



## Sultan of Brunei Bans Christmas Celebrations, Threatens Celebrants With Prison

The nation of Brunei is again banning the celebration of Christmas, as its sultan has reissued an edict first put into effect last year that prohibits any public display of Christmas decorations and even the wearing of Santa hats.

Britain's *Independent* reported that the tiny nation's ruler, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah (shown), introduced the ban on Christmas in 2014. Back in October 2013, the sultan announced his intention to impose Sharia law on the country's Muslims, who make up two thirds of the country's population. This change is being implemented in three phases, culminating in 2016, making Brunei the only country in East Asia to introduce Sharia law into its penal code.



While Sharia technically applies only to Muslims, even non-Muslims in Brunei (13 percent are Buddhists and 10 percent are Christians) must refrain from any public behavior that runs counter to the law. Christians cannot have any public Christmas displays and must celebrate their holiday privately. Violations of the ban on celebrating Christmas is punishable by a fine of \$20,000, a sentence of up to five years in prison, or both.

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The *Independent* reported that officials from Brunei's Ministry of Religious Affairs have reportedly visited private businesses to ensure they are not displaying Christmas decorations, including Santa hats and banners with Christmas greetings.

Brunei's imams defended the ban in sermons published in the nation's press. An example is: "Using religious symbols like crosses, lighting candles, putting up Christmas trees, singing religious songs, sending Christmas greetings ... are against Islamic faith."

ABC News reported that although Christians are free to celebrate, they have been ordered by the government not to do so "excessively and openly."

Although Brunei is a tiny country about the size of Delaware and has just over 400,000 people (about as many as Oakland, California), it has considerable economic importance because of its oil production, in which it ranks 45th in the world with an output of 124,000 barrels per day. In an article for the *Washington Times* on December 22, Tea Party Nation founder Judson Phillips suggested that it was Brunei's oil riches that inspired the Obama administration to include the country in the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) "free trade" deal. Phillips correctly noted:

The Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) is called a free trade deal. It is nothing of the sort. It gives



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foreign nations and foreign corporations the greatest gift they could ever get. Not only do they get access to American markets, they get access with advantages over American businesses.

Moving on to the inclusion of Brunei in the TPP, Phillips continued:

Hassanal Bolkiah, the sultan of Brunei, is known as an international playboy who is bound and determined to drag his nation back into the 7th Century. The question is why America would reward this nation with all of the benefits of the Trans Pacific Partnership?

Soon Brunei will have all of the horrors of an Islamic nation. Under the Islamic code that will go into effect, there will be stonings, amputation of limbs for theft, whippings and the death penalty for insulting Mohammad and the Koran.

Phillips raised two separate, yet related, points in his article:

1) "The TPP is one of the worst deals ever." [He also concludes, that because it is against the interests of the United States, "every Republican in Congress needs to vote no on this insanely bad trade deal."]

2) Why is the Obama Regime willing to include a nation like Brunei in this agreement?

Regarding the TPP, it is not only a "bad deal" (in the economic sense) but, like all similar regional authorities, such as the European Union, which also was originally sold as a "trade agreement," it threatens our sovereignty as well. On November 10, 2015, on the floor of the U.S. Senate, Senator Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) noted that the goal of the TPP is the creation of an EU-like "Pacific Union." Sessions said: "The TPP is about the goal of creating a new global regulatory structure — what I have called a Pacific Union — transferring power from individual Americans and Congress, eroding Congress, to an unaccountable, unelected, international bureaucratic committee." Sessions further said of the TPP: "This agreement is not just about promoting trade; it is about creating a framework for a transnational union which supersedes the authority of Congress."

Because of this threat to our sovereignty, a recent "Federal Legislative Action Alert" posted on the website of The John Birch Society (with which *The New American* is affiliated) recommended:

In order to safeguard our nation's economic and political sovereignty from this new Pacific Union it is imperative that you contact your U.S. representative and senators, urging them to oppose and vote Nay on the TPP or any legislation advancing its passage. This has very little to do with trade, but everything to do with the continuity of America's independence.

Going back to Phillips' other objection to the Obama administration's willingness to include Brunei in the TPP, we might compare how the United States has favored Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah — a billionaire playboy who has effectively banned Christmas — with how the United States treated Saddam Hussein, the autocratic ruler of Iraq who, despite his many faults, let Christians practice their faith, and celebrate Christmas, openly.

We read in a 1998 article in the *Baltimore Sun* about how Christians celebrated Christmas under Saddam Hussein:

In Iraq, where the overwhelming majority of people are Islamic, Christmas crosses the religious divide.

The country's 600,000 Christians celebrate the holiday in traditional ways. They attend church services that mark the birth of Jesus Christ. Their children awake on Christmas morning to find the



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gaily wrapped packages left by Baba Noel, the Arabic name for Santa Claus....

“All through the country — in hotels, stores, restaurants and Muslim houses — you can see the tree of Christmas,” said the Rev. Joseph Habbi, an Iraqi Catholic. “New Year’s is an official fest for all Iraqis, not only Christians.” ...

In the parish office of St. Joseph’s Church, the cathedral of the Catholic Chaldean community, a Christmas garland is strung across a picture of St. Barbara. Nearby hangs a decorative plate featuring the face of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Muslim....

Christians represent about 5 percent of Iraq’s population of 2 million. Hussein’s secular government has ensured their right to worship freely. And unlike Iran, Iraq does not preclude members of religious minorities from holding high-ranking government jobs. For example, Tariq Aziz, Iraq’s deputy prime minister, is a Christian.

After the United States invaded Iraq and removed Saddam from power, things changed. This was reflected in the headline in a December 25, 2014 blog by Cal State Professor Kent Bolton: “In Iraq, Traditions of Christmas Found Only in Memory.”

Bolton noted: “In 2003, when the Americans invaded, there were an estimated 1.5 million Christians living in Iraq. Today, experts say, there are fewer than 400,000, many of them on the run from the Islamic State.” He cited a recollection of a man named Samir Bihnam, who grew up in Baghdad, who said when asked what Christmas meant to him:

Baghdad Christmases were once magical affairs, shared by Christians and Muslims. The streets were lit up, the municipality sponsored fireworks, and the last week of the year — from Christmas right through New Year’s — was one long party....

Nowadays, it is hard to find even a natural Christmas tree....

For the Christians, times were undeniably better under Saddam Hussein, who, they say, at least kept them safe from sectarian violence. It is the same reason that many Christians, and other religious minorities, in Syria tolerate the police state of Bashar al-Assad. “There were problems, but at least we felt protected,” said Mr. Bihnam, who served in the Iraqi Army during Hussein’s time.

Christians in Iraq celebrated Christmas openly under Saddam Hussein, but thanks to the U.S. invasion, Saddam is history. Sultan Hassan al-Bolkiah has banned the celebration of Christmas in Brunei, yet he was invited to bring his tiny country into the TPP. Many will ask what is wrong with this picture.

*Photo: AP Images*

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