

# Op-Ed: Singapore, as a Moral Society, Ought Not to Consider the Death Penalty

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by Cindy Toh (Singapore)

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**#S**aveNagaenthran. A hapless attempt at saving the life of an intellectually disabled man convicted of a drug offense from execution. A hashtag that ignited an international reckoning over the death penalty.

Unfortunately, Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingham was a statistic imposed by the Singaporean legal system: [he was 1 of 11 men who was executed in 2022 under the Singaporean legal system due to a drug-related offense, a number that had risen to 16 as of November 2023 and expected to rise in 2024.](#)

Nagaenthran was executed over a year ago today, yet the movement he's emboldened still stands, as the Singaporean government continues to promote the death penalty as the prevailing, status quo mechanism for counteracting drug use in line with its zero-tolerance policy for drugs. It is fair to say that unfettered access to drugs and the ramifications of such are problems that demand concrete, meaningful solutions. It is fair to say that a society conducive to crime is inherently immoral. Yet, a moral society is also one that is humane, respecting the dignity and value of human beings. The death penalty, as a deterrent to crime and a means of retributive justice, is neither of the above and ought not to be the solution for reducing drug use in a society that considers itself moral such as that of Singapore.

The death penalty is incompatible with the role of a moral society, such as that of Singapore, to uphold the rule of law by enforcing and promulgating laws fairly and consistently to all. The notion of morality is defined as one that distinguishes right from wrong. Accordingly, [a legal system in a moral society would be rooted in dignity, justice, and freedom](#), for these values differentiate right from wrong, are key rule of law tenets, and are essential to

promoting the fair, consistent essence of the rule of law. While the Singaporean government is arguably upholding the rule of law by carrying out executions as regards the [1973 Misuse of Drugs Act](#), which criminalizes drug trafficking with the death penalty, the contents of this statute are incompatible with the rule of law. In its eradication of an individual's [Article 9 right to life under the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore](#). Other freedoms and rights cannot exist without the right to life, so to seize an individual's right to life is to seize their freedom and dignity, an action antithetical to the rule of law and the underlying moral values upon which the rule of law is based. As a moral society, the Singaporean government should therefore amend the penal means set out in the the 1973 Misuse of Drugs Act to one that respects an individual's right to life and dignity.

Proponents of Singapore's death penalty enforcement may assert that because crime is immoral, an inherently moral society would defend its moral character by holding immorality accountable through effective deterrents such as the death penalty. While crime reduction is essential for a moral society to defend its moral character, it needs not to occur through a measure that, in its essence, further perpetuates immorality. Given that immorality entails harm creation in addition to what society deems as acceptable behavior, responding to crime through a punitive measure that causes harm by imposing death upon an individual contravenes both conditions. Within Singapore's jurisdiction, the legal means of retribution for crimes punishable by death, as laid out in the [Criminal Procedure Code 2010](#), is [hanging via the long drop method](#). This a method within which convicts are suspended from a noose or ligature and dropped to ["dislocate" their axis and ultimately "sever their spinal cords."](#) Yet, the Singaporean government simultaneously deems murderers, those who cause such injuries and similarly impose death upon individuals, as immoral by criminalizing the same actions it has inordinately committed even against those whose actions do not amount to human death. While it is not wrong for the government to do so, this act shows that the government's imposition of the death penalty to crack down on crimes considered immoral does not bring about the moral character of its society.

The moral action that the Singaporean government can do to reduce crime, however, is to premise its criminal justice system on reform through prevention and rehabilitation. The death penalty alone as a primary deterrent to crime is effective, [for there are other](#)

variables to account for. For instance, [Iceland is considered the safest country with some of the lowest rates of drug use in the world, despite its lack of the death penalty since 1928](#). However, it does have a criminal justice system and government that emphasizes rehabilitation and heavily allocates funding to factors that prevent crime in the first place such as police intervention, poverty alleviation, and anti-drug education. If the Singaporean government were to channel its funding for execution toward the above preventative measures instead of preparing more gallows, there would not be a need to implement or enforce the penal provisions set out in the 1973 Misuse of Drugs Act.

In a society where right triumphs over wrong, the death penalty is and should not be the answer to crime. The rule of law and human dignity and freedom are at stake. In ensuring that Singaporean society continues to maintain character, the Singaporean government should repeal provisions within the 1973 Misuse of Drugs Act that impose the death penalty as a punitive solution to drug crimes. Instead, it should reform the criminal justice system to one that pursues accountability through prevention and rehabilitation that upholds the humanity and dignity of Singaporeans struggling with drug use.

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