

Malawi president pardons engaged gay couple: Couple had been sentenced to 14 years hard labor

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The president of Malawi, under pressure from UN and human rights groups, has pardoned a gay couple who were recently sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment with hard labor after they became engaged in a traditional ceremony.

President Bingu wa Mutharika, speaking as UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon visited his African country May 29, said he ordered their immediate release on humanitarian grounds. Ban called Mutharika's decision "courageous," according to BBC News. "This outdated penal code should be reformed wherever it may exist."

Southern Africa's Anglican bishops had called on the government of South Africa to press for the release of the two Malawi men, Steven Monjeza, 26, and Tiwonge Chimbalanga, 20.

The bishops said "we should love one another as he has loved us, without distinction," alluding to Jesus' words in the Gospel of John. Their statement differs from stances taken by churches in Malawi and Uganda that support the jailing of homosexuals. Despite his pardon, the Malawi president said that "in all aspects of reasoning, in all aspects of human understanding, these two gay boys were wrong—totally wrong."

A Presbyterian leader in Malawi earlier had approved of the sentencing. "As a church we don't support homosexuality or same-sex marriages. That is both un-African and unchristian," said Levi Nyondo, general secretary of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Living stonia Synod. "We are happy they have been sentenced to 14 years in jail," Nyondo said.

Nongovernmental organizations in Malawi said the sentence was extreme. "We are shocked," said Undule Mwaka sungula, executive director of the Center for Human

Rights and Rehabilitation. "Sending them to jail will not stop them from being gay."

The British government, one of Malawi's major donors, said it was "deeply dismayed" by the jail terms. "We are also very concerned by the allegations of their mistreatment in police custody," added United Kingdom government ministers. "The UK believes that human rights apply to everyone regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity." -*Ecumenical News International*