

## Being Gay at the Sochi 2014 Olympic Games

Professor Andy Miah

**In recent months, there has been a lot of talk about Russian law and homosexuality. Much of it has centred on international outrage at a change in its legislation which, for many countries, would be a return to a very dark and depressing era in humanity's history, where non-heterosexual lifestyles were seen as something to hide or feel ashamed about.**

Some political leaders are not attending the Sochi 2014 Olympics, it is thought, because of these anxieties about human rights. Yet, the time for debate is now over. As the Games begin, the only question remaining is what will happen to an athlete if they do anything to express their sexuality while at the Games.

The IOC's position on political manifestation at the Games is pretty unambiguous: the Games are apolitical and any action to politicize the Games is likely to be met with disciplinary action by the athlete's National Olympic Committee.



This happened in 1968 when Smith and Carlos each raised a black gloves fist on the podium on behalf of African-American civil rights. They were subsequently removed from the team.

Sochi's equivalent to Mexico 1968 is sexuality and the IOC would prefer that athletes just focused on their competition. I have some sympathy for the IOC, which, all along, explains itself as essentially the guardians of a multi-sport mega event, and that the issues around belief systems is not within their purview. It is not realistic to expect the IOC to make a significant intervention in long term domestic law, beyond what is required to logistically deliver the Games.

Yet, over the years the IOC has nurtured an identity that has made more central its contribution to advancing society in crucial ways and this is actually part of what Coubertin dreamed of when setting up the modern Olympics. For example, the IOC has built close relationships with the United Nations on a range of issues, such

as creating global peace and environmental concern. In this sense, it has become a powerful advocacy organization, the value of which is born out of its response to and action around important global concerns.

Furthermore, it is hard to understand how sexual identity should be construed as a political manner, rather than a fundamental human right that the IOC should support. After all, the Olympic Charter compels its members to support non-discrimination. To this end, support for sexual freedom is more adequately understood as a condition of membership to the Olympic movement, not a political choice. Being the host of an Olympic Games should make these commitments even more necessary to uphold.

The IOC's only defence is found in the difference between a fundamental freedom and the advocacy of this freedom in public fora, the latter of which is what authorities seek to avoid. This may

be the only way that the IOC can justify its stance. In any case, the IOC should guarantee that GLBT athletes will not face action for taking a stand at the Sochi Olympics. This would be an important message to send the world and the only way that these can really be great Games for everybody and avoid being labelled in history as the homophobic Games.

As the Google doodle today states in its rainbow colours, quoting the Olympic Charter:

*"The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play." -Olympic Charter*