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Brunei to punish adultery and gay sex with death by stoning

By Austin Ramzy

NY Times (28.03.2019) - <https://nyti.ms/2YyfHSs> - When Brunei announced in 2013 that it was bringing in harsh Islamic laws that included punishments of death by stoning for adultery and gay sex, the move was met with international protest. Some investments by the country's sovereign wealth fund, including the Beverly Hills Hotel, were targets of boycotts and calls for divestment.

Following the outcry, Brunei, a sultanate of about 430,000 on the island of Borneo, delayed carrying out the harshest provisions of its Shariah law.

Now, it is quietly going ahead with them.

Beginning on April 3, statutes allowing stoning and amputation will go into effect, according to an announcement posted by the country's attorney general last year that has only recently received notice.

That has set off a renewed outcry from human rights groups.

"Brunei's Penal Code is a deeply flawed piece of legislation containing a range of provisions that violate human rights," Rachel Chhoa-Howard, a researcher for Amnesty International, said in a statement. "As well as imposing cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments, it blatantly restricts the rights to freedom of expression, religion and belief, and codifies discrimination against women and girls."

Brunei has had the death penalty on the books since it was a British protectorate, but in practice executions are not typically carried out.

Homosexuality is already illegal in Brunei, with a punishment of up to 10 years in prison, but the new laws allow for penalties including whipping and stoning. The new laws also introduce amputation of hands or feet as a punishment for robbery.

"To legalize such cruel and inhuman penalties is appalling of itself," Ms. Chhoa-Howard said. "Some of the potential 'offenses' should not even be deemed crimes at all, including consensual sex between adults of the same gender."

Brunei is ruled by a sultan, Hassanal Bolkiah, who lives in a 1,788-room palace and whose wealth amounts to tens of billions of dollars thanks to Brunei's oil riches. In recent decades he has advocated a conservative vision of Islam that has clashed with the more moderate strains generally practiced in the region, and with the royal family's own luxurious lifestyle.

A long-running feud between the sultan and his brother, Prince Jefri Bolkiah, unfolded in courtrooms around the world after the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s and brought attention to the prince's reputation for extravagance, including cars, mansions, mistresses and erotic statues.

Under the laws about to come into effect, a person can be convicted of adultery or having gay sex only if there are multiple Muslim witnesses. The law will apply to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, although some offenses, such as apostasy, apply specifically to Muslims, who make up about two-thirds of Brunei's population.

In an update to its travel advice for Brunei, Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs said the new Shariah code "applies to Muslims, non-Muslim and foreigners even when on Brunei registered aircraft and vessels." It recommended that travelers "exercise normal safety precautions" when visiting the sultanate.