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Rising

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Friday, 17 November 2006

South Africa and Arizona have something expansive in common, and it has nothing to do with their deserts.

On November 14, South African lawmakers passed legislation 230 to 41 in favor of the Civil Union Bill that recognizes same-sex marriage. Exactly one week earlier, Arizonians voted against a measure that would have denied benefits to domestic partners. Although both the country of South Africa and the state of Arizona still have their share of opponents of same-sex unions, these latest votes of confidence reflect more than a start. It's a new beginning ... a new dawn.

Ten years ago, South Africa ushered in its own new dawn, the post-Apartheid government of the ANC ("African National Congress"). It is because of the ANC's determination to excise all forms of discrimination that the Civil Union Bill passed. Per Home Affairs Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, "When we attained our democracy, we sought to distinguish ourselves from an unjust painful past by declaring that never again shall it be that any South African will be discriminated against on the basis of color, creed, culture and sex."

It would be beautiful if it were that easy. It's not. Non-hetero sexuality is illegal in many African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Just because the Civil Union Bill has passed, it doesn't mean that attacks on the gay community will suddenly cease. As of this writing, already some pundits are afraid that with the passage of this bill, a new backlash, a new gay apartheid, might rise.

Objections are pouring in: the South African version of James Dobson, President of the African Christian Democratic Party Kenneth Meshoe, summarized the passage of the bill as the "saddest day in our 12 years of democracy," saying that South Africa "was provoking God's anger." But looking on the South African, sunnier side of the street, Laurent Laroche, spokesman for the gay rights group Collectif Arc-en-Ciel, said "I feel very, very proud for South Africans. It is a great model for us, for Africa." Fikile Vilakazi of the Joint Working Group, a national network of 17 gay and lesbian organizations, stated "It demonstrates powerfully the commitment of our lawmakers to ensuring that all human beings are treated with dignity."

In a country, in a continent where homophobia is the law of the land, it is stunning

that the Civil Union Bill not only passed, but by such a great margin. Yet if it weren't for South Africa's history of apartheid, this newly legislated tolerance would probably not have happened. In its dramatic destruction and ensuing rebirth, South Africa echoes the myth of the phoenix, the fantastical bird that lives for 500 years, builds its own funeral pyre, is consumed by the flames, then rises anew from the ashes.

After all the despair, torture and injustice that the native South Africans experienced at the hands of the white Afrikaners during the period of apartheid, the country ultimately went through a phoenix-like self-destruction, leading to its own, magnificent rebirth. And now, reflected in the new passage of the Civil Union Bill, is the continuing extension of that same rebirth. What a beautiful sight to see.

In looking back at our own country, there's Arizona—the only one of eight states that said "no" to denying benefits to domestic partners in the latest election. But there's much more in common with South Africa than the vote to fight for gay rights. The capital and largest city of Arizona, namely Phoenix, got its name because the city rose from the ancient ruins of a Hohokam Indian settlement that existed until 1400. In 1867, the Swilling Irrigating Canal Company was formed, and one of the canal builders, a man named Darrell Duppa, suggested the name.

Mr. Duppa might have sensed something that his canal-building friends did not.

In the ashes of despair, at home and abroad, with all the anti-gay fear and misunderstanding, that phoenix still exists. If it can rise in Africa, it can rise anywhere. Even here.