

NEW CONTROVERSIAL LAW IN INDONESIA TO FIGHT SEX TOURISM



The new Indonesian law penalizes cohabitation, with unmarried couples living together facing up to six months in prison. The governor of Bali, the country's most touristic island, assures that tourists will be spared.

Is tourism in Indonesia about to take a nosedive? A decision adopted on December 6 by the parliament is causing a lot of ink to flow. The parliament approved a series of amendments prohibiting sexual relations outside of marriage as well as cohabitation. **This project has been denounced by various human rights groups** and several personalities, including the Indonesian writer Julia Suryakusuma. For them, the text constitutes an attack on civil liberties and the rights of the LGBTQ community in the archipelago.

While the text hits Indonesians hard, some countries, such as the United States, have also expressed concern for their own nationals. With one question: will unmarried tourists be able to stay together in a hotel room in the country without being worried?

The question is even stronger in Bali, one of Asia's tourism hotspots. The Indonesian island, with a Hindu majority, is known for its more liberal morals than those practiced in the rest of the country. Wayan Koster, the governor, wanted to reassure future travelers in a statement. Those who "visit or live in Bali will not have to worry about the entry into force of the Indonesian Penal Code", he insisted. He added: "there will be no verification of marital status when registering in tourist accommodations (...) nor inspection by officials or community leaders.

"Counterproductive."

Will this announcement calm the fears of travelers? The law passed by the Indonesian Parliament, which is expected to come into force in 2025, makes it a crime for unmarried couples to have sex outside of marriage and to live together for six months. Premarital sex can be punished with a maximum sentence of one year in prison or a fine of 10 million rupees (US\$640).

As Wayan Koster reminds us, prosecutions can only be brought if a parent, spouse or child complains. In other words, foreign tourists should not be affected by these new rules, neither in Bali nor in the rest of the country. Indonesian authorities have tried to reassure would-be travelers and companies making a living from tourism. "I want to address foreign tourists and say to them: '**Come to Indonesia, you will not be prosecuted by this article**'," said Edward Omar Sharif Hiariej, Indonesia's deputy minister of justice and human rights, to journalists.

Many people denounce, through this new legislation, the evolution of Indonesia - the most populated Muslim country in the world - towards a form of religious fundamentalism. For local actors, there is still the question of the impact of this law on tourism as well as sex tourism. Maulana Yusran, deputy head of the Indonesian tourism industry council, said the new penal code was "totally counterproductive", especially at a time when tourism is picking up after two years of the pandemic.

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