



## How Taiwan Became One of the Most Pro-LGBTQ Countries in Asia

SINGAPORE — Taiwan, which won a bid to host WorldPride, an international LGBT event in 2021, has been at the helm of a rising pro LGBT movement in Asia and was first in the region to decriminalize same-sex “marriage.”

In 2017, the island’s highest court implemented homosexuality-based unions, instructing parliament that it had two years to pass a law permitting same-sex “marriages,” failing which they would automatically be legalized.

The Constitutional Court ruling came after pro-natural-marriage supporters protested against the then-proposed “Same-Sex Marriage Act.” Pro-family groups have been helping people comprehend the negative repercussions the new law would bring. Taiwan eventually passed the ruling into law in 2019, effectively legalizing same-sex “marriages,” despite the fact that a majority of voters rejected such unions in an island-wide referendum in 2018.

A record 200,000 people participated in a pride march in Taipei in 2019 to cheer the new law.

Although the 2018 referendum against gay “marriage” was poised to prompt lawmakers to approve the weakest law acceptable to the court and to address the desires of the population, the passing of the ruling into law was a stark reminder of how same-sex “marriage” made its forays into codified law in the United States. American judges’ successive verdicts in favor of legalizing it basically alienated millions of pro-family Americans who voted to reject the idea in state ballots.

How then did Taiwan, formerly a sanctuary for the anti-communist and conservative Kuomintang (KMT) party after its defeat in the civil war with the Chinese Communists in the mainland, become a pro-LGBT bastion?

A variety of factors contributed to the rise of the LGBT movement in Taiwan and eventually made the island the vanguard for such advocates in Asia.

For one, the plurality in political and social voices that arose in wake of the end of the KMT martial law in the 1980s resulted in the LGBT movement becoming a major platform for Taiwanese to position their island as an image of a progressive democracy in line with more liberal Western countries.

As the communist mainland China tried to assert its claims on the island, Taiwanese civil society



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groups, as well as political parties like the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), tried to capitalize on LGBT advocacy in a bid to distance Taiwan from the state-controlled communist regime of China. The LGBT movement eventually kicked off in the 1990s as politicians pointed out causes espoused by various non-mainstream groups as a way of differentiating the island from its communist neighbor.

Arguably, Taiwan's democratic political system contributed to a plural civil society and a culture of members of the public speaking out on various issues, including calls for more LGBT inclusion.

As Taiwanese LGBT rights promoter Leslie Li testified, the LGBT movement has garnered more support since the 2000s, after some unfortunate incidents. In 2000, the tragic death of 14-year-old Ye Yong Zhi, who was reportedly bullied due to his sexual orientation, ignited massive anger on the island.

Corporations also backed same-sex unions. As reported by [Thomson Reuters Foundation](#), 15 companies, including Google, O-Bank Co, and EY, collaborated to extol the supposed merits of same-sex "marriage," such as giving rise to innovation and cooperation.

Meanwhile, in nearby Hong Kong, the Supreme Court ruled in 2018 to require immigration authorities to grant same-sex partners spousal visas that were hitherto only accessible only to heterosexual couples.

Support from politicians and lawmakers has been crucial contributing to the increased traction of LGBT activists in Taiwan as well. For instance, President Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP has been a vocal advocate of LGBT policies, including homosexual "marriage." After defeating the more conservative KMT that had ruled Taiwan since World War II, Tsai has since 2016 openly articulated her support for LGBT activities. Yet widespread protests initially obstructed her aim of legalizing gay unions through the island's parliament.

"The Taiwanese president, Tsai Ing-wen, openly supported legalizing same-sex marriage during her campaign, but in the year since she came to power and amid low approval ratings, she declined to aggressively push for amending the law," *The Guardian* reported. However, as seven of the 15 members of the Taiwanese Constitutional Court were nominated by Tsai, pro-family advocates said the eventual legalization of same-sex unions was not too surprising.

Brian Camenker of the American pro-family group Mass Resistance, which helped the pro-family traditional-marriage supporters in Taiwan, noted there is an element encouraging corruption in Taiwan's high court: "The Justices of the [Taiwanese] Supreme court have a term limit of eight years. But they are allowed to hold concurrent government posts by the President's direct assignment. This directly affects their careers and especially their income."

The fact that Taiwan has been perceived by many in Asia as a champion for gay issues has only served to further embolden the pro-LGBT camp. "Hong Kong's gay rights parade started a few years after gay rights activities took off in Taiwan. In terms of mainland China, I think it will take a bit of time," Xu Ruining, a volunteer for the Taiwan Tongzhi homosexual support hotline, told ABC News.

"While I think it is still a long way to the equality dominos falling all over Asia, I think a few East Asian countries, such as Japan and Vietnam, may be more ready to consider equality legislation," Ray Chan, Hong Kong's first publicly gay lawmaker, told AFP. "I can foresee many couples in Hong Kong will try to get married in Taiwan. When they return home, they will press the government and even the private sector for recognising them because the current laws, policies, and rules are blatantly discriminatory."

Yet all is not lost for conservatives. Homosexuality is still a taboo topic with the older generation, and



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politically influential social-conservative and Christian groups are generally not in favor of gay unions. A poll from 2013 revealed that 75% of Christians were against legalization, while a slight majority of Buddhists, Taoists, and the greater public supported the move.

A campaign budget exceeding \$3.24 million was supposedly raised by a leading conservative group, the Alliance for the Happiness of the Next Generation, to support the traditional definition of family. In the weeks before the same-sex “marriage” law was passed, the group’s advertisements were published on billboards and on the front pages of newspapers. This group, along with others, suggested that a referendum to keep the current definition of marriage in the Civil Code be conducted. Previously, these conservatives had proposed a referendum to bar homosexuality education at elementary and junior-high schools, citing the need to protect children from being exposed to age-inappropriate information.

While there are many Buddhist and other religious groups in Taiwan, it is the Christians who have been spearheading protests against LGBT activism and gay unions.

Fr. Otfried Chan, a Catholic priest who was involved with organizing thousands of protesters against the ruling, told ABC News why he opposed legalizing same-sex unions. “Because it changes the law itself, it changes the institution of marriage, it changes the culture of Taiwan. So the tensions are already there, we can feel it,” he said. “From time immemorial human beings are born by the union between a man and a woman.”

“Whether you call it marriage or not, that’s the natural law.... It’s better to just disrupt the process [debate], just stop it, suspend it,” the priest said before the ruling was passed into law. “[And] in the meantime to create more space for communication and public debate.”



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