

## Intimidation and repression in Uganda

By Mushda Huda

Human rights in Uganda have been a hot topic in recent years, particularly because of its ongoing persecution of gays and lesbians in the country, often spurred on by the involvement of US religious activists.

A recent Castan Centre event, held in conjunction with Human Rights Watch, heard about not only LGBTI issues, but also a range of other human rights problems facing the country. The panel consisted of Maria Burnett, senior researcher in the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch, and Nicholas Opiyo, a Ugandan lawyer and founder of the human rights organisation *Chapter Four Uganda*. They were joined by a large audience, including many ex-patriate Ugandans living in Australia.

Burnett, who has worked with Human Rights Watch since 2005, has been involved with a range of issues including child soldiers, torture and killings, and justice reform in Central and East Africa. Nicholas Opiyo, among other things, is well known for his leading role in successfully challenging Uganda's anti-homosexuality laws and in advocating for the criminalisation of torture. Together, the two experts gave some insight into how the Ugandan government uses intimidation and repression to maintain control.

Burnett began by highlighting the many limits on the right to freedom of expression. Burnett outlined how intimidation was used to restrict expression on social media platforms, which ultimately led to a complete ban of social media. She also commented on the risks faced by protesters engaged in anti-government campaigns. Numerous protesters and bystanders have been killed at the hands of security forces. Protesters are regularly exposed to tear gas, which the government relies on heavily to suppress opposition. Burnett finished by saying that in light of the political climate, advocacy with the government of Uganda is still quite challenging.

Nicholas Opiyo introduced a more positive face of Uganda. He emphasised that despite its many political problems, numerous things have significantly improved over the years. For example, Opiyo is of the opinion that within its borders, Uganda is now a relatively peaceful country. He compared the Uganda of his childhood to the present country that now holds comparatively democratic elections.

However, Opiyo did not hesitate to express his serious concerns with the lack of practical democracy in these elections. The last Ugandan elections had brought widespread hope in the country that the current government would be overturned, giving way

to a peaceful transfer of power. This unfortunately was not the case. In a bid to maintain power, the government suspended access to all social media and restricted the use of mobile money. Opiyo explained that access to mobile money was crucial to the opposition's ability to transfer funds to their agents so that they could fan out across the country and observe the elections. The restriction on transfers meant that many of the agents were unable to attend the election and, as a consequence, scrutiny was hampered.

Additionally, the role of social media in political activism was enormous. Opiyo described social media platforms as the primary means to spread evidence of the government's human rights abuses. A suspension on social media meant that political opposition to the government was considerably curtailed. In addition, the opposition leader was arrested without genuine cause, leading to a 45 day house arrest, during which he was unable to attend his office. To this day, he is subjected to continuous surveillance and interference by the state. Opposition supporters were also beaten on the streets.

Opiyo then turned to suppression of minorities in Uganda. He emphasised that despite the progress in decriminalising homosexuality, sexual minorities were still subject to beatings, denied access to healthcare and exposed to various discriminatory actions. Women, particularly those involved in political activity, are regularly assaulted and sexually harassed. Opiyo gave examples of public undressing and sexual assaults.

Burnett offered the view that despite the constant harassment faced by women in politics, this did not seem to discourage involvement. Uganda had numerous strong female leaders who were, if anything, further galvanised by the abuse they were facing. It did not appear as though women were being successfully silenced.

Opiyo concluded with an extremely important insight into the path forward. He highlighted the importance of civic awareness and stated that the breakdown in law and services is due to a problem in governance. For true democracy to be a reality in Uganda, the government must be held accountable. However, this is not a task for Uganda alone; the international community has an obligation to listen and provide appropriate assistance to concerns of human rights abuses.



Centre Director Sarah Joseph with speakers Nicholas Opiyo and Maria Burnett