Press Release

Public Narrative Moves Away from Death Penalty in Malaysia, Study Shows

Kuala Lumpur, 27 October 2026 — Study finds that public support for capital punishment in Malaysia is rapidly waning as exposure to personal stories, social media, and regional legal cases drives citizens toward supporting abolition and non-capital alternatives. According to a new policy brief launched in Parliament on 27 October 2026 by the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN), the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Monash University Malaysia (SASS), and Eleos Justice at Monash Law (EJ), growing distrust in systemic justice, the disproportionate targeting of vulnerable populations, and a rising belief in rehabilitation are prompting Malaysians to reject official state narratives in favor of comprehensive criminal justice reform.

Key Findings from the Policy Brief

- First, participants expressed deep distrust of the institutions that administer the death penalty. They pointed to four perceived structural failures that undermine the system's integrity: corruption within the justice system; unequal access to justice; inconsistent use of judicial discretion in death sentencing; and discriminatory enforcement of drug laws.

- Second, participants described how poverty, marginalisation and deception draw people into low-level courier roles.[1] Those affected include low-income households in the bottom 40% income group (B40),[2] women facing economic insecurity, and ethnic minorities. Meanwhile, they noted that 'kingpins',[3] rarely face arrest, likely protected by corruption and wealth.

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[1] 'Mules' or 'couriers' refer to low-level carriers who transport drugs, often recruited through financial desperation or deception. See Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide, *Judged for More than Her Crime* (2018) 12; Amnesty International, *Fatally Flawed: Why Malaysia Must Abolish the Death Penalty* (ACT 50/1078/2019, 2019) 23.

[2] B40 refers to households in the bottom 40% of the national income distribution, as classified by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM). This corresponds to a gross monthly household income of below RM5,860. Department of Statistics Malaysia, *Household Income Survey Report 2024*; *Ministry of Economy 2024* (*Kementerian Ekonomi 2024)*.

[3] 'Kingpins' refers to those who organise or direct drug trafficking operations and occupy 'higher positions in the hierarchy of criminal drug networks'. Amnesty International, *Fatally Flawed: Why Malaysia Must Abolish the Death Penalty* (n 7) 23.

- Third, participants observed that public support for the death penalty for drug offences has long been shaped by government narratives and media coverage that present drugs as a threat serious enough to justify execution. Social media, lived experience, and cases in Singapore and neighbouring countries have since exposed people to other views.

- Fourth, participants believed in rehabilitation, and this belief underpinned their support for abolition. Many favoured responses that address the poverty, coercion, drug dependence and mental health problems that draw people into the drug trade. For them, the death penalty ends the possibility of reform and rehabilitation.

"Our findings clearly demonstrate that public sentiment is no longer a legal or political barrier to abolishing the death penalty for drug trafficking," said Dr. Thaatchaayini Kananatu, Deputy Head of School (Research) and Co-Director of Eleos Justice and co-author of the policy brief. "To turn this evidence into actionable reform, our policy brief proposes recommendations for each of Malaysia's three branches of government: the Executive, the Legislature, and the Judiciary. Ultimately, our main recommendation is to abolish the death penalty, starting with drug crimes,"

Significance of the Policy Brief

With the enactment of the **Abolition of Mandatory Death Penalty Act 2023**, Malaysia's legal system now has the discretionary death penalty for 27 offences, including drug trafficking under Section 39B of the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 (DDA 1952). The historic resentencing process for those sentenced under the mandatory sentencing framework combined with the introduction of judicial discretion has drastically decreased the death row population 1,275 individuals in 2023 to 140 by January 2025 and further declined to 97 in November 2025. As of 2025, individuals convicted of drug offences constitute 21% of those on death row.[4]

"Malaysia should be commended for its important progress in reforming its death penalty laws. Ending the mandatory death penalty and resentencing those on death row has dramatically reduced the number of people facing execution," said Sara Kowal, Director of EJ, Deputy Co-Convenor of ADPAN, and co-author of the policy brief. "But we know that in practice the death penalty falls on the most vulnerable: people living in poverty, people from marginalised communities and people living with disabilities. Abolishing the death penalty for drug offences is a pragmatic next step, and one that recognises that executing people for drug offences breaches international human rights law."

What's Next?

The policy brief launch presented the study's key findings and recommendations to parliamentarians, government officials, and key stakeholders. By showcasing the research

[4] Harm Reduction International, 'The Death Penalty for Drug Offences: Global Overview 2025' (HRI 2025) 12 <https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/HRI-GO-Death-penalty-drugs-2025-FINAL.pdf>

evidence and sharing perspectives on reform, the event aimed to foster ongoing policy engagement toward abolishing the death penalty for drug offenses.

"Our goal is for this policy brief to serve as a foundation for ADPAN's advocacy towards the abolition of the death penalty, starting with abolition for drug offences in Malaysia," said Ngeow Chow Ying, ADPAN's Deputy Co-Convenor. "By examining the narratives and arguments that shape discussions around drug-related offences and the death penalty, the research helps us better understand how these issues are framed and how we can communicate the case for abolition more effectively. We will use these findings to inform our advocacy messaging and campaign strategy, and to engage parliamentarians, BHEUU and legal partners with evidence-based arguments to build a united front for reform,"

Methodology

Between May and July 2026, Monash University Malaysia hosted five ethics-approved focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore public views on the death penalty for drug trafficking. Involving 31 key stakeholders including youth, civil society representatives, professionals, entrepreneurs, and leaders across five major religious groups (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Sikhism). The study examined the beliefs shaping these opinions and identified what participants consider fair and effective drug policies.

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Media Contact

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About the Organisations

1. **Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network**

The Anti Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN) is the peak regional body for organisations and individuals committed to the abolition of the death penalty across the Asia Pacific, with members from 20 countries within the region. As such, ADPAN maintains that the death penalty violates the right to life and that the death penalty should be entirely abolished internationally.

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2. **Monash Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia**

Monash University Malaysia, established in 1998, is the third-largest campus of Australia's largest university and the first foreign university campus in Malaysia. We are a premier research-intensive Australian university ranked among the top 50 universities globally by the QS World University Rankings 2024 and a member of Australia's prestigious Group of Eight (Go8). Monash University is also ranked 58 in the latest Times Higher Education World University Rankings. A self-accrediting university, we offer a distinctly international and culturally rich environment with approximately 13,800 students from 94 countries. Monash University Malaysia, including the Jeffrey Cheah School of Medicine and Health Sciences, is wholly owned and operated by Monash University since 2020.

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3. **Eleos Justice**

Eleos Justice was established in 2018 as a collaboration between the Capital Punishment Justice Project, an NGO working to end the death penalty, and the Faculty of Law at Monash University. It is now co-located between Monash Law and the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Monash University Malaysia, led by Co-Directors Sara Kowal and Dr Thaatchaayini Kananatu.

Our mission is to restrict and abolish the death penalty in Asia. With over 90 per cent of the world's executions taking place in the region, a coordinated approach is urgently needed to bring lasting change. Working across the Indo-Pacific region, Eleos Justice brings together advocacy, evidence-based research and teaching as a leading hub for ending the death penalty in Asia.

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