

The Council for Global Equality



Advancing an American Foreign Policy
Inclusive of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Preparing New U.S. Ambassadors to Raise LGBT Human Rights Concerns

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Ambassadorial confirmation hearings in the U.S. Senate offer unique venues for raising LGBT related issues with future U.S. ambassadors. Senator Dodd and Senator Feingold, two leading members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, recently posed specific LGBT questions to ambassador-nominees heading to countries where the State Department's own human rights reports point to troubling landscapes for local LGBT communities. These questions have triggered official commitments—to two influential U.S. Senators—that these newly confirmed U.S. ambassadors will raise LGBT human rights issues as matters of pressing U.S. concern. Through these exchanges, the Council for Global Equality has emphasized to U.S. Senate offices and to U.S. ambassadors that state-sanctioned LGBT abuses are altogether unjustified in any country governed by the rule of law. Nor are they in keeping with fundamental American values, which ambassadors are charged with upholding and promoting under Secretary Rice's call for "transformational diplomacy."

U.S. Ambassadors Pledging to Support LGBT Human Rights

Ambassador Hugo Llorens, U.S. Ambassador to Honduras: "Respect of human rights is central to any thriving democracy. If confirmed, very early on in my tenure, I will seek a meeting with members of the LGBT community in Honduras to develop a strong working relationship and to discuss the findings. Consolidating democracy and strengthening adherence to the rule of law is crucial for human rights. There are no discriminatory laws based on sexual orientation, but in practice, there is widespread social discrimination against persons based on sexual orientation in Honduras. I intend to include the findings of human rights violations in the LGBT community as integral to our overall effort to improve the human rights situation in Honduras, and convey the importance of this issue to senior officials of the Government of Honduras."

Marcia Stephens Bloom Bernicat, U.S. Ambassador to Senegal: “The arrest of two gay men as a result of the publishing of photos of their marriage in a local magazine and the ensuing street demonstrations against homosexuals underscore widespread concerns about the state of human rights in Senegal. If confirmed, I would address these incidents as human rights issues in concert with local human rights NGOs such as Raddho (African Rally for Human Rights), the local chapter of Amnesty International, the National Human Rights Organization (ONDH), and the International Federation for Human Rights (FDIH).

I believe our role should consist of the continued use of embassy-sponsored programs and other educational tools to underline the *universality* of human rights, as defined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights and other key international covenants. In addition, there should be a U.S. role in decreasing this stigma through support for the activities of indigenous institutions and groups. All of the previously mentioned local NGOs played a role in the release of the two men who were arrested, and all of these groups have the potential to have an impact on Senegal’s tolerance for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals. “

Senegal’s traditionally tolerant society is changing as its traditional mores confront western ones and is at a cross-roads in accepting homosexuality in its society. Islamic traditionalists see homosexuality as contrary to the precepts of their religion. However, Senegal is a moderate country with a constitution that guarantees individual freedom. There are extremists who would like to see homosexuality treated as a criminal offense subject to severe sentencing and are trying to encourage Islamic leaders to lead the charge. Senegal’s influential Sufi brotherhoods have so far elected not to press for criminalization of homosexuality. The manner in which the U.S. approaches the subject, and in which we engage and cooperate with local religious institutions, will require sustained effort as well as sensitivity to evolving local culture.”

Donald Gene Teitelbaum, U.S. Ambassador to Ghana: “If confirmed as U.S. Ambassador, I would meet with Ghanaian government officials as well as some of the leaders of the LGBT human rights community in Ghana to discuss the findings in reports by the U.S. government and by numerous U.S. and international human rights organizations. I believe it is important for U.S. Embassies to seek and maintain a broad range of contacts. I also believe that the words and actions of U.S. Embassies must reflect the core values of America, particularly the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

When these career Ambassadors return, and are eventually re-nominated for new postings in other countries, their record on LGBT issues can be reviewed again in the Senate. And already we see that the State Department is beginning to prepare ambassador nominees for LGBT questions as part of their regular confirmation preparations. So whether U.S. Senators actually pose our suggested questions or not, the mere fact that we are beginning to encourage ambassador designates to do some “LGBT homework” is an early indicator of progress.