

Aceh's harsh Islamic law is an ominous sign
Ana Gomes International Herald Tribune
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BRUSSELS After the World Food Program's compound in Banda Aceh, the capital of Indonesia's Aceh Province, was raided last month by the local Shariah police, a UN official told the Deutsche Press Agentur, "No one wants to make a big deal about it publicly at the moment."

Indeed, no one seems prepared to raise the issue - not the United Nations, not Europe, not the United States. Because despite the billions of dollars spent to help Aceh recover after the 2004 tsunami and a 29- year separatist war, no one has so far paid attention to the implications of allowing the police who enforce Shariah, or Islamic law, to become stronger than the state police or any other law-enforcement authority - or of allowing a law to be implemented that imposes Taliban-style local government.

In Aceh, the first to suffer the consequences of the rise of Shariah are women, who face being beaten and arrested if they don't wear their head scarves "properly." The organizers of the All Acehnese Women's Congresses raise these and many other worries. Devout Muslims, they follow Shariah as a personal commandment but find an officially enforced extremist interpretation of Shariah offensive and un-Islamic.

For them this perversion of the peace process shows how much women's voices, interests and human rights, have been blatantly disregarded by the Indonesian government, the rebel movement GAM and the international facilitators, including the European Union.

A GAM representative, Yusuf Irwandi, said the movement had never fought for the enforcement of Shariah, and was worried about the way Shariah was being implemented but unwilling to make religion an issue.

In Indonesia's Parliament, however, legislators have approved a law on governing Aceh that paves the way for more power for local religious leaders. In effect, it creates a theocracy within Aceh that has little accountability and makes a mockery out of Indonesia's positive developments toward greater democracy and the rule of law.

If the aspirations and rights of the Acehnese people - and, indeed, Indonesian law - are to be respected, a drafting committee should be immediately established, including representatives from civil society and, in particular, women's groups, to ensure that the process of working out how Aceh is governed is inclusive and not hijacked by a group of radical Islamists.

The problems go beyond Aceh. The soft-spoken head of Aceh's Shariah department, Aliyasa Abubakar, made no secret of the fact that Aceh is a pilot project for those who want all of Indonesia to drop its secular foundations and become an Islamic state with an extreme version of Shariah.

This was candidly confirmed by Nasir Jamil, a young member of the Indonesian Parliament from PKS, the Islamist political party driving the national Shariah campaign, part of the coalition that elected President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. He actually

worried that the Shariah police in Aceh was overdoing it and scaring people with their military uniforms and brutal raids, but he said the severest forms of punishment, such as cutting off hands and stoning, would gradually be enforced.

Attempts to radicalize Indonesia are triggering a strong reaction in many parts of the country where other religions are in the majority. In Bali, which is mainly Hindu, people are increasingly talking of separating from Jakarta. The same goes for Flores and other Catholic islands of eastern Indonesia, where tensions are growing between non-Muslim and Muslim communities.

What is at stake is Indonesia's national integrity.

The European Commission and EU member states should embark immediately and decisively on a strategy to help all those in Jakarta, Aceh and throughout Indonesia who are eager to keep Indonesia united, secular and tolerant. These people are fighting to consolidate democracy, combat terrorism and promote human rights, women's rights and sustainable development for the people of Indonesia. All these are values Europe claims to defend. The fate of Indonesia is decisive for a world that aims to avoid the dire prophecy of a clash of civilizations.

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