

SECRET EXECUTIONS

By keeping executions secret, many governments are making sure that the public have no way of debating the real issues around the death penalty.



Taken from a videotape, this photo allegedly shows prisoners being prepared for public execution in Fukien province, China, in 1992.

Many governments actively promote the death penalty as vital for crime control. They claim that the threat of execution deters criminals from committing violent crime. For the death penalty to prevent such crimes, potential offenders must be fully aware in advance of the risk of being executed. Yet these same governments, while endorsing the death penalty with one hand, cover up its use with the other.

In Japan, executions are typically held in secret with prisoners being informed just hours before they are killed and family members given no prior notice. In China and Vietnam, information about the death penalty, such as the annual number of executions, is classified as a state secret. Calls from the UN to divulge this information have been met with steadfast refusal. This leaves the public in those countries without information and stifles debate around this important human rights issue. Logic would also dictate that such secrecy would lessen any alleged deterrent effect that executions have.

In Singapore, too, the situation is much the same. Singapore endorses the death penalty but keeps silent about how much it is used in the country. Controls imposed by the government on press and civil society organizations curb freedom of expression and are an obstacle to the independent monitoring of human rights, including the death penalty. Consequently, there is virtually no public debate about the death penalty in Singapore and the government has consistently maintained that capital punishment is not a human rights issue.

The Singaporean authorities appear to be sending contradictory messages. If the death penalty plays a vital role in the fight against crime because of its deterrent effect, it should therefore follow that the authorities would wish



A police officer stands outside the prison in Tokyo, Japan. Executions are typically held in secret, and prisoners are not warned of their execution until the day of their death.

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to maximize publicity around the issue to maximize the deterrent effect. In fact, it is doing just the opposite.

The states above are not alone in carrying out secretive executions. They are joined by Mongolia and North Korea.

In 2006, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions called for an end to official secrecy around the use of the death penalty, saying that meaningful public debate could only take place if governments disclosed full details of:

“(a) the number of persons sentenced to death;

(b) the number of executions carried out... Notwithstanding the critical role

of this information in any informed decision-making process, many States choose secrecy over transparency, but still claim that capital punishment is retained in part because it attracts public support.”

The taking of a human life by the state is one of the most powerful acts a government can commit. As many countries have illustrated, the journey to abolition of the death penalty is fuelled by debate. When the authorities in states that kill suppress this debate and starve the public of information, they deny the population the right to informed debate. But the severity of executions demands that they be subject to public focus and discussion – not choked by a conspiracy of silence.

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UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, 2006

