

Why Christians May Be Flogged, Dismembered or Stoned to Death in Brunei

The sultan of Brunei has announced a controversial new law based on Islamic criminal punishments criticized by U.N. human rights officials and other human rights groups.

"I place my faith in and am grateful to God the Almighty to announce that Thursday May 1, 2014, will see the enforcement of Shariah law phase one, to be followed by the other phases," Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, leader of the country's absolute monarchy government for nearly 47 years, said in a speech the day preceding the implementation of the law.

Brunei, a tiny country of just over 420,000 people nestled in Southeast Asia, has already been practicing Islamic laws to regulate civil affairs such as personal and family issues, but now the laws will be extended to cover criminal offenses.

The new Islamic penalties will be introduced over time, at least another year or two, and will eventually include severe bodily punishments, such as: flogging for adultery, cutting of limbs for theft, and stoning to death for rape and sodomy.

The first phase includes laws for offenses against eating or drinking in public during Islam's fasting month, which are punishable by fines and imprisonment.

Parts of the law also apply to non-Muslims. In February, Shariah law experts from the Ministry of Religious Affairs announced that non-Muslims could be punished for wearing indecent clothing that "disgraces Islam." The offender could be jailed for up to six months, fined a maximum penalty of BN 2,000 (\$1,600), or both.

Even now, it is mandatory for women of all religions—including Christians—to wear a hijab (head covering) if they work for the government or are attending official functions. However, now that the Shariah penal code is enacted, a violation against these religious instructions will be criminalized.

In the past, church leaders claimed to receive heavy monitoring by the government so the new penal code is expected to add pressure, anxiety, and fear upon Christians who make up 8.7 percent of the population.

“Brunei’s decision to implement criminal Shariah law is a huge step backwards for human rights in the country. It constitutes an authoritarian move towards brutal medieval punishments that have no place in the modern, 21st century world,” says Phil Robertson, deputy director of the Asia division at Human Rights Watch.

Another restriction aimed at Christians who converted from a Muslim background includes a law that prohibits any Muslim parents from letting non-Muslims care for their child. The act is punishable by a jail term of up to five years, a fine of up to BN 20,000 (\$15,600), or both.

Consequently, people who convert to Christianity can lose custody of their child should their new faith come to light. “All parental rights are awarded to the Muslim parent if a child is born to mixed-faith parents and the non-Muslim parent is not recognized in any official document, including the child’s birth certificate,” wrote the U.S. Department of State in the 2012 International Religious Freedom Report.

What’s more, once Shariah law takes effect, the restriction may be extended to daycare services operated by non-Muslims.

The new penal code also cites that non-Muslims can no longer share their faith with Muslims and atheists. Offenders are at risk of being fined of up to BN 20,000 (\$15,600), sent to jail for five years at most, or both.

Teaching other religions outside Islam to a child of Muslims or atheists carries the same punishment. Because of this, the few Christian schools will receive a setback as many of their students are non-Christians; the school day normally begins with a reading from the Bible.

“Even now, parents have started demanding that we begin every gathering with a Muslim prayer instead,” an unnamed school official told WWM.

Lastly, following the lead of neighboring Malaysia, the penal code claims 19 words to belong solely to Islam. Therefore, Christians are banned from using words like *Allah* (God) and *Firman Allah* (God’s Word), which are found in the Malay language Bible commonly used by Bruneians. Christian materials also cannot be brought into the country.

The extent to which the laws may affect non-Muslims is hard to predict given the fact that it is early in the implementation stage. The government admits lacking the infrastructure to support Sharia law. For one, there is a shortage of specialized judges in Sharia courts.

However, with a budget of BN 2 million (\$1.5 million) for the 2014-15 fiscal year, it is only a matter of time before it puts the system in order. Once this is accomplished, Shariah law can be easily enforced to the small Bruneian population. By then, the above scenarios could become the reality of many Christians in Brunei, which ranks as the 24th most difficult country to be a Christian, in an annual list of 50 countries on the World Watch List.