

Beijing LGBT Center shuttered as crackdown grows in China

By HUIZHONG WU May 16, 2023

A Chinese paramilitary policeman stands guard outside the Swedish embassy during the opening ceremony for Diversity Week in Beijing, Friday, May 12, 2023. On Monday, May 15, 2023, the advocacy group the Beijing LGBT Center became the latest organization to close under a crackdown by Chinese leader Xi Jinping's government. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — An advocacy group that also served as a safe space for the LGBTQ community in Beijing became the latest organization to close under a crackdown by Chinese leader Xi Jinping's government.

“We very regretfully announce, due to forces beyond our control, the Beijing LGBT Center will stop operating today,” read a notice posted on the center's official WeChat account Monday night.

Beijing LGBT Center did not respond to an email request for comment. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, which oversees nonprofits in China, also did not immediately respond to a faxed request for comment.

The group's shuttering marks a critical blow for advocacy groups that once had been able to be public about their work for LGBTQ+ rights.

“They are not the first group, nor are they the largest, but because Beijing LGBT Center was in Beijing, it represented China's LGBT movement,” said one Chinese activist who requested anonymity out of fear for his safety. “In our political, economic and cultural center, to have this type of organization. It was a symbol of the LGBT movement's presence.”

The Beijing LGBT Center described its mission as evolving; it started as a safe space for the community to host events. Then it became an advocacy group aiming to “improve the living conditions for the sexually diverse community.” They offered low-cost mental health counseling and published lists of of LGBTQ-friendly health professionals.

Throughout its evolving mission, the center hosted public speakers, film screenings and other events. Mr. C, who keeps his real name secret to protect his parents' privacy, was one of the center's featured transgender speakers. [Mr. C sued his former employers](#) for letting him go after a 8-day trial period. He alleged it was because of his gender expression. They also hosted Liu Peilin, a transgender woman in her 60s, who spoke about being mocked online for dressing in women's clothes.

Groups like the Beijing LGBT Center continued to publicly push for rights such as same-sex marriage [even after a nationwide crackdown](#) on human rights lawyers and activists that started in 2015 after Xi came to power.

In the past few years, that limited space has shrunk further.

The well-known group called LGBT Rights Advocacy China, which brought strategic lawsuits to push for policy change and expanding rights, [closed down in 2021](#). The group's founder was detained and the organization's end was a condition of his release, according to an activist close to the group who was previously based in China but has since relocated abroad. He declined to be named out of fear of government retribution toward family in China.

In face of the constant pressure, he said, sometimes groups are not able to openly inform the community they serve about politically sensitive events they held, which would cause confusion.

Before the crackdown, LGBT Rights Advocacy China built a network of lawyers who were sympathetic and willing to help LGBTQ+ people with legal issues. They had several visible nationwide campaigns pushing for policy changes, such as recognizing same-sex marriage, through targeted lawsuits.

Police pressure on rights groups increased in the past few years, the activist said. Police often invited LGBTQ+ groups to “drink tea” — a euphemism for unofficial meetings that police use to keep track of certain targets. That used to happen in public spaces, but started taking place in private spaces, such as directly in front of activists' homes. Police also started taking activists to the police station for these “teas,” the activist said.

LGBTQ+ organizations often don't officially register, as it is difficult for them to get government approval, and officially registered groups that partner with them have also come under pressure. Sometimes groups, especially small ones, are shut down without an opportunity to tell the public, the activist said.

“The ones we've seen aren't just these few, but actually the majority have shut down,” the activist said. “The pressure has continuously grown. It's never stopped.”

In July 2021, [WeChat shut down dozens of accounts](#) with LGBTQ+ topics that were run by university students and non-profit groups. In response, some groups changed their names, removing words that like “gay” or “sexual minority” that would easily trigger the censors, though it was largely ineffective.

Until Monday, the Beijing LGBT Center stayed in operation despite the censors and growing pressure. The group worked with the United Nations Development Program to conduct a nationwide survey on sexuality and gender in 2015, aiming to provide a baseline on the hardships that face LGBTQ+ people living in China. The survey asked respondents about their access to social services, health care, and how societal attitudes affected them.

In recent years, the group has focused on workplace diversity and inclusion. Last week, the center posted an article celebrating 15 years of work. “Beijing LGBT never had much money, and very few staffers, it was all dependent on hundreds of volunteers,” the article read.

“Their shutdown makes one feel very helpless. As groups large and small shut down or stop hosting events, there's no longer a place where one can see hope,” said another Chinese activist who requested anonymity for fear of government retribution.