



Biden opens major push for LGBTIQ rights abroad

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President Joe Biden has quickly launched a campaign to support LGBTIQ people abroad, putting their rights higher on the US foreign policy agenda than ever before.

Elevating a 2011 initiative launched by his former boss Barack Obama – and reversing a turnaround under Donald Trump – Biden is expanding the scope of US efforts on LGBTIQ rights while also adjusting based on lessons learned over the past decade.

In his first foreign policy speech, Biden announced Thursday he was ordering all US government agencies active abroad to promote the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer people and to come up with plans within 180 days.

"All human beings should be treated with respect and dignity and should be able to live without fear no matter who they are or whom they love," Biden said in the presidential memorandum.

Biden, who plans a dramatic rise in US admissions of refugees, promised greater attention to LGBTIQ asylum seekers, including by ensuring action on urgent cases even when vulnerable people first flee to countries that are less welcoming.

The memorandum said that the United States would also combat discriminatory laws overseas and work to build international coalitions against homophobia and transphobia.

A senior State Department official said that Secretary of State Antony Blinken plans to name a special envoy on LGBTIQ issues.

"I think that when that envoy is appointed, that will help to elevate attention to these issues even further," the official told AFP.

- Speaking out -

The Biden administration has already incorporated its message in public statements. State Department spokesman Ned Price criticized Turkey after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his interior minister verbally attacked gay people, and Biden mentioned LGBTIQ rights in a message to an African Union summit.

Considering the outsized US influence on the world, activists expected Biden to set an example. They pointed to the rapid impact both at home and abroad when Biden, then vice president, in 2012 became the highest-ranking US official to back marriage equality -- which became the law across the United States three years later.

After the gradual evolution on LGBTIQ rights under Obama, "we have a radically different opportunity today," said Jessica Stern, executive director of advocacy group OutRight Action International.

"To have President Biden issue this very holistic presidential memorandum so early in his administration is a clear indication that this is a political priority for him," she said.

Stern voiced hope for greater funding for non-governmental groups, which a number of European nations fund more generously.

But she cautioned that the solution was not always vocal US support at the local level.

"One of the most effective and consistent ways of discrediting LGBTIQ people and our movement is to say that they are the result of colonial and Western imposition -- they're getting paid by foreign donors," Stern said.

The State Department official said the United States would examine each country and decide case by case whether public diplomacy is the best approach.

"Our watch-word always is to work and listen to the activists on the ground working on these issues to get their best advice on how to move the ball," the official said.

- Backing local voices -

The United States has plenty of case studies from the Obama years.

Obama slashed aid or trading privileges to Uganda and Gambia after the countries passed laws that authorized imprisonment for homosexuality.

The tough rebukes fueled a backlash in parts of Africa, whose most populous nation Nigeria defiantly pushed through its own draconian law.

But there has been steady progress, even in nations once seen as hotbeds of homophobia such as Jamaica. Gay sex is now legal in nearly two-thirds of all nations, and 28 countries allow same-sex marriage, according to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association.

Phillip Ayoub, an associate professor at Occidental College in California who has studied diplomacy and sexual minorities, said the key was to support local campaigners but to let them lead.

"There are activists on the ground who will say that it might not make sense to be fully visible right now because that can increase violence toward our communities," he said.

"This kind of foreign policy cannot be top-down. It has to be done carefully with civil society in different countries and I think empowering them is one way where we can be productive."

Trump reversed some LGBTIQ gains at home, particularly on transgender people.

Under Trump's secretary of state Mike Pompeo, an evangelical Christian, the United States limited visas for foreign diplomats' same-sex partners, stopped US embassies from flying rainbow flags and entered a joint declaration with countries including Uganda that promoted the "natural" definition of family.

Trump appointed an openly gay ambassador to Germany, Ric Grenell, who launched a campaign to end the criminalization of homosexuality, although critics say the effort was aimed more at furthering other Trump goals such as pressuring Iran and discouraging immigration.

After Trump, Ayoub said, Biden's approach "is a monumental change."