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GAY PARADE: Cyclists and motorists decorated with balloons and rainbow flags take part in Vietnam's first ever gay pride parade on a road in Hanoi. — AFP photo

Vietnam holds first gay pride parade

HANOI: Dozens of cyclists decorated with balloons and rainbow flags streamed through the Vietnamese capital Hanoi yesterday for the first gay pride parade in the communist state.

Organised by the city's small but growing Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community, the event went ahead peacefully with no attempt by police to stop the colourful convoy of about 100 activists despite their lack of official permission.

"It's time to eliminate discrimination against people of different sexuality. I am straight, but my cousin is a lesbian," said Kyle Tran, 19, wearing a red headband saying 'I love LGBT'.

The cyclists attracted no hostility — and only a little attention — as they made their way down Hanoi's busy streets.

"Vietnamese society supports

us, supports this rally — I have come out already and I have never had any problems," Hung Culif, 22, told AFP at the start of the event.

The parade follows recent gay pride celebrations in Myanmar and Laos, reflecting signs of liberalising social attitudes in parts of Southeast Asia.

Homosexuality remains largely taboo in Vietnam, where Confucian social mores — with their emphasis on tradition and family — still dominate.

Gays are routinely portrayed in the media as comical figures or as people suffering from a condition that can be treated.

But in a surprise move late last month, Justice Minister Ha Hung Cuong said that it might be time to consider a change in the law to recognise same-sex marriage.

Vietnam currently forbids

same-sex unions. Any move to legalise gay marriage would make Vietnam the first nation in Asia to do so.

The cyclists voiced strong support for the possible legal changes, shouting "we support same-sex marriage" and calling for equal rights for gays and lesbians.

"There is a lot of attention on gay rights issues now," Le Minh, 21, told AFP as she attached a rainbow flag to her bicycle.

"There were (many) questions about gay marriage at the recent National Assembly session. It is really good for the community," she said.

Activists said they had modified the parade route after coming under pressure from police to avoid sensitive areas of the capital where anti-China demonstrations were taking place. — AFP