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Openly gay US ambassador treads touchy path in Dominican Republic

At the end of James Brewster's first year as ambassador, many in the conservative Catholic country say his appointment shows how out of touch the US is with local values. But he says it's important for him to speak out.

By Ezra Fieser, Correspondent | DECEMBER 16, 2014

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic

On the day he was sworn in as United States ambassador to the Dominican Republic, James Brewster married his partner, Bob Satawake, in a hotel with a view of the White House grounds.

Mr. Brewster and Mr. Satawake arrived in Santo Domingo as the first openly gay couple ever to serve at an ambassadorial level in the Americas. But even before their plane touched down, conservative circles in the Dominican Republic were pointing to them as an example of how US foreign policy is out of touch with local norms.



Participants wave rainbow flags during a gay pride parade in Santo Domingo July 13, 2014. (Luz Sosa/Reuters/File)

The conservative archbishop of Santo Domingo, Cardinal Nicolás de Jesús López Rodríguez, referred to Brewster using a derogatory slur for homosexuals. The leader of evangelical Christian churches called for protests, and Dominicans filled social media sites with anti-gay comments.

“The words that were used and I think the conversations coming from such a strong sense of hate really were shocking to me,” Brewster told The Christian Science Monitor in his first interview with a foreign news outlet. “My objective after seeing it was to make sure that we took it in context. And we saw the outpouring of support.”

Now, a year after Brewster's arrival, his ambassadorship is seen as an example for how top US diplomats can manage the State Department's call to push for stronger rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community in sensitive situations. The Obama administration, which has appointed more openly gay ambassadors than all other administrations combined, said last year that the advancement of LGBT rights around the world would be a priority. “No matter where you are, and no matter who you love, we stand with you,” Secretary of State John Kerry said in June 2013.

'Isn't it time to stop hating?'

Brewster, a former executive for a US shopping mall developer and a top Chicago-area fundraiser for Obama's 2012 reelection campaign, was nominated as part of a historic class of five openly gay ambassadors.

Others went to Denmark, Australia, Spain, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Austria. Last month, the Senate confirmed Ted Osius as ambassador to Vietnam, making him the first openly gay US diplomat to serve in Asia.

Those ambassadors have incorporated protection of LGBT rights as part of their mission, including the ambassador to Spain, James Costos, who flew the rainbow gay pride flag just below Old Glory to celebrate LGBT Pride month in June.

None, however, has had to navigate the type of backlash Brewster confronted when he arrived in Santo Domingo. Politically influential Catholic bishops, who did not return calls for comment, warned Brewster that his values were not in sync with those of the majority Catholic Caribbean country. “He is going to suffer and will have to leave,” Monsignor Pablo Cedano said.

The Dominican Republic does not have a law that bans homosexual relations, like those on the books in several Caribbean countries. But it is one of few countries in the region to ban same-sex marriage under the Constitution. In 2010, the year that Constitution was enacted, a public opinion survey by Vanderbilt University’s Latin American Public Opinion Project found that only 18.6 percent of Dominicans supported same-sex marriage. It was among the 10 countries in Latin America with the lowest support for such rights.

To mark LGBT Pride month, Brewster and Satawake released a video in which they responded to their critics. “To those individuals who continue to discriminate against individuals because of who they are as human beings, I have to ask, ‘Isn’t it time to stop hating?’” Brewster said.

“The intent was to let them know that we’re much broader than the married gay couple that lives in the ambassador’s residence,” Brewster says. “It was something we wanted to do because if we’re going to continue to promote that anyone who is born anywhere in the world can be proud of who they are, it’s important for us to be out there to talk about that we’re proud of who we are.”

But it also continued the controversy around his presence.

“I don’t think that most people agree with what they said, but people think that the US doesn’t recognize that for us to have a gay ambassador is like an insult,” says Omar Fernandez, a bank employee and Catholic here.

'In a fishbowl'

“Ambassadors often speak on issues of controversy – some matters of policy, others involving things they’ve said or done in country,” Michael Guest, an openly gay ambassador to Romania appointed by George W. Bush in 2001, wrote in an e-mail after Brewster’s video was released. “He’s absolutely right to integrate this issue into comments regarding pride season.”

Brewster and other gay ambassadors have to balance their roles as diplomats with their desire to advocate for LGBT rights, says Dennis Jett, former ambassador to Mozambique and Peru and a professor of international affairs at Penn State University.

“As ambassador, you have to pick and choose the issues you’re going to engage on,” says Mr. Jett. “You’re constantly in the fishbowl.”

For those advocating for gay rights here, however, Brewster "is an important symbol," says Juan Jimenez Coll, a local gay rights activist. "His presence shows to us that there is support for what we're trying to do."

Brewster, for his part, seems to be looking beyond the controversy.

"The great thing about Dominican culture is that they're a very proud culture that has a strong faith," says Brewster, who vacationed here for 15 years before becoming ambassador. "For me, any time I look at anyone who has a strong faith, my hope is that their understanding that loving everyone as they would love themselves is going to be the thing that wins."

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