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Indonesian Province Embraces Islamic Law

By JANE PERLEZ
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BANDA ACEH, [Indonesia](#) — Across this most religious of Indonesia's provinces, brown uniformed policemen in black wagons enforce Shariah, or Islamic law. They haul unmarried couples into precincts and arrest people for drinking or gambling. Increasingly, many of the cases are pushed to the ultimate conclusion, public canings at mosques in front of pumped-up crowds.

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Oki Tiba/Imaji, for The New York Times
An man caught drinking at a beachside stall was sentenced to 40 lashes. The caning was televised nationally, and he fainted on the seventh stroke.

In mid-July, a 27-year-old man sentenced to 40 lashes fainted on the seventh stroke of a rattan cane from a hooded man in the yard of a mosque here in the provincial capital.

The caning was televised nationally, with an announcer reporting that the man, who had been arrested for drinking at a beachside stall, would receive the remainder of his punishment once he had recovered.

Battered by the Asian tsunami 19 months ago, Aceh is undergoing a profound transformation that is likely to have considerable impact on the nature of Islam in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country.

For centuries Indonesia has been known for the open-minded, sometimes freewheeling, interpretation of its dominant religion. That is changing as moderate Muslims find themselves under siege from more orthodox proponents, and as the moderates are hesitant to push back.

Aceh, where Islam has always been more rigorously observed, is the first of Indonesia's 33 provinces to put Shariah law onto the books. Special Shariah courts established to mete out punishments have been operating for a year.

Now, some of Indonesia's other provincial governments are looking to Aceh as a model for how they might more formalize Shariah laws already on the books. More than a score of townships across Indonesia have introduced Shariah-like laws that fall short of the precision of the religious laws here.

The 1945 Indonesian Constitution is generally considered a secular document. But in a signal of the current mood in

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The New York Times
Aceh is the most religious of Indonesia's 33 provinces.

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Timur Angin/Imaji, for The New York Times
A woman in Aceh being questioned by policemen who enforce Shariah, or Islamic law, which is also being adopted elsewhere in Indonesia.

Indonesia, leading politicians have recently refrained from criticizing Aceh's new laws. Indeed, the laws were written in 2003, and had been made possible by the national government as a special gesture to the province, which for years suffered through separatist unrest.

In Aceh itself, though, the way the new laws are being enforced has aroused some opposition, especially among women. Often, they say, an arrest by overeager Shariah police officers, many of them men in their 20's and 30's, seems orchestrated as a punishment unto itself.

When three activists, all women, chatting in the seclusion of a hotel corridor after a long day of meetings, were shoved into an open police van in February for not wearing their head scarves, the police paraded them before a throng

of men.

"We believed we were in our personal space, and they broke into our personal space," said Nursyamsiah, 41, the head of the Acehnese Women's Empowerment Group, who recounted sitting on a sofa in the hotel where they had been staying after a [United Nations](#)-sponsored seminar on women's rights.

About 11 p.m. the Shariah police burst in, demanding to know why they were in a hotel at such an hour. "They made sure people were laughing and booing at us as they took us to the mayor's office," she said.

In a ruling that has enraged women's groups, an elementary school teacher, a married woman in her 30's, was sentenced on July 21 to caning for working in the headquarters of a political party on a Sunday afternoon at the same time as the party leader, who was not her husband.

"They were two people working in different rooms. How can she get punished?" asked Fatimahsyam, the head of the women's branch of the legal aid society in Lhoksemawe, Aceh's second biggest city.

It is not easy, the women's groups say, to question the Shariah laws for fear of being considered an unfaithful Muslim. The women's groups are careful not to criticize the existence of the laws themselves, but rather the method of enforcement.

Curiously, Mrs. Nursyamsiah, who was arrested here, is a civil servant assigned to the Shariah offices in Lhongsia, in southern Aceh. There she has watched the introduction of the new laws up close. A new force of 75 Shariah police officers — 70 men, 5 women — is being trained, she said.

The system of Shariah laws, she said, represents a form of politics as usual, a way of fattening the payroll.

"By applying Shariah law, the governor, the political elites, get more money for police, more courts," she said. "We've opened a new section of government to look after Shariah."

What also rankled her, she said, was the fact that the laws on drinking, gambling and relations between men and women tended to affect poor people the most. "Why," she asked, "have they not introduced the Shariah laws on corruption? Stealing in Islam is a bigger sin than these small sins."

At the municipal office of the Shariah police in Banda Aceh, Nasir Illyas, the director of administration, defended the style of punishment, proudly showing off the nearly three-foot-long rattan rod — with a curved handle for a better grip — that he keeps near his desk.

The rules are fair, he said as he itemized the following particulars from a manual: a

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minimum of about two and half feet between the person who canes and the defendant; the cane is applied from the left side; onlookers are at least 10 yards away.

Mr. Illyas, who sits under a portrait of the Indonesian president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, said the Shariah laws were the “wish” of the people. The laws should be extended to non-Muslims, too, he said, a move that would place Aceh in the same ranks as Saudi Arabia.

Such a broad application, now under discussion among Aceh’s officials, could have ramifications for the economic future here. Foreign aid workers, overseeing billions of dollars of international reconstruction aid, say they are finding the province less welcoming.

In mid-July, an Italian aid worker was arrested by the Shariah police for being with an Acehese woman late at night. It was the second arrest of a foreign aid worker and an Acehese person of the opposite sex in the last several months.

For some, the enforcement of Shariah laws is upsetting the ideal of a new Aceh as an open society.

The director of the agency responsible for rebuilding the tsunami-ravaged province, Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, is a graduate of [Stanford University](#), and a well-traveled government official from the capital, Jakarta. But to remind visitors that Aceh was once a bustling entrepôt, he keeps a turn-of-the-20th-century photograph of Sabang port, the main entry point to Aceh, on his wall.

It would be impolitic for Mr. Kuntoro to speak out against the Shariah laws, but the message of the photo, and a remark to a visitor that Sabang once rivaled Hong Kong, is clear.

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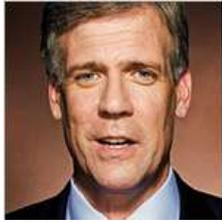
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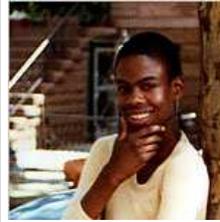
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