Inside the Islamic Morality Police

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Every Friday, an all-female patrol from the Islamic police sweeps through Banda Aceh. Its mission: to monitor and arrest citizens who violate sharia law during prayer time. Our reporters accompanied one of these units.

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With brisk, synchronized steps, 13 women stride toward two open-backed trucks and climb into the rear. It is 12:50 P.M. The Friday call to prayer echoes through the city, carried by the amplified voice of the muezzin. This all-female patrol of the *Wilayatul Hisbah* — from the Arabic *wilayatul*, meaning "authority," and *hisbah*, meaning "oversight" — is about to comb the streets of Banda Aceh for the next ninety minutes. We are allowed to follow them on motorbikes.

Created in 2002 in the autonomous province of Aceh, this morality police force enforces its authority with uncompromising rigor. Under pounding rain, shopkeepers pull down their shutters — all commercial activity is forbidden during prayer. The role of these women is simple: monitor, inspect, reprimand. Officers record every "deviant" behavior, every store that remains open during prayer, every woman not wearing a hijab.

Patrol Hour

Dressed in green uniforms, the color of Islam, the officers sit back-to-back on metal benches bolted to the trucks. Their eyes scan the streets for "improper" behavior. The pickups crawl through the city, slowing even further whenever the officers decide to stop and question a passerby.

Beside the driver, one officer pounds into a microphone: "Brothers and sisters, stop your activities and go pray!" The order blares through the vehicle's loudspeakers. From the back, two officers shout at restaurant owners to close their businesses. One jumps down from the truck to confront a man who immediately extinguishes his cigarette. Smoking is prohibited under sharia.

Here, Islamic law governs every aspect of life, from public institutions to private conduct. Missing Friday prayers three times can result in a summons to the police station and possible prosecution.

At the end of the patrol, the officers return to headquarters for a debriefing. Rosmini, 43, shows a colleague a photograph she has just taken: a man drinking coffee "instead of being at the mosque," she explains. The officers collect such evidence and share it in a WhatsApp group to organize arrests at people's homes later on.

"Islamic morality must be upheld to prevent disorder," Rosmini says sharply. "I keep a close eye on young people — they're more unpredictable." Every Friday, she says, she intervenes whenever she sees a boy and a girl holding hands or standing too close together. "I'm not persecuting anyone," she insists. "I'm simply checking whether they're married. If they aren't, we have to separate them. That's the law."

Her colleague Erlinawati, 44, a mother of three, proudly wears the *Wilayatul Hisbah* insignia on her jacket. The wallpaper on her computer displays the Kaaba in Mecca, while her phone ringtone plays the Islamic call to prayer. When we raise the brutality of the force's methods, she rejects the criticism outright: she does not punish, she says, she "educates."

In practice, however, her work consists of hunting down homosexuals, unmarried couples, women without headscarves or wearing tight clothing, alcohol drinkers, and gamblers. "We shut down illegal cafés where men hide to drink tea during prayer," she adds sternly. "They close the shutters and think we can't see them. Eventually, we'll ban those places altogether."

Nearby, Roslina Djalil — head of the religious police precinct and spokesperson for the women's patrol — moves from one phone call to the next. Her deputy, Erie Fekri, dressed in a pale khaki uniform, silently watches our interview.

To justify the crackdown, Roslina opens the Islamic criminal code, which applies exclusively to Muslims in the province. The list of punishable offenses is long: "Unmarried couples, adultery, homosexuality, pedophilia, gambling, alcohol consumption, drug use…" Three of those offenses are punishable by caning:

homosexuality, adultery, and pedophilia. In 2024, the Islamic police arrested 115 people; 35 were publicly flogged. By October 20, 2025, authorities had already arrested 142 people, with 32 floggings carried out.

Repression as Education

Interrogations last anywhere from two to five hours, Roslina Djalil explains, adjusting her veil. During questioning, officers provide what she calls "moral education" to determine whether "the person is receptive." "With our Islamic education," she says, "we prevent these abnormal behaviors from happening again. Otherwise, children imitate adults." At the back of the police station, another room awaits suspects considered uncooperative, for harsher interrogations.

We leave the station. Two medical students agree to speak with us at a small roadside café. Eighteen-year-old Mikra describes how he navigates Aceh's restrictions with his girlfriend. "We see each other at school, but there are always people around. You have to avoid the sharia police. The only moment we feel free is when I take my girlfriend on my scooter. We ride toward the beach with nowhere to go. She holds my waist, and we just enjoy the moment."

But the conversation darkens when Mikra speaks about homosexuals. In his view, the patrol's only real merit is arresting them. Even for this younger generation deeply connected to the outside world through the internet, a man and a woman are meant to be together. A couple can only be heterosexual.

"God didn't create me to love another man," he says with disgust. "What do I think about corporal punishment for homosexuals? Caning is too lenient. They should be harsher, like some Arab countries that use stoning…"

- ***Timeline – Aceh and the Expansion of Autonomy***

13th Century

The Sultanate of Aceh thrives along the maritime trade routes linking China and India.

1600–1949

Dutch colonial rule.

December 10, 1976

Creation of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

January 1, 2001

Jakarta grants Aceh special autonomous status, partially easing the conflict with GAM.

December 26, 2004

The tsunami devastates Aceh, killing 166,000 people.

August 5, 2005

The Helsinki Accords

GAM renounces its bid for independence in exchange for expanded special autonomy and the official implementation of sharia law.

October 23, 2015

The *Qanun Jinayat*, Aceh's Islamic criminal code adopted in 2014, comes into force. It makes Aceh the only province in Indonesia to criminalize certain private behaviors, including consensual same-sex relationships.