

Brunei to implement Shariah penal code, including stoning, caning

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(RNS) The sultan of Brunei announced on Tuesday (Oct. 22) he will rule his oil-rich Islamic country according to Shariah laws, including death by stoning for adultery, the amputation of limbs for theft, flogging for alcohol consumption and abortion, and other punishments.

The Shariah penal code will begin in phases starting in April 2014, said Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, according to Agence France-Presse.

Brunei is on the northwest edge of Borneo island, which is also part of Indonesia and Malaysia in the South China Sea.

“Let us not just look at the hand-cutting or the stoning or the caning (flogging) per se, but let us also look at the conditions governing them,” Brunei’s Mufti Awang Abdul Aziz, the country’s top Islamic scholar, told a legal conference, according to The Associated Press.

“It is not indiscriminate cutting or stoning or caning,” he added. “There are conditions and there are methods that are just and fair.”

The laws and punishments apply only to the Sunni Muslim majority in the Southeast Asian country that enjoys one of the richest economies in Asia, based on extensive fields of petroleum and natural gas.

“It is because of our need that Allah the Almighty, in all his generosity, has created laws for us, so that we can utilize them to obtain justice,” said the sultan, 67, according to Reuters.

The sultan's family has been in power for more than 600 years, including when Brunei became a British protectorate in 1888 and after it gained independence in 1984.

The sultan, who is also prime minister, has ruled since 1967. There are no elections.

Up until now, he enforced a dual judicial system of British secular laws, and Shariah courts mainly for family matters.

Brunei's 416,000 population are 67 percent Muslim and ethnic Malay, governed under a constitutional sultanate officially called the Malay Islamic Monarchy.

"The Compulsory Religious Education Order of 2012 mandates that all Muslim children aged 7 to 15 residing in the country must be enrolled in Islamic religious education," said the U.S. State Department's 2012 International Religious Freedom Report.

"The government routinely censored magazine articles on other faiths, blacking out or removing photographs of crucifixes and other Christian religious symbols," the State Department said. There were "no depictions of other religions' practices" in school textbooks.