

AROUND TOWN

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The battle lines are drawn

With politicians breaking their electoral promises to implement gay rights legislation and vocal religious intolerance, the stakes are high for this year's Taiwan LGBT Pride parade

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Following in the wake of an anti-gay march organized by religious groups last week, this year's Taiwan LGBT Pride 2009 takes to the streets tomorrow to celebrate the diversity of human sexuality and raise awareness on a raft of LGBT issues that activists say are being ignored by politicians.

Now in its seventh year, the Taiwan LGBT Pride has grown from a humble gathering of 500 participants in 2003 to become the largest annual LGBT parade in the Chinese-speaking world. Organizers expect more than 20,000 people to attend this year's edition joined by representatives of more than 60 groups including the Taiwan Gender Equity Education Association (台灣性別平等教育協會), Bi the Way, the country's first bisexual group, and GBooks (基本書坊), a gay publishing house.

One aim of this year's event is to voice frustration and disappointment with the country's two major political parties for ignoring gay rights.

"Politicians from pan-blue and pan-green camps always say they support the gay rights movement when elections approach, but never put their promises into action when they take office," said J.J. Lai (賴正哲), who helped organize the parade and is the owner of Gin Gin's Bookstore (晶晶書庫), the country's first bookstore specializing in books, music and DVDs related to homosexual topics.

The broken promises include implementation of a basic human rights law that recognizes same-sex marriage, which was drafted during Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) administration but never passed, and President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) pledge, made while he was Taipei City mayor, to legalize gay marriage in the capital once the central government allowed it. As president, Ma has not done anything to improve gay rights, said Lai.

Under the slogan "Love Out Loud" (同志愛很大), parade organizers hope to encourage members of the public to love, not discriminate against, lesbian, gay, transgender, transsexual or transvestite relatives, colleagues and neighbors.

Not everyone feels that affection, though. An anti-gay march was held on Saturday of last week by members from several Christian groups including the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (台灣基督長老教會), May God's Grace Be With You (基督教耕耘會), the Baptist Church (浸信會) and Methodist Church (衛理會).

Led by two former Presbyterian Church pastors, Chen Yu-chuan (陳宇全) and Chen Fu-chu (陳福住), the march followed a route similar to that of tomorrow's LGBT parade, starting from Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (中正紀念堂) and passing the 228 Memorial Park (二二八和平紀念公園). Participants held banners aloft that read, "gay parades cause calamities" (同性戀遊行招致大災難), "God blesses heterosexual marriage" (神祝福一男一女的婚姻), and "refuse wrong love and cleanse Taiwan" (拒絕錯愛潔淨台灣).

Some participants got up on the soapbox and said that though the Christian church is not against homosexuals, they should cease their "sinful" sexual behavior or else Taiwan would turn into a modern Sodom and Gomorrah.

Taiwan LGBT Pride organizers such as Lai criticized the protesters' bigoted views on homosexuality. Gay rights activist Li Ming-chao (李明照) said the march demonstrated how Christianity persecutes those who don't conform to its multifarious ideas, and all in the name of God's love.

"I don't believe in [the Christian] god, so why should I repent? My Matzu (媽祖) loves me very much," Li said.

Elias Tseng (曾德威), a former pastor of the Tong-Kwang Light House Presbyterian Church (同光同志長老教會), expressed concern that Saturday's march marked the beginning of an organized religious anti-gay movement.

"Churches such as the Bread of Life Christian Church (基督教靈糧堂) and Evangelical Covenant Church (行道會) were suspiciously missing from the frontline of the march, which was led by members of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan," said Tseng, who was ordained as the first openly gay pastor in Taiwan in 2004. The Presbyterian Church, which holds relatively liberal views on homosexual issues, was not officially



represented at the event.

"The way the protest was setup suggests that its organizers want to generate an image that more and more churches have joined the anti-gay movement," said Tseng. "As far as I know, those anti-gay groups have already established contact with similar groups in Hong Kong, which may lead to more anti-gay activities in the future."

Such gay-bashing language and hateful sentiment would be discouraged if the government passed anti-discrimination legislation, Li said.

This year's pride parade finishes on Ketagalan Boulevard near the Presidential Office, where participants will voice political demands.

"The parade had for years taken place in the East District (東區), which gave the event a carnival, big-party feel. But we wanted to move the route to remind people of why we started the parade in the first place," said Ann Tung (童楚楚), convener-in-chief of this year's LGBT parade.

This year's route not only passes by various government organizations but takes in many sites that are closely linked to LGBT communities, past and present, including the 228 Memorial Park, a well-known meeting place for gay men.

Lesser known is nearby Changde Street (常德街). In July 1997, police cracked down on gay men who showed up in the area, arresting 40. The occasion has become known colloquially as the "Changde Street Incident" (常德街事件).

The parade will also reach Ximending, an area that has traditionally been seen as homosexual-friendly and currently has around five saunas for gay men and a few tea houses that lesbians frequent, said Lai.

Red House Theater (紅樓劇場) is now filled with cafe bars and shops that cater to homosexual communities. Nicknamed "Little Bear Village" (小熊村), which refers to a masculine type of gay man, the area is popular among gays and lesbians as well as straight shoppers, said Tung.

The procession sets off from the Presidential Office on Ketagalan Boulevard, proceeds along Gongyuan Road (公園路), Zhonghua Road (中華路), Zhongxiao West Road (忠孝西路) to Zhongshan South Road (中山南路) and finishes in front of the Presidential Office.

Organizers encourage participants to meet in front of the Presidential Office at 1pm. The procession starts at 2pm and ends around 4:30pm.

For more information and a route map, visit www.twpride.info.

For those interested in sports, this weekend Taipei hosts the eighth edition of The Straits Games, an annual event initiated by the Leadership Program for Gays in Malaysia and Singapore's Men After Work to foster exchanges and promote healthy lifestyles in the LGBT communities.

Previously held in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Phuket, Thailand, this year's games attracted more than 300 registered participants from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, who will compete in volleyball, badminton, tennis, bowling and table tennis at various locations in Taipei tomorrow and Sunday.

Spectator tickets for the volleyball and badminton competitions, which will be held at the National Taiwan University Sports Center (台大體育館) today from 9am until the evening, cost NT\$150 each and NT\$250 for two, available through ticket. topfong.com. Check tickets. books.com.tw for special offers that include tickets to the games, admission to screenings of *Chef's Special* as well as free drinks at gay bars. For more information visit tsg2009.pixnet.net/blog.



Scenes from past Taiwan LGBT Pride parades. To highlight the political demands the parade advocates, organizers of this year's parade have changed its route so it passes by government agencies.



PHOTOS: AGENCIES