The Cane or the Cell

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In the far northwest of the island of Sumatra, Aceh is the only Indonesian province governed under sharia law. Homosexuality is criminalized there, punishable by caning or imprisonment. *La Chronique* met two victims publicly flogged in 2025 because of their sexual orientation.

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On August 26, 2025, a young man's life was shattered. 20-year-old Qori Husni received 76 lashes of the cane: a corporal punishment inflicted solely because he is gay. The scene unfolded in Taman Sari Square, in the heart of the provincial capital, Banda Aceh. Here, far from Indonesia's tourist beaches, an uncompromising interpretation of sharia, Islamic law, is rigorously enforced. In this province of five million people, a heavy silence surrounds the violence inflicted on those deemed "different." Few dare speak in their defense.

We meet Qori Husni two months after the most traumatic day of his life. The interview takes place on the white-tiled esplanade of Taman Sari Square, exactly where he was beaten. He remembers climbing onto the platform, dressed in the white tunic reserved for outcasts. He can still hear the jeers of the crowd gathered to witness the punishment. He remembers the shame, the crushing sense of guilt. His executioner — a woman, as custom dictates — wore a hood, a mask, and a brown robe. In her hand, a one-meter wooden cane. At the first blows, Qori shut his eyes. A sharp whistle through the air, the crack of wood striking flesh, again and again, 76 times. He wanted to disappear. His vertebrae cracked, his face tightened in pain, his legs gave way beneath him. The bruises took nine days to fade. Another humiliation etched onto his body. His ordeal was broadcast widely. Cameras from pro-government television networks filmed every lash, as though documenting a perfectly choreographed ceremony. In Aceh province, homosexuality has been criminalized for more than two decades.

Insults, Slaps, and the Cane

To understand how Qori ended up before an executioner, one must return to April 16, 2025. At four in the morning, he went to meet his boyfriend. Unable to see each other at home, the two young men arranged to meet through “HeeSay”, an LGBTI+ dating app, in the restroom of a public park. They were having sex when two figures suddenly appeared: the morality police. The officers arrested them and drove them to a police station in Banda Aceh. For Qori, it marked the beginning of a long descent into hell.

At the station, the beatings came relentlessly. When the slaps stopped, the insults took over. Qori reenacts the scene by folding his arms over his head: “I was protecting myself from a concussion. They took turns venting their rage on me, kicking and punching me in the face. They forced me to crawl on all fours like a dog.”

The interrogation became a torture session. The police were not interested in hearing his account, they wanted to break him. “Why are you shaming us? Why do you love men? You need to leave this place — you don’t belong here. You’re not normal. Say it!”

Qori spent a month in that police station, subjected to rushed interrogations. On the thirtieth day, he was transferred to Banda Aceh’s Class II-B prison: up to ten inmates crammed into cells smaller than 10 square meters, family visits forbidden. He waited there for three months before trial. On August 11, 2025, denied access to legal counsel, he was sentenced to 76 lashes for homosexuality.

Since then, he says, he wakes every night haunted by the same images: the blows, the humiliation. For the sake of his “mental health,” Qori left Banda Aceh to continue his business studies in Medan, in northern Sumatra.

He returned to Aceh to share his testimony with us. When we meet him, the young man walks the streets with fear lodged in his stomach. “I’m traumatized. I haven’t had sex since what happened, and every time I see a police officer, I freeze. The world needs to know how Aceh treats homosexuals. To them, we are monsters.”

After completing his studies in business consulting, Qori dreams of leaving far behind: Thailand, Japan, or anywhere else.

Across Aceh province, dozens of men have suffered the same fate as Qori Husni. Here, to love or desire someone of the same sex is to live in a constant state of alert. When

morality police do not catch gay couples themselves, local residents report them. A climate of fear and suspicion has taken hold: a dedicated hotline allows neighbors to denounce one another. Sometimes, mere suspicion is enough to trigger the machinery of repression.

That is what happened to 22-year-old Apis Iwawan on November 11, 2024.

That morning, in his small room near Banda Aceh's imposing Baiturrahman Mosque, the law student was watching a movie with his boyfriend, flipping through a comic book, exchanging a few kisses. For weeks, he had felt the neighbors watching him. When police burst in, he panicked, opened the door, stammered, then confessed. Officers threw him into the back of a pickup truck. Crying, he found himself pinned beneath their mud-caked boots. They dragged him to the police station while officers insulted him and spat in his face.

Exile From Within

Apis recounts the episode through clenched jaws. "They told me I deserved castration, like an animal…"

Before being sent to prison, Apis spent fifty days in a dilapidated cell. Police beat him seven separate times. On February 27, 2025, he was tried behind closed doors in a hearing that lasted twelve minutes. He remained silent, paralyzed with shock. The verdict: 82 lashes of the cane, the same sentence handed to his partner. The next day, the punishment was carried out on the Taman Sari esplanade — the same place where Qori would be beaten six months later.

Apis still remembers the silhouette of the female executioner. She was told how many blows to deliver only seconds before the punishment began. After the twentieth strike, she allowed the condemned man a brief pause: a glass of water, a bandage pressed against the blood running down his back. But the ordeal did not end with physical violence. What came afterward nearly destroyed him.

Within hours, his circle of friends vanished. The neighborhood grocer refused to serve his family. Professors ignored his emails. On social media, videos of the flogging

unleashed a torrent of hateful comments: “The women of Banda Aceh are beautiful — why choose boys?”, “I hope it hurt, and that his case sets an example.”

That night, his family decided to flee in order to escape public disgrace. At dawn, his parents and four siblings boarded a boat with him bound for Simeulue, their family island, 700 kilometers from Aceh. Since then, his life has frozen in place. Apis has separated from his boyfriend and lives in constant fear of another arrest.

“I tried dating girls, but I can’t do it. I’m not ready for a relationship right now, but the day I meet another man, I’ll be happy,” he confesses quietly.

The “Luck” of the Condemned

At the Banda Aceh Islamic Sharia Court, vice president Amir Khalis explains the penalties faced by those accused of “homosexual crimes.” According to him, the condemned are fortunate: they may choose between 100 lashes or ten months in prison. He even compares flogging to “a small correction,” miming the gesture with his hand.

As he speaks, two holding cells already stand ready to receive new defendants awaiting another summary trial.

After lengthy negotiations, the judge who sentenced Qori and Apis agreed to speak with us. His name is Rokhmadi Hum. He refuses to comment on Apis’s case, dismissing his name with a wave of the hand. But he insists on the “leniency” shown to Qori, whom he describes as “cooperative” during detention.

“The police asked for 100 lashes,” he says. “I believed his apology was sincere. I don’t think he will commit homosexual acts again. I reduced the sentence to 76.”

Proud of his mercy, the judge concludes: “Islamic law drastically reduces homosexual behavior. There are very few repeat offenders. We achieve these results through fear. That is essential. If someone repeats the offense, the punishment will be harsher.”

In Aceh, love has become a crime. And fear has replaced justice.

- ***Explanations – Aceh, Indonesia’s Exception***

Islamized as early as the 13th century, Aceh remains a singular case within the Indonesian archipelago. It is the only province in Indonesia to enforce sharia law. In 2001, the central government granted Aceh special autonomous status, allowing the province to manage certain political, economic, and religious affairs independently. These powers were further strengthened by the 2005 peace agreement signed with the Free Aceh Movement (*GAM*), ending three decades of armed conflict in exchange for broader autonomy.

An Islamic Criminal Code

Following the agreement, the strict enforcement of sharia intensified. In 2015, a specific Islamic criminal code — the *Qanun Jinayat* — came into force, formally codifying these rules: mandatory hijab for women, bans on gambling and alcohol consumption, prohibitions against adultery and sex outside marriage, among others.

Aceh thus became the only province in Indonesia to criminalize certain private behaviors, including consensual same-sex relationships.