

Stoning Gay People to Death in Brunei Is an Outrage and Not My Definition of Islam

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I was 13 years old when I first heard of the [Sultan of Brunei](#). The absolute ruler of a tiny, oil-rich kingdom in Southeast Asia, Hassanal Bolkiah was the subject of a [much-discussed TV documentary](#) by the British filmmaker Alan Whicker in 1992. As a young teenager, sitting in front of the television, I was in awe of this Muslim king. He was the richest man in the world! He earned a quarter of a million pounds every hour! He owned more than 150 cars!

Today, however, I'm filled not with awe but with disgust. Brunei has become the first country in Southeast Asia to impose [capital punishment](#) for "crimes" such as adultery and gay sex.

LGBTQ Bruneians, who are in particular danger, have been [fleeing the kingdom](#). Can you blame them? According to the [Associated Press](#), "Homosexuality was already punishable in Brunei by a jail term of up to 10 years. ... But under the new laws, those found guilty of gay sex can be stoned to death or whipped. Adulterers risk death by stoning too, while thieves face amputation of a right hand on their first offense and a left foot on their second. The laws also apply to children and foreigners, even if they are not Muslim."

This is barbarism, plain and simple. How can a punishment rightly described as "[cruel and inhuman](#)" (U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet), "[vicious](#)" (Amnesty International), and "[medieval](#)" (Human Rights Watch) be considered appropriate or acceptable in the 21st century? Has the Sultan — who isn't exactly a [paragon of moral rectitude](#) himself — taken leave of his senses?

Then again, shamefully, Brunei isn't alone. A [recent study](#) by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association found that there are already six countries that explicitly make homosexuality a crime punishable by death. And, as a Muslim, it is a source of deep frustration for me that 5 out of the 6 are Muslim-majority countries — Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia — and in the sixth, Nigeria, the death penalty is imposed only in [Muslim-majority or Muslim-plurality](#) states. According to [ILGA](#), there are also 70 member states of the United Nations that "criminalise consensual same-sex sexual acts" — and, again, Muslim-majority countries are disproportionately represented on that list. In fact, homosexuality is illegal in the vast majority of the world's Muslim-majority nations, from Senegal in West Africa to Malaysia in Southeast Asia to Qatar in the Middle East. (Full disclosure: I host [two shows](#) on Al Jazeera English, which is funded by the government of Qatar. According to the [Qatari penal code](#), gay sex can result in a prison sentence.)

It is easy to blame all of this rampant, state-sponsored homophobia in the Muslim-majority world solely on Islam. Indeed, the prominent British atheist, scientist, and Islamophobe, Richard Dawkins, [cited](#) Brunei's barbaric new law in order to [compare](#) my faith to cancer.

Yet the truth is that nowhere in the Quran is a legal punishment prescribed for the sin, or the "crime," of homosexuality. There are [no authentic reports](#) in any of the Muslim books of history of

the Prophet Muhammad punishing anyone for same-sex acts. In fact, even many Muslims today are unaware that the Ottoman Empire [decriminalized homosexuality](#) in 1858. Got that? One hundred and nine years before the [U.K.](#) and 145 years before the [United States](#), the biggest Muslim-ruled empire on earth decreed that there should be no penalty for being gay.

To be clear: The consensus position among mainstream Islamic scholars, whether Sunni or Shia, is that same-sex relations, like extramarital or premarital relations, are a sin. There is, however, no consensus among scholars about any earthly punishment for committing this sin. Don't take my word for it — [ask Shaykh Hamza Yusuf](#), described as “[arguably the West's most influential Islamic scholar](#).”

To point the finger only at Islam, or even at Islamists, doesn't explain why Egypt under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who came to power after [toppling the Muslim Brotherhood](#) and is now a [hero to Ivanka Trump](#), has [violently cracked down](#) on LGBTQ communities; or why Muslim men are fleeing a “[gay purge](#)” in secular Chechnya.

Homophobia is not the monopoly of any one country, culture, or religion. Catholic-majority Brazil is believed to have the [highest LGBTQ murder rate](#) in the world. Orthodox-majority Russia passed a “[gay propaganda law](#)” in 2013. Here in the United States, anti-gay hate crimes are [on the rise](#) and, [according to Rebecca Isaacs](#), executive director of the LGBTQ rights group Equality Federation, the Trump administration has “done so many things that are as anti-LGBTQ as you could possibly be.” The president has even joked that his vice president wants to “[hang](#)” all gay people. (As my friend Owen Jones, perhaps Britain's best-known progressive and gay commentator, has [observed](#), “If you only talk about LGBTQ rights to bash Muslims, you don't care about LGBTQ rights.”)

For those of us who are Muslims, however, there is no point denying that queer people do face particular abuse, discrimination, demonization, and violence across the Muslim-majority world. It is long past time for us to engage in a frank discussion about our attitudes toward gay people in our midst. We have to find a way to try and reconcile our beliefs — and Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, has traditionally seen homosexuality as a sin — with the reality of life in modern, pluralistic, secular societies in which gay people cannot be wished away or banished from sight. Personally, as a practicing Muslim, I have had to think long and hard about this over the years, and I have also written before about my own [homophobia when I was younger](#) and the [lack of compassion and understanding](#) displayed by some in my own community.

Muslims, though, are not a monolith. In the United States, the [majority \(51 percent\) of Muslims](#) now support a legal right for gay couples to marry, compared to a majority (58 percent) of white evangelical Christians who remain opposed. There are a [number](#) of prominent Muslim-majority countries, from Turkey and Indonesia to Bosnia and Kosovo, where it isn't a crime to be gay (though, of course, homophobic prejudice and discrimination still abounds).

And, in an interview on the [Deconstructed](#) podcast in February, the soon-to-be prime minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, told me that he plans to repeal his country's [anti-gay laws](#). Ibrahim, one of the most respected voices in the Muslim-majority world who was himself imprisoned on [trumped-up charges](#) of sodomy, said the laws are “archaic,” a hangover from the days of British colonialism, and “nothing to do with Islam or Christianity.” For Ibrahim, “you cannot condemn people for their sexual orientation” because “your sexual orientation is your business.” However, he added, “it will take time” for attitudes to “evolve.”

Here's the problem though: Gay Bruneians no longer have time on their side. Their Muslim-majority neighbors have stayed silent while Brunei's Western allies, such as the [United States](#) and the [United](#)

[Kingdom](#), have issued the most tepid and halfhearted of condemnations. It has been left to [Hollywood celebrities](#) to publish [scathing op-eds](#) and launch a [loud boycott campaign](#). So it's time for the rest of us — Muslims and non-Muslims alike — to make some noise too, on behalf of members of a persecuted minority group who are in [genuine fear](#) for their lives.

Remember, this isn't a debate about Islamic theology or ethics. This isn't about changing sincerely held religious beliefs. We should all, of course, be free to believe what we want, but while I can't and don't speak for other Muslims, I'll tell you this for free: Stoning innocent people to death is not my definition of Islam.

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