**Malaysian women to be caned for 'attempting lesbian sex'**

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Two Malaysian women convicted for attempting to have lesbian sex will be fined and caned, a prosecutor said on Tuesday, in a rare case against gay people in the Muslim-majority country.

Islamic enforcement officers in the conservative northeastern state of Terengganu found the two Muslim women attempting to engage in sexual acts in a car during a patrol in April, according to prosecutor Muhamad Khasmizan Abdullah.

The women were charged under the Islamic sharia law known as musahaqah - which bans lesbian sex - and sentenced to six strokes of the cane and a fine of 3,300 Malaysian ringgit ($806) each this week after pleading guilty, the prosecutor said.

The conviction comes amid concerns around growing intolerance toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community in Malaysia after activists criticised some officials for making homophobic remarks in recent weeks.

“Sexual intercourse between people of the same sex is forbidden in Islam. It is an offence and morally wrong,” Muhamad Khasmizan told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

“This verdict is a first for us,” the prosecutor added, saying it was the first time people had been convicted for same-sex reltions in Terengganu.

Malaysia is home to 32 million people, where ethnic Malay Muslims make up more than 60 percent of the population and the remaining ethnic minorities practice other religions such as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism.

It has a dual-track legal system, with Islamic criminal and family laws applicable to Muslims running alongside civil laws.

The two women, aged 32 and 22, are on bail pending the execution of the sentence on August 28, Muhamad Khasmizan said, adding that the religious officers who saw the women found one in a state of undress, and also discovered a dildo in the car.

“The caning would be carried out within the court premise,” he said. “Under the sharia rules, they will be whipped with a rattan cane on their back with their clothes on while they are seated.”

Thilaga Sulathireh from rights group Justice for Sisters condemned the court’s decision as a form of torture. She said there have been previous cases of lesbian couples being arrested, but it was not known if they were convicted.

“Consensual sex between adults is not a crime. This is a precedence and it will increase discrimination toward LGBT people,” she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

A minister last week ordered the removal of portraits of two LGBT advocates from a public photography exhibition as they promoted gay activities, sparking criticism from rights groups.

Sodomy is a crime in Malaysia, which is punishable by up to 20 years in jail, although enforcement of the law is rare.