

## FUNDAMENTALISM

# From Malaysia to Africa, jihad is carried out by applying Sharia law

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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In Malaysia, Islam is the state religion, even though Muslims number around 63% of the population. Sharia law is increasingly being applied there. In fact, most Malaysian Muslims want it to be enforced as strictly and restrictively as possible. They would also

like Sharia law to become the official state law. According to a 2022 Pew Research Center survey, 86% of Malaysian Muslims hold this view.

**This would mean that even non-believers** would be obliged to comply with Islamic teachings. While not all Muslims agree, many do, and not only in Malaysia. Indeed, following the example of the infallible prophet Muhammad and the will of Allah as expressed in the Koran — the uncreated word of God that cannot be doubted — some Muslims believe it is their duty to subjugate the rest of humanity to Islam, by force if necessary, through jihad, or holy war. They refer to territories where Sharia law has not yet been adopted as dar al-Harb, the house of war.

**Dar al-Islam are the territories that have already been subjugated**, where it is therefore necessary to ensure that everyone practises their faith with absolute devotion. Those who err, whether through mistake, omission, negligence or open rebellion, must be reprimanded, coerced and, if they persist, punished. If religious and state authorities fail to do so with due diligence and effectiveness, every believer has the right and duty to intervene. Jihad, or holy war, is also this. Millions of Muslims have paid and continue to pay the price for being deemed weak in faith by their militant brothers, for not practising with absolute submission.

**Algerians are among those who have paid the highest price:** 150,000 people died in the 1990s when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) attempted to seize power. Entire families were slaughtered simply because they did not pray 'properly'. Jihadists on motorbikes chased and killed young girls leaving school who were dressed 'inappropriately'. A similar fate has befallen Nigerian Muslims in the 12 northern states with an Islamic majority for over 20 years. In 1999, these states adopted Sharia law in violation of the constitution. Understandably, the focus is on the persecution of Christians in Nigeria by the jihadist group Boko Haram, which is affiliated with al-Qaeda and was formed in 2002, as well as by ISWAP, which is affiliated with ISIS and was formed in 2016 following a split. For both groups, jihad means liberating the north of the country from the presence of the Christian minority and imposing strict observance of Sharia law on Muslims. They kill Christians and burn churches, but they also kill Muslims and burn mosques. Indeed, when they blow themselves up in crowded bus stations or markets, they almost inevitably kill more Muslims.

**'Jihad is an avalanche that has hit the Sahel and our country** with the aim of Islamising the whole of Africa. It is a threat to everyone,' commented Monsignor Laurent Birfuoré Dabiré, president of the Joint Episcopal Conference of Burkina Faso and Niger in 2024. He explained that jihadists target not only Christians and their churches, but

also Muslims who profess a different form of Islam and their mosques. Just a few hours later, in February 2024, they attacked a church and a mosque, killing dozens of worshippers in both cases.

**The jihadists are satisfied that it is the government** that enforces Sharia law in Malaysia, as in other Islamic states. However, this costs the faithful their freedom and dignity, and sometimes their lives. Those who do not observe Salat (the obligation to pray five times a day at set times), fast during Ramadan, behave in a manner deemed indecent, or commit khalwat (being alone in a private place with a member of the opposite sex who is not a close relative or family member) can face penalties of up to three years in prison, fines of up to 5,000 ringgit (just over €1,000), and up to six strokes of the cane.

**Terengganu, one of the 13 states of the Malaysian federation** where more than 90% of the population is Muslim, has decided to further tighten the penalties. On 18 August, amendments to the 2001 law on criminal offences relating to Sharia law, approved in 2016, came into force. Until now, a man who failed to attend Friday prayers at the mosque three times in a row was punished with a maximum of six months in prison or a fine of 1,000 ringgit. From now on, missing even once without a valid excuse will result in a penalty of up to two years in prison and a fine of 3,000 ringgit. "Friday prayers are not only a religious obligation, but also a symbol of obedience," said Muhammad Khalil Abdul Hadi, the State Executive Councillor responsible for Islamic affairs. Banners will be displayed in all mosques to remind worshippers of their duties.

**As in the past, checks on worshippers' behaviour** to ensure compliance with Sharia law will be carried out through public reports, patrols organised by the authorities, and operations by officials from the Department of Islamic Affairs. In reporting the news, the AsiaNews press agency provides a useful clarification. The new sanctions concern violations of Sharia law called takzir, for which discretionary punishments can be established, as neither the Koran nor the Hadith (accounts of Muhammad's actions and words during his lifetime) specify penalties for these offences. Therefore, it is up to Sharia courts and government authorities to determine the appropriate penalties. Hudud offences, such as theft or adultery, are another matter, as the penalties for these are specified in detail in the Koran or the Hadith: cutting off the hands and stoning.