

Death penalty offenders: China, Iran and America

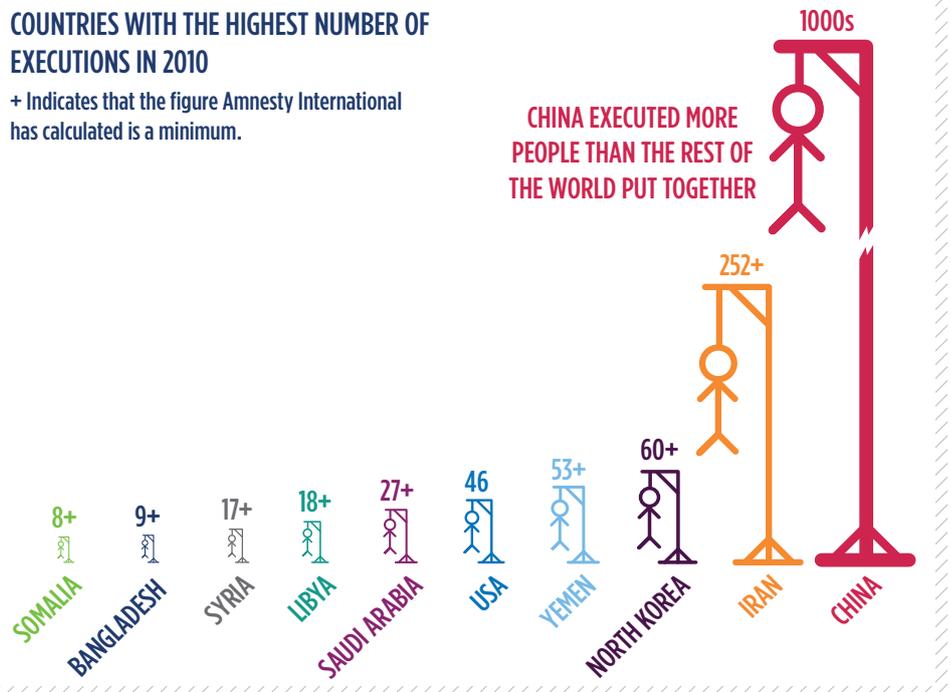
Fewer people were executed worldwide last year, as nations gradually turn their backs on the death penalty. But judicial killings remain high in secretive authoritarian countries and the US.



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COUNTRIES WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF EXECUTIONS IN 2010

+ Indicates that the figure Amnesty International has calculated is a minimum.



‘A world free of the death penalty is not only possible, it is inevitable,’ says Salil Shetty, head of the human rights campaigners Amnesty International. ‘The question is, how long will it take?’

She might well ask. This year’s annual report on executions around the world shows an encouraging fall in the number of people who have been killed by the state, but some countries, including China, Iran and the United States, remain stubbornly enthusiastic about using the ultimate sanction.

In 2009, 714 individuals were executed worldwide, but in 2010 this figure had fallen to 527 – it’s part of a downward trend. Since 1977, when Amnesty started a campaign for the global abolition of the death penalty and only 16 countries in the world had ended its use, there has been steady retreat: now 139 have either abolished their death penalty laws or don’t use them.

But in some parts of the globe, the outlook is still bleak.

China is thought to have executed thousands of its own citizens last year for a wide range of offences, some non-violent, and often after flawed trials. Because of state secrecy, we don’t know the true number. Even here in Europe we have one dictatorship, Belarus, carrying out death sentences.

Perhaps the most chilling paragraphs in the report concern Iran, where around 300 deaths by hanging in one prison, Vakilabad, should probably be counted on top of the 252 official executions that the regime acknowledges. 14 people were executed in public.

Overall, Asia and the Middle East are the two regions with the worst current statistics. The countries with the worst record – China, North Korea, the Yemen and Saudi Arabia, for example – are countries without a well-developed culture of

respect for the rights of the individual.

But America stands out as an intriguing exception to this rule. It’s a global superpower, a self-styled and in some senses very real beacon of progress, the ‘home of the brave, the land of the free.’ So why this continued reliance on the electric chair, the gas chamber and the lethal injection?

THE AMERICAN WAY?

This month, Illinois became the 16th state in America to abolish the death penalty. The United States did execute 46 people last year, but during the mid 1990s that figure was twice as large.

Human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith argues that politicians find the death penalty convenient: they can say they are cracking down on the violent crime that’s endemic in American society, where tackling the poverty and inequality that causes crime would be far more expensive.

Q & A

Q What are the arguments in favour of the death penalty?

A The moral argument is that some crimes are so terrible that the perpetrators should suffer the ultimate punishment. There is also a belief that the death penalty deters criminals, by making an example of the most serious offenders.

Q Does that work?

A In the US, states with the death penalty tend to have higher murder rates than those without. But that doesn’t necessarily mean the deterrent is failing – there could be other factors involved.

Q What about the moral argument?

A Even here in the UK, opinion polls show a slim majority in favour of the death penalty. We can only imagine how we would feel if

a loved one was killed and whether it would change our stance on this: they do say that a Conservative is only ‘a Liberal who has been mugged.’

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

‘An eye for an eye is still the best rule for justice.’

WHAT DO YOU THINK?