From Guerrilla Warfare to Sharia Law

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Malik Mahmud Al Haythar, a former separatist leader from the *GAM*, remains Aceh's highest religious and customary authority. He openly defends public flogging in the name of social order, even though Indonesia has been bound since 2006 by an international treaty prohibiting torture.

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Inside his vast palace, with its silent hallways and ceremonial grandeur, 87-year-old Malik Mahmud Al Haythar receives us with unmistakable pride. "We fought for independence," he declares, "and we achieved it, along with the implementation of Islamic law."

As a young man, he belonged to *Darul Islam*, a movement advocating for an Islamic state in Indonesia. Later, his life became inseparable from the history of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). Serving as the movement's foreign minister in exile, Malik Mahmud Al Haythar helped shape GAM during its long insurgency against Jakarta.

Founded in 1976, GAM rose in opposition to the authoritarian rule of President Suharto — in power from 1967 to 1998 — and to what many Acehnese viewed as the meager economic returns from the province's gas wealth. Brutally suppressed by the Indonesian military, the movement kept a low profile for nearly a decade. But in the early 1990s, GAM resumed armed operations against the Indonesian state, with Malik Mahmud Al Haythar playing a central role.

At the time, he personally screened volunteers from Aceh before sending them to Muammar Gaddafi's Libya for military training. "Nearly 3,500 men trained there," he recalls. "They returned prepared for close combat against the Indonesian army."

The movement financed its struggle through a revolutionary tax system and weapons smuggling. Once again, GAM became the target of severe repression: torture and arbitrary detentions carried out by Indonesian authorities were denounced at the time by Amnesty International.

By the early 2000s, the conflict had bogged down while Islamist attacks shook Indonesia, including bombings at the Jakarta Stock Exchange in 2000 and in Bali in 2002. Some attacks were attributed to GAM by Indonesian authorities.

Then came the 9.2 magnitude earthquake of December 26, 2004, followed by the tsunami that killed nearly 230,000 people across Asia and left half a million homeless. GAM leaders interpreted the catastrophe as divine punishment, reinforcing, in their view, the urgent need to establish sharia law.

Weakened by the disaster, the Indonesian government signed the Helsinki peace accords with the insurgency on August 15, 2005, bringing the war to an end. Malik Mahmud Al Haythar played a decisive role in those negotiations, traveling from Tokyo to Stockholm in search of a compromise. “We laid down our weapons in 2005 and obtained special autonomy,” he says. “It is not complete separation, but a fair coexistence within the Indonesian state. We have our Islamic laws, which reflect our traditions.”

Jakarta ultimately accepted that Aceh would be allowed to enforce its own Islamic legislation. Since the accords, former guerrilla commanders — including Malik Mahmud Al Haythar — have imposed their strict interpretation of sharia across every sphere of society.

When we raise the issue of public floggings carried out to punish sexual orientation, he does not hesitate. “Our sharia produces results,” he says. “Every year, crime declines. Caning is a form of moral correction, not revenge. It prevents deviant behavior.”

Moral Correction

To him, Apis Iwawan and Qori Husni — sentenced to caning in February and August 2025 — are simply two young men brought back onto the “right path.”

“The Islamic police did their job well,” he says. “In the West, you see sharia as religious extremism or fanaticism. But look at the United States, it still practices the death penalty. Islamic law makes us better people and obliges us to respect the values of Heaven.”

Malik Mahmud Al Haythar claims he has “never encountered homosexuals” in his own circle and presents his policies as a bulwark against a society “governed by TikTok.”

After more than an hour of conversation, he grows even more outspoken, insisting on the necessity of physically correcting homosexuals. Since the first public floggings in 2017, he says, the punishment has had one virtue above all others: equality.

“The cane makes no distinction between rich and poor,” he argues. “It restores everyone’s dignity to its proper place. We help them by correcting them, and afterward they do not repeat their actions because they feel shame.”

He acknowledges that some flee the province after being punished. “That is not a great loss,” he says coldly. At one point, he even urges us to “keep things in perspective,” noting that Singapore also practices caning — “except theirs happens in prison, not in public like ours.”

For Amnesty International, however, such punishment remains inherently cruel, inhuman, and degrading, amounting to torture under international law. The organization has repeatedly called for the repeal of punishments imposed under Aceh’s local Islamic legislation.

Night falls over Banda Aceh. Inside Malik Mahmud Al Haythar’s palace, the emblems of GAM — crossed weapons, a fleur-de-lis, and a star — stand as reminders of the enduring influence of the man officially confirmed as *Wali Nanggroe*, the “Guardian of the Aceh Government.”