

**A code of their own**  
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**Anthony Spaeth**

Life is slow in the northeastern state of Terengganu and that is exactly what visitors like about it. The long stretches of unspoiled beach along its 255-kilometer coast, the coral reefs and even the odd sea turtle attract more than 1.4 million tourists each year, including 150,000 foreigners.

From now on, they had better be on their best behavior. In July, the state assembly passed a comprehensive set of new Islamic laws and called for punishments familiar from the Taliban's days in Afghanistan: whipping for a range of relatively minor offenses such as consumption of alcohol; stoning to death for adulterers; hand amputation for theft. It's all part of a drive by the conservative Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), which governs Terengganu and is the country's main opposition party, to create what it calls a "pious, religious, disciplined, dignified, noble and trustworthy society."

But that has put Terengganu on a collision course with Malaysia's central government. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has no intention of letting parts of his moderate, secularly governed nation go the way of Afghanistan. Until recently, it seemed a showdown would not be necessary. Nine years ago, PAS tried to enact similar laws in Kelantan, a neighboring state that it also governs, yet these were never implemented owing to the threat of legal challenges from Kuala Lumpur. But the party's hard-line leader, cleric Hadi Awang, personally runs Terengganu as Chief Minister and he is a determined adversary. In the past weeks, Hadi has made it clear that he intends to put the so-called hudud laws into full effect as soon as possible.

The central government has hit back. Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who also serves as Malaysia's Home Minister, has vowed that the police force—which is controlled by the central government—will not enforce the hudud laws. And he declared that the country's federally run prisons won't house anyone convicted of breaking such laws. Publicly, Mahathir has been equally uncompromising. On a recent visit to Terengganu, he thundered that people who attempt to enforce such laws "have deviated from Islam and should be condemned to hell." The trouble is, the issue puts him in a tricky political bind. Mahathir and his party cannot afford to appear anti-Islamic or they could alienate Muslim Malay voters, who constitute around 60% of the country's population. On the other hand, non-Malays expect him to keep the country secular—especially the Chinese community, which accounts for about 20% of the population.

So Mahathir has to tread lightly. One key issue is whether the hudud laws violate the country's constitution. Kuala Lumpur insists that the Terengganu state assembly does not have the right to enact laws covering criminal offenses, which can only be passed by the country's national assembly. The central government's Law Minister recently promised that Terengganu's hudud laws would soon be challenged in court, though legal analysts say they expect the government to allow the suit to come from a private individual or group, not from the Attorney General. Says P. Ramasamy, a professor of political science at the Universiti Putra Malaysia: "The government is happy to let somebody else put the suit in the courts and then wait for a ruling."

Hadi, however, makes it clear that he intends to enforce the hudud laws whatever the consequences. The state, he claims, has already trained 140 of its own enforcement officers

to crack down on un-Islamic activities. He is currently identifying sites where state prisons can be built. Hadi has never elaborated on where and how the amputations and stonings will be carried out or who will perform them. Clad in a traditional white turban and a green duster draped from neck to ankles, he insists that both the state's Muslims and non-Muslims (about five percent of the population) will welcome the new system. "The important issue is the wisdom of the law," he says with a cold smile. "Islamic laws will prove to be wiser and will make people repent and not repeat their criminal acts." If you are planning a trip to Terengganu, you might want to bring your piety with you—and leave the bikini at home.

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