

THAW AND ICE AGES

Nicaragua The LGBTI movement is fighting for equality under difficult conditions

Lesben- und Schwulenverband (LSVD)
and partner organisations



“We are fighting against the dictatorship, the pandemic, depression and anxiety – and every day it gets more difficult,” says LSJI, an activist for LGBTI rights, regarding the situation of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender and intersex people in Nicaragua in the summer of 2020 – but they still do not sound desperate. It is currently impossible to make progress on a political level in the country: “President Daniel Ortega does not respect the law, and human rights are regularly and systematically violated.” However, according to LSJI’s perception, the population has decided to strive for a transformation peacefully – and Ortega’s legitimacy is dwindling more and more.

LSJI focuses on a long-term change in awareness of the population towards respect and human rights for all. After all, the LGBTI movement in Nicaragua has succeeded in establishing lively contacts with student, educational and women’s and health groups in Nicaragua and has also networked with local institutions, attracting some international attention. There were also several meetings with human rights groups: “They didn’t even have us on their radar before”. The aim is both an end to everyday discrimination and the enforcement of state-certified rights for everyone, regardless of who someone loves or what gender they belong to. LSJI knows this is going to be a long road. “A

wrong word in the wrong context can easily lead to rejection by large groups.” Nonetheless: Under no circumstances does he want to see himself and his group in a passive victim role.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people have a hard time in patriarchal societal structures. However, homosexuality was rarely criminalised in Latin America – unlike in Nicaragua, where the Conservative President Violeta Chamorro enacted a criminal law against it in 1992. Even before the law was abolished in 2008, those affected had come together under the umbrella of a human rights and environmental network. Klaus Jetz, who was active in Nicaragua Solidarity as a young person, now works for the Lesbian and Gay Association in Germany (Lesben- und Schwulenverband/LSVD); he met one of the participants at an international event. Since then, the LSVD and the Hirschfeld Eddy Foundation (HES) have been accompanying the Nicaraguan LGBTI movement.

Thanks to extensive advocacy work Ortega abolished the criminalisation of homosexuality in Nicaragua in 2008. The LSVD informed the Bundestag human rights committee and motivated Gregor Gysi from the Left Party to contact Ortega,

whom he knows personally from former times. However, this success left a bitter taste: In return, Ortega tightened the already restrictive abortion law. For the LGBTI movement in Nicaragua, it is very evident that they are working together with the women's movement towards the impunity of abortion.

In many Latin American countries, the 2010s were a good time for the LGBTI movement. "The number of initiatives has exploded; countries like Argentina and Mexico have dozens of non-governmental organisations," summarises Jetz. Since then, 18 groups from different parts of Nicaragua have been meeting regularly. Under the name Mesa Nacional LGBTI, they discuss strategies to improve everyday acceptance and achieve fair media coverage. The network, in which LSJI is one of three full-time employees, is also involved here. With

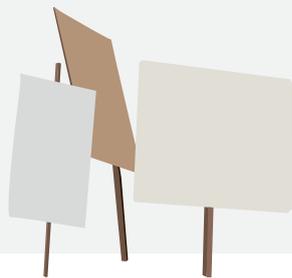
the help of the HES and financial support from the Federal Foreign Office, three projects were able to be carried out, all of which aimed to create more awareness on the topic of human rights and sexual diversity. Well-known straight musicians went public with a song, and a video was produced to popularise the human right to live with one's own sexual identity. In a process lasting several months, the groups also created a national agenda on the topic and discussed it with representatives from government and civil society. The media response was positive.

Conference of LGBTI-activists in Costa Rica © Klaus Jetz/LSVD



The atmosphere began to change, and LGBTI people increasingly dared to go out in public. Yet a major setback came in the spring of 2018. There were demonstrations across the country over planned pension cuts while social security contributions were increased. The police attacked protesters with live ammunition, and people from the LGBTI movement were arrested. Today, activists are very cautious again. They make sure that their cell phones do not reveal too much when they are checked. Many even fled abroad.

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The reason LSJI still sees hope lies in theory: Every transformation is preceded by a phase of chaos – and this is currently taking place in Nicaragua. However, there is no hope that Ortega will be voted out of office in 2021. None of the participating parties aggressively takes the position of “human rights for all” – probably also out of fear of alienating voters. Yet, LSJI hopes for a procession of social change as soon as the political situation relaxes. At the moment, however, it is important to hide those at risk or to bring them into exile. In addi-

tion, the group and its fellow campaigners try to document human rights violations as well as possible in order to build up international pressure and later have something in hand to use against the perpetrators.

“We agree on the current strategies here on our own because the situation often changes so quickly,” explains LSJI. Nevertheless, Klaus Jetz and the LSVD are still important contacts. What the activists in Nicaragua want are training and further education in order to plan for the “time afterwards” and to create good conditions for later court proceedings. At the moment, people from the area around the network are scattered; many have lost or destroyed their papers while fleeing. “We are not prepared for them all to come back. They need orientation – and jobs,” says LSJI.

The activists’ work is also recognised internationally. In 2018, at the invitation of the HES, an activist was able to meet German MPs and speak at several universities. He also appeared before the Human Rights Council in Geneva. “We have managed to gain international recognition – and that encourages support and pressure from outside,” is LSJI’s interim assessment.

This article was based on an interview with Klaus Jetz from the Lesben- und Schwulenverband Deutschland (LSVD) and LSJI, an activist from Nicaragua who wants to remain anonymous.