Anger and anxiety in Taiwan as same-sex marriage vote nears

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Taiwan is set to hold a series of public votes on November 24 to decide whether same-sex unions should be written into law, raising uncertainty whether there will be full marriage equality on the island.

Regarded as a beacon of liberalism in Asia, the self-ruled island of Taiwan has a vibrant gay scene. (Representational image)

Kuala Lumpur: When Taiwanâ€™s top court sided with Chi Chia-wei last year in a ruling that should have paved the way for same-sex marriage to be legalised, the activist thought his three-decade struggle was finally over.

But little progress has been made since.

Instead, Taiwan is set to hold a series of public votes on November 24 to decide whether same-sex unions should be written into law, raising uncertainty whether there will be full marriage equality on the island.

â€œI am disappointed,â€• said Chi, a veteran activist who was the first person to come out publicly as gay in Taiwan in 1986.

â€œThe government could have passed a law on same-sex marriage soon after the court ruling if there was political will, but unfortunately reform has stalled,â€• the 60-year-old told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from the capital Taipei.

Often spotted in rallies draped in a rainbow flag, Chi has campaigned relentlessly for same-sex marriage in his 30-year struggle, sending numerous petitions to authorities and courts.

He was jailed for five months in 1986 for robbery, an accusation he said was trumped up to intimidate his campaign soon after he filed the first petition for gay unions.

But his latest petition, in 2015, culminated in a historic ruling in May last year by Taiwanâ€™s constitutional court, which declared same-sex couples had the right to legally marry.

It was the first such decision in Asia and was cheered by campaigners in a region where conservative values and prejudice have long stood in the way of progress on gay rights.

FAMILY VALUES

Regarded as a beacon of liberalism in Asia, the self-ruled island of Taiwan has a vibrant gay scene that includes one of the biggest pride parades in the region and a wide range of gay-friendly bars and restaurants.

But despite this, socially conservative attitudes still largely hold sway, and those who oppose same-sex marriage say such unions could destroy society and family institutions.

The May 2017 court ruling gave the government a two-year deadline for legalisation but did not give specific guidance on how laws regulating same-sex relationships should be drawn up.

Conservative groups seized on this to launch a bid for a referendum, calling for a separate law similar to civil partnership to be enacted for same-sex couples.

â€œSame-sex marriage will change our culture, our family values. Taiwan is not ready for drastic changes,â€• said Tseng Hsien-ying from the Coalition for the Happiness of Our Next Generation, which launched the anti-gay marriage referendum bid.

â€œIf same-sex couples want to be together, we respect that but we want a separate law for them so that we donâ€™t redefine our law on marriage which should remain between a man and a woman,â€• he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Gay rights campaigners like Chi and others have rejected a separate law, saying it is discriminatory and offers fewer legal protections especially on the question of whether same-sex couples would be given the right to have children.

President Tsai Ing-wen said this year that society is still divided on same-sex marriage, although she campaigned on a promise of marriage equality in the run up to 2016 polls.

The Nov. 24 referendum, which coincides with local elections for mayors and magistrates, will see four questions related to same-sex marriage â€“ two for and two against â€“ put to a vote.

A fifth question about rolling back mandatory gender equality education in schools will also be on the ballot.

For the referendum to pass, at least 25 percent of some 19 million eligible voters must vote yes, and the government is obliged to propose laws that reflect their results.

It is unclear what will happen if the results are conflicting, given the number of questions put to the electorate.

â€˜DARKNESS BEFORE DAWNâ€™

Pro-gay marriage activist Jennifer Lu predicted it would be hard for both sides to secure a clear victory.

The implication of the vote, however, would reach far beyond the gay and lesbian community in Taiwan, she said.

â€œWe are at a very important moment because other countries in Asia are looking to see what is the final outcome here,â€• said Lu, the chief coordinator of the Marriage Equality Coalition Taiwan, an alliance of groups that support gay rights.

â€œLike us, they face struggles and challenges. If Taiwan can pass a full marriage right vote, it can become a good example to show everyone this is our basic rights, this is not some Western concept,â€• she said.

Gay rights crusader Chi vowed to keep up his fight until Taiwan allows same-sex marriage for him and tens of

thousands of others on the island.

Chi, who has a partner of 30 years, was optimistic he would live to see marriage equality on the island, saying more people have begun to accept same-sex marriage.

â€œThat day will come,â€• he said. â€œThis is the darkness before dawn.â€•

- Reuters