

# Obama uses prayer breakfast to challenge host, Uganda: Calls for civility

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President Obama chided conservative religious and political leaders at the annual National Prayer Breakfast, condemning an antigay bill in Uganda and challenging them not to question his faith or his citizenship.

“We may disagree about gay marriage, but surely we can agree that it is unconscionable to target gays and lesbians for who they are—whether it’s here in the United States or . . . more extremely in odious laws that are being proposed most recently in Uganda,” he said at the February 4 event in Washington, D.C.

Critics have linked sponsors of the annual breakfast—a secretive and politically connected group known alternatively as the Family or the Fellowship—with ties to the controversial legislation. Gay groups had pressured Obama to combat the Uganda issue head-on at the breakfast.

The president, displaying the same assertiveness he has recently projected in the wake of a string of political setbacks, focused on the need for civility between people of different faiths and political ideologies.

“Civility also requires relearning how to disagree without being disagreeable,” Obama said. “Now, I am the first to confess I am not always right. . . . But surely you can question my policies without questioning my faith, or, for that matter, my citizenship.”

His comment drew both laughter and applause from the crowd of some 3,000 people, including members of Congress, military brass and representatives of more than 140 countries.

The prayer breakfast, which is traditionally opposed by church-state separationists, has been criticized this year by gay activists. In recent months, members of the

Family have been accused of exporting U.S. culture wars to Uganda and inspiring its antihomosexuality bill, which would punish gay rights advocates and severely criminalize homosexual acts.

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and David Bahati, the member of parliament who introduced the bill, are both members of the Family, according to Jeff Sharlet, whose book *The Family* investigated the organization.

Openly gay Episcopal Bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire came to Washington earlier in the week to urge Obama to address the Uganda bill. “I think this raises awareness about what’s going on and about the connections to the religious right in this country, so I think that’s all to the good,” Robinson said.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who gave the keynote address at the breakfast, said she had spoken with Museveni, “whom I have known through the prayer breakfast, and expressed the strongest concerns about a law being considered in the parliament of Uganda.”

Obama also spoke of his personal prayer life—“I assure you I’m praying a lot these days”—and said it includes petitions for a spirit of civility. “Progress comes when we look into the eyes of another and see the face of God,” he said. –*Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*