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Barbados pledges same-sex marriage vote, but supporters doubt reform

The Caribbean island nation of Barbados has pledged to put same-sex marriage to a public referendum and recognize same-sex civil unions.

By Anastasia Moloney

Thomson Reuters Foundation (16.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/33WQq8h> - The island nation of Barbados has pledged to put same-sex marriage to a public vote, but campaigners said on Wednesday they were wary about any hope of major reform in a nation that still has laws punishing sex between men on its books.

LGBT people suffer discrimination, verbal abuse and harassment in Barbados, where the Catholic Church and evangelical groups are vocal in their opposition to giving legal rights to the gay and trans community, supporters say.

Barbados Governor General Sandra Mason said in a speech to parliament this week that the Caribbean country would hold a public referendum on allowing same-sex marriage.

The tourism-dependent Barbados must have a "frank discussion" and "end discrimination in all forms" so as not to be "blacklisted" for human rights issues, she said.

"My government will do the right thing, understanding that this too will attract controversy," Mason said, adding that the government would accept the result of the public vote. No date was set.

She said the government was prepared to recognise "a form of civil unions" - a legal status that falls short of marriage - for same-sex couples.

Alexa Hoffmann, an activist and transgender woman in Barbados, said the governor's speech was filled with "smoke and mirrors, tiptoeing around and the use of buzz words."

"The speech has left me unimpressed," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"A nod is being given to civil unions but yet anything that relates to the LGBT community physically being able to practice that relationship is still criminalized and completely forbidden."

Homosexuality is not explicitly illegal in Barbados, but colonial-era "buggery" and indecency laws, rarely enforced, prohibit and criminalize sex between two men or two women.

"In practice, a nosey neighbour can easily decide to call the police and create hell," said Hoffmann.

Hoffmann and other campaigners said they thought any referendum on allowing marriage between same-sex couples was likely to fail.

"My bet would be that any public vote comes back as a no," Hoffmann said.

Barbadian LGBT+ rights campaigner Michael Rapley said he was optimistic about recognition of civil unions but warned against a public vote on same-sex marriage.

A marriage referendum would be better held after people get used to the idea of same-sex civil unions and equal rights regardless of sexual orientation, said Rapley, the head of Equals, a local LGBT+ rights group.

"I do not think a referendum on gay marriage is wise at this moment," he said.

Rights campaigner Neish Mclean said he was encouraged by the government's willingness to recognize same-sex unions but that addressing discrimination and decriminalizing sexual relations laws would take a lot more work.

"There is a long way to go to achieve equality for LGBTIQ people," said Mclean, Caribbean program officer for OutRight Action International, a LGBT+ rights group.
