

# Strip sultan of Brunei of honours, NSS urges British institutions

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The National Secular Society has urged British institutions to strip the sultan of Brunei of honours awarded to him following his kingdom's introduction of draconian new punishments under sharia law.

The NSS has written to universities, the RAF and the Royal Navy to encourage them to cut ties with the sultan after the laws [came into force](#) on Wednesday.

The laws mean sex between men, adultery and 'defamation' of the Islamic prophet Muhammad will carry the maximum penalty of death by stoning.

The NSS wrote to the vice-chancellors of three UK universities that have awarded honorary degrees and doctorates to Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.

Bolkiah has been awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters degree from the University of Aberdeen, an Honorary Doctor of Law degree from the University of Oxford and an Honorary Doctorate of Law from King's College London.

He is also an air chief marshal in the RAF and an admiral of the Royal Navy, after receiving honorary appointments from the queen.

The University of Aberdeen told the NSS it is considering the revocation of the honorary degree "as a matter of urgency".

It said the first stage in its process for revoking an honorary degree "has taken place", and an honorary degree committee has "recommended that the award be rescinded".

Their recommendation now requires approval from the academic body senate. This is expected over the next week.

The University of Oxford told the NSS that "no decision has yet been taken". It said it shares "the international condemnation of Brunei's new penal code" and backs the United Nations' call "to stop the code entering into force".

The university also told [The Observer](#) it would reconsider the decision.

King's College University is understood to be reviewing its award to the sultan, made in 2011. Vice-chancellor Edward Byrne told the NSS the university has had no new contact with Brunei "over the last few years". He said he has asked the committee responsible for advising on awarding honorary degrees "to reconvene in light of the issues" the NSS raised.

Under Brunei's new [laws](#), sex between women will be punished by 40 strokes of the cane and/or imprisonment.

Those who "persuade, tell or encourage" nominally Muslim children to follow religions other than

Islam are liable to a fine or imprisonment.

The harsh new penalties also include fines and jail terms for pregnancy outside of marriage and failing to pray on Fridays.

Brunei's Islamic penal code, which also became significantly [harsher](#) in 2014, also includes amputation as a punishment for theft and public flogging for abortion.

In its letters, the NSS said revoking the honours would "send out a powerful message" that the institutions condemn Brunei's laws.

It said revoking the honours would protect the institution's reputation from being "tarnished" and "reassure people in the UK, especially LGBT+ people" that the university "values and upholds equality for all".

It also called Brunei's new laws "a breach of basic human rights" and said any state that violates human rights so blatantly "must be condemned".

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "Brunei's deplorable new laws are a breach of basic human rights and contrary to the values these universities and services profess to uphold. Stripping the sultan of the honours they have bestowed upon him would send out the important message that they do not wish to be in any way associated with this kind of medieval barbarism."

A spokeswoman for Buckingham Palace told *The Observer* that the queen had "acted on the advice of government" when making the sultan's military appointments. A spokesman for the Cabinet Office said: "We do not comment on individual cases."

It also emerged this weekend that defence secretary Gavin Williamson has asked Brunei for assurances that gay British troops in the state will not be affected by the new laws.

*This story was originally published on Friday 5 April and updated on Monday 8 April to reflect the fact the NSS had written to the RAF and Royal Navy.*

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