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## “Role of International Organizations in Abolishing the Death Penalty”

### **Ms. Shehar Bano**

Bachelors Scholar, Department of political science & International Relations,  
Government College Women University, Faisalabad, Pakistan  
Email: Sheharbano1219@gmail.com

### **Ms. Maryam Maqsood**

Visiting Faculty, Department of political science & International Relations, Government  
College Women University, Faisalabad, Pakistan  
Email: maryammaqsood@gcwuf.edu.pk

### **Dr. Tayba Anwar** (Corresponding Author)

Incharge, Department of Political Science & International Relations, Government  
College Women University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the involvement of international bodies, including the United Nations, the European Union, and Amnesty International, in abolishing the death penalty. It also explores how these organizations monitor states' adherence, provide support for legal reforms and encourage states to modify their policies in this regard. It also looks into the legal responsibilities placed on nations through international and regional human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its Second Optional Protocol. According to international law, executions are not an effective method for lowering crime rates. United Nations resolutions have called on countries to decrease the number of offenses that carry execution and to progressively work toward its complete abolition. This research is based on a qualitative doctrinal approach, focusing on the analysis of laws, treaties, official documents, and some written articles to assess how international and regional systems handle the death penalty. The study concludes by assessing the effectiveness of these treaties and organizational efforts by comparing stated commitments with actual implementation at the national level. Through this comparison, the research identifies the challenges, achievements, and ongoing difficulties in achieving the global abolition of capital punishment.

**Key words:** Death Penalty, Abolition, International Bodies (UN, EU, Amnesty International), Human Rights Instruments (ICCPR, Second Optional Protocol), International Law, Legal Reforms, Implementation Challenges



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### List of Abbreviation:

<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>ICCPR</b>	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
<b>ECHR</b>	European Convention on Human Rights
<b>NGOs</b>	Non-Governmental Organizations
<b>UDHR</b>	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

### Introduction:

One of the most hotly contested topics in the current human rights discourse is the death sentence. Once thought to be a valid punishment for serious crimes, it is now universally condemned for ethical, legal, and pragmatic reasons. Treaties, conventions, and international organizations that have supported the sanctity of life and the defense of human dignity have had a significant impact on the rising global consensus towards abolition. These efforts have been led by organizations like the UN, EU, Council of Europe, and Amnesty International, which claim that the death penalty is cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment and that it violates the fundamental right to life (Neumayer, 2008). In this worldwide movement, legally binding mechanisms have been crucial. The “right to life” is recognized as the most fundamental human right in Article 6 of the 1966 ICCPR, which also calls on nations to work toward its abolition (United Nations, 1966). This is reinforced by the 1989 Second Optional Protocol to the ICCPR, which expressly requires state parties to outlaw the death penalty within their borders and only allows for a limited exception during times of conflict. Similarly, by setting stringent international norms to prevent torture and safeguard human dignity, the Convention against Torture (1984) forbids cruel and inhuman treatment, strengthening the moral and legal argument against executions (United Nation, 2006). I apply a constructivist international relations lens specifically, norm emergence, cascade, and internalization along with insights from transnational advocacy networks to examine why these legal and institutional initiatives become popular across nations. Through ECHR and its supplementary protocols, the Council of Europe has shown outstanding leadership in promoting abolition at the regional level. The death penalty was outlawed in peacetime by Protocol No. 6 (1983), which permitted its use only in times of war or the imminent threat of war. Protocol No. 13 (2002) went one step further and forbade the death penalty in all situations, without exceptions or reservations (European Union, 2021). Together with strict oversight by international organizations and human rights committees, these legal tools have produced a robust normative framework that forces member states to harmonize their domestic legislation with their commitments under international human rights treaties. The worldwide picture is still uneven in spite of these accomplishments. Some jurisdictions still defend the death sentence on the grounds of national security, culture, or sovereignty, even though many have abolished it in accordance with treaty obligations or regional participation requirements. This demonstrates the discrepancy between domestic application and international legal duties. However, the constant lobbying and normative pressure from international organizations and treaties has played a significant role in delegitimizing the death penalty and turning it from a state right to a violation of human rights. Thus, the repeal of the death penalty represents both a legal advancement



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and a moral shift toward the universal acceptance of the right to human dignity and life (United Nations, 2006).

### **Theoretical Framework: Abolishing Death Penalty**

The Constructivist Theory of International Relations, in particular the ideas of norm diffusion and internalization, serves as the foundation for this investigation. Constructivist academics contend that common values, beliefs, and social conventions influence international behavior in addition to material power and self-interest. States take action not merely as a result of pressure or enforcement but also because they start to recognize particular standards as righteous and morally obligatory. The worldwide campaign to abolish the death penalty can be viewed as a process whereby states gradually internalize human rights standards, particularly the right to life and dignity, through engagement with regional and international organizations. (Neumayer, 2008).

International organizations function as "norm entrepreneurs," according to this notion. Through declarations, treaties, and oversight mechanisms, they advance new moral norms. The legitimacy of the death penalty is contested by groups like Amnesty International, the Council of Europe, and the United Nations. To disseminate abolitionist ideas around the globe, these organizations employ both legal tools such as the ECHR, ICCPR, and its Second Optional Protocol and moral persuasion (Ogendi, 2022).

The three primary stages of norm dissemination are described by the theory:

**Norm Emergence:** when players like human rights advocates or international organizations start to doubt the morality of the death penalty.

**Norm Cascade:** when additional nations start enacting abolitionist laws as a result of regional impact, international pressure, or the need for acceptance in a global society.

**Norm Internalization:** The process by which the repeal of the death penalty is assimilated into a nation's identity and internal laws as a universal moral and legal norm is known as "Norm Internalization" (European Union, 2021).

The human rights-based framework, which emphasizes that every individual has an intrinsic right to life and freedom from cruel or degrading treatment, is also reflected in this theoretical approach. These values have been formalized by treaties like the ICCPR (1966), Convention against Torture (1984), and ECHR (1950), which have transformed moral standards into binding legal obligations. These tools are used to gradually instill in states the belief that the death sentence is incompatible with human dignity.

Constructivist theory also explains why political and cultural context affects how effective treaties are. Abolitionist standards are more likely to be internalized in nations with democratic regimes, vibrant civil societies, and exposure to human rights principles, as your article demonstrates. However, regimes that emphasize sovereignty or cultural tradition, or are authoritarian or religiously inflexible, may oppose them (Carolyn, 2015). This illustrates that treaties by themselves do not bring about abolition; rather, they work by reshaping states' moral identities via social and political interaction.

Transnational advocacy network theory, which examines how activists, the media, NGOs affect state conduct, is similarly related to this idea. Organizations such as Amnesty International are crucial because they disseminate information, influence public opinion, and exert pressure on governments that still carry out executions (Hoyle, 2023).



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### **Effectiveness of Treaties in Abolishing the Death Penalty:**

International Treaties as Part of the Global Trend International treaties and protocols are important in the worldwide movement toward abolition. Ratifying or being bound by treaties significantly raises the probability that a state will abolish the death penalty. The treaties statistical models demonstrate that countries tied into these international legal frameworks are more likely to move toward abolition earlier than countries outside such frameworks. This tendency is indicative of a norm cascade, as later states conform to acquire legitimacy after early adopters and IOs promote abolition as desirable.

### **Regional and Peer Group Influence:**

Treaties do not act in isolation. Their effectiveness is reinforced by regional peer pressure and diffusion. For example, once the Council of Europe made abolition for membership, countries in Eastern Europe rapidly adopted abolitionist policies. The Council of Europe's regionally anchored socialization serves as a cascade mechanism that speeds up entrants' internalization. Here, treaty obligations worked hand-in-hand with regional norms: states abolished not only because of legal pressure but also to gain legitimacy and acceptance within the regional community. Thus, treaties are effective partly because they create communities of practice, where abolition becomes a condition for belonging (Neumayer, 2008).

### **Combination with Domestic Political Structures:**

Treaties are most effective when combined with democratic political institutions. Democracies are generally more responsive to international human rights norms and reputational costs. By contrast, authoritarian regimes are less sensitive to such obligations (Ogendi, 2022). Adopting abolitionist standards is less expensive and more quickly assimilated into domestic law and identity when democratic institutions are in place.

### **International Pressure and Norm Internalization:**

Treaties also work through international reputational pressure. States that have signed up to binding treaties or optional protocols face higher costs for non-compliance. Over time, this contributes to the internalization of abolitionist norms: governments shift from seeing abolition as external "pressure" to treating it as part of accepted human rights standards.

### **Limits of Treaty Effectiveness:**

Treaties are not decisive alone. Countries that ratify often already lean toward abolition. This means treaties may partly reflect pre-existing political will rather than cause it. Cultural and legal traditions matter. For example, states with strong Islamic traditions or English common law systems are more resistant to abolition, even when treaties exist. Authoritarian states may ignore treaties. Without democratic institutions or regional pressure, treaties by themselves may not create change. But treaties and international protocols are effective predictors and catalysts of abolition. They are not the only factor domestic democratization, political ideology, and regional influences also play large roles but treaties raise the likelihood that a country will abolish and help lock in the global trend toward abolition (Carolyn, 2015) So answer is that treaties and protocols are effective in pushing countries toward abolition, though their power lies in working



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together with democratic politics, international pressure, and regional diffusion, rather than acting alone.

Human rights treaties such as the UDHR, ICCPR, and ECHR emphasize the right to life and against cruel punishment but do not go all the way in prohibiting the death penalty (United Nations, 2006). This leaves a “gap between principle and practice”. For instance, these treaties continue to permit executions for “most serious crimes” or following a fair trial. In the real world, most states still employ the death penalty and frequently disregard the rules, for example, by executing children or the mentally ill.

Enlightenment philosophers such as Montesquieu and Beccaria had already proposed centuries ago that harsh punishments were immoral, useless, and inhumane. Beccaria specifically stated that the death penalty was not effective in deterring crime and did not respect human dignity. These concepts framed the subsequent human rights Principles, but they are not always respected in practice (Neumayer, 2008). The treaties have been more successful at “reducing the scope” of the death penalty than in abolishing it entirely. Courts have used treaty principles to reject obligatory death sentences, to prevent extremely long delays on death row, and to bolster fair trial rights (Non-Governmental Organization, 2023).

### **The Death Penalty as a Human Rights Violation:**

The death penalty is now universally regarded as a breach of basic human rights, particularly the right to life and freedom from cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment. (Hoyle, 2023). When the UDHR (1948) was written, it strongly focused on the right to life. Death penalty was still lawful in nearly all states at that time, so it was only referred to as an exception. But during subsequent decades, international law evolved in such a manner that abolition of the death penalty became the main human rights aspiration (Office of the high Commissioner for human rights, 2006).

### **International Treaties and Abolition:**

A number of key human rights treaties have progressively restricted and then eliminated the death penalty: (European Union, 2021). ICCPR, 1966 permitted the death penalty only in extremely limited situations but encouraged the notion that its elimination would progress human rights (United Nations, 2006). The American Convention on Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights also regarded the death penalty as an exception to the right to life. Notably, the American Convention prohibits already-abolishing states from reinstating it. (Amnesty International, 1998). Subsequently, more conclusive instruments were implemented: Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention (1983), the Second Optional Protocol to the ICCPR (1991), and the Additional Protocol to the American Convention (1993). These instruments exclusively ban the application of the death penalty. (European Union, 2021). Over 50 states had ratified or signed abolitionist treaties by the late 1990s, and it has since grown. This reflects a definitive world trend linking abolition to human rights (Neumayer, 2008).

### **International Criminal Justice and Human Dignity:**

Even against the most heinous of crimes such as genocide and war crimes there has been a refusal on the part of international tribunals to impose the death penalty. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (1993) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (1994) restricted punishment to imprisonment alone. This



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confirms that even for the crime of humanity, the death penalty is no longer consistent with human rights (Hoyle, 2023). The UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions has time and again argued that since the right to life is absolute and irrevocable, capital punishment cannot coexist with respect for human right. He pointed out that executions also follow unbalanced trials, are used with racial or political discrimination, and even involve innocent individuals making the penalty both unjust and inhuman (Amnesty International, 1998).

### **International**

### **Organizations'**

### **Stance:**

The Human Rights Commission and the United Nations General Assembly have made resolutions stating that abolition of the death penalty promotes the development of human rights and human dignity. Amnesty International, the EU, the Council of Europe, and UN agencies all function as norm entrepreneurs, using legal tools and moral persuasion to redefine executions as violations of human rights. The Council of Europe has made it a requirement for its membership that its members eliminate the death penalty. It went so far as to equate the death penalty with torture and labeled it as inhuman and degrading. (Hoyle, 2023). The European Union stands firmly in favor of abolition and declines to extradite suspects to states where they could be put to death.

### **Cultural Traditions, Public Opinion, and Social Attitudes in Constructing the Death Penalty:**

The death penalty is not just a legal issue but also one formulated by culture, society, and general values. Cultural traditions, public opinion, and social attitudes all have significant roles in determining if societies uphold or discard capital punishment. These factors are intricate, differ from nation to nation, and are dynamic over time. These cultural scripts influence whether internalization proceeds or stalls and whether abolitionist norms resonate.

### **Cultural, Traditions and Historical Practices:**

Cultural customs provide the context of how societies traditionally conceived of punishment. In most societies, in the past, executions were integral to social order, morality, and even public ceremonies. To cite one instance, in past centuries, public hangings were routine in Europe and North America, demonstrating values of deterrence and retaliation (Lee, 2021). With time, however, cultural attitudes evolved toward human dignity and justice, resulting in incremental abolition across most states. This indicates that traditions are not absolute: habits previously regarded as standard can be reconsidered as attitudes change within cultures (McCarthy, 2022). Authority and religion are also cultural traditions. Where religious teaching stresses retribution or moral order, pro-capital punishment views remain firm. Where there are merciful, forgiving, and rehabilitative traditions, there are alternatives to the death penalty (Sato M. , 2022). Cultures that prefer strong leadership and orderly society tend to view the death penalty as acceptable, while those with a focus on equality and human rights shift toward abolition.

### **Social Attitudes and Inequality**

Social attitudes determine people's views on the death penalty. Factors such as a person's social environment, their geographical location, and whether they think the



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justice system is fair or not may all have an effect (Lee, 2021). Some believe the death penalty is not always evenly applied and therefore is not fair. Others view it as essential to maintain control in society. Where crime is prevalent or individuals do not feel safe, support for the death penalty is also normally stronger due to the perception that it is a method of deterrence or maintaining order. In contrast, in cultures that have faith in their justice system and prioritize fairness, individuals are more receptive to alternatives such as life imprisonment (Sato M. , 2022). Public opinion is also relevant. If individuals view minority or immigrant groups as dangerous, they are more inclined to endorse more severe punishments, including capital punishment. Conversely, societies with more egalitarian attitudes, where equality and openness are valued over inequality and exclusion, have lower support (McCarthy, 2022).

### **Public Opinion and Its Role**

Public opinion tends to be cited by governments as a reason for maintaining the death penalty. Leaders might argue that the popular will should guide law. Surveys are not always reliable, though. It is a matter of when, how, and whom. Many people answer emotionally on the basis of crime stories without extensive knowledge about justice systems. Public opinion still has importance. In democratic societies, legislative changes tend to follow changes in collective values (Sato M. , 2022). For instance, in the United States, public opinion evolved: whereas high support for the death penalty existed in the 1990s, increasing numbers of Americans today opt for life without parole. Incorrect convictions, media publicity, and growing awareness of expenses have contributed to this evolution. Courts, for instance, the U.S. Supreme Court, also consider “evolving standards of decency” and demonstrate how legal rulings and public attitudes interact (Lee, 2021).

### **Narrative, Media, and Cultural Meaning**

Cultural analysis indicates that law goes beyond regulation it is symbolic. The death penalty indicates moral conceptions of justice, responsibility, and the seriousness of crime. Public narratives through trials, the media, or movies influence how individuals conceptualize offenders, victims, and punishment (Berman, 2001). When executions are less conspicuous, individuals may embrace them without scrutinizing. When they are more openly debated or revealed, moral preoccupations tend to rise. Tales focusing on wrongful convictions or injustices reinforce societies’ skepticism over executions, whereas tales of emphasis on fear, chaos, or grave offenses could reinforce support (Lee, 2021).

### **Interaction between Law and Society’s Value**

There is a close connection between law and social values. In some instances, law follows public opinion, while in others, leaders or courts lead the way in altering policy ahead of majority opinion. Abolition of the death penalty in some nations, for instance, was a result of political leadership, with public attitudes adapting gradually over time (Sarat, 2002). Institutional trust also plays a role. Where courts, police, and governments are perceived to be fair and legitimate, individuals are less likely to call for extreme punishment. But where corruption is widespread or justice is questioned, support for the death penalty can persist as a reaction to mistrust or fear (Lee, 2021).



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### **Flexibility and Change**

One of the central findings across studies is that individuals' attitudes are not fixed. Even in abolitionist nations, attitudes shift when citizens have more information on alternatives, the dangers of wrongful execution, and abolition impacts (Sato M. , 2022). Education, exposure to human rights concepts, and issues of fairness also help reduce support (Lee, 2021).

### **The Death Penalty and Crime Deterrence; Comparison with Life Imprisonment:**

The deterrent theory is among the most prevalent reasoning employed to justify capital punishment. People assume that if individuals are aware that they can be sentenced to death for committing severe offenses, such as homicide, they will be reluctant to commit them. Yet, decades of scholarly analysis and expert opinion confirm that this assumption does not maintain a powerful position when subjected to empirical testing examined over 30 years of research and concluded that there is no solid evidence to suggest that the death penalty is a more effective crime-reducer than other sanctions, such as life imprisonment. (National research council, 2012) The Council also detailed how previous research favoring deterrence such as economist Isaac Ehrlich's work in the 1970s was fundamentally flawed at its core. Ehrlich had written earlier that every execution stopped a number of murders, but his proofs were not strong enough and his statistics unreliable. Later on, his student Stephen Layson reproduced these allegations with even bigger figures, but specialists once again detected serious errors and discredited the research (Donohue, 2005-2006). Nowadays, most criminologists are of the opinion that studies of this kind should not be trusted. This professional opinion is also evident in polls. Almost 88% of leading criminologists stated that the death penalty does not reduce murder rates, and 93% refuted the assertion that it is a better deterrent than life imprisonment (Information Center, 2023). The moral framing ("incompatible with human dignity") becomes more salient as the instrumental rationale for executions waned, which served as gasoline for the formation and cascade of norms.

Police chiefs also indicate that capital punishment is not a sound crime-control measure; they view it as more of a political tool than a deterrent. In the U.S., states abolishing capital punishment "did not experience increased murder rates compared to retaining states". Likewise, when "Canada abolished executions", murder rates fell progressively rather than rising. (Carolyn, 2015). In European nations like "Poland, Romania, and Hungary", homicide rates have decreased markedly by as much as 61% in post-abolition years. ( World coalition against the death penalty, 2015). This trend indicates that having or not having executions does not control crime levels. The death penalty is harsh, but it is neither swift nor certain. Executions are infrequent, and when they do take place, typically it happens decades after the crime due to lengthy appeals in the courts. This delay diminishes any deterrent effect. Additionally, most crimes are not well planned; they are committed when one is angry, scared, or drunk. In such a situation, the perpetrators do not even think about punishment. Others just don't think they will be arrested, so the threat of execution is worthless (Ehrlich, 1975).

Another critical variable is that "crime rates are shaped much more by social and economic factors" rather than by whether or not executions are present. Research shows that poverty, joblessness, inequality, and police strength contribute much more to crime levels. Places with good policing and social support initiatives tend to have less crime even in the absence of executions, while places with poor institutions and economic



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adversity experience greater crime rates regardless of capital punishment. Criminologists and police chiefs tend to concur that “certainty of punishment and competent law enforcement” are more important for deterrence than intensity of punishment. Life imprisonment offers the same measure of protection for society, without the risk, expense, and ethical issues associated with executions. The justice and certainty of punishment, as well as broader social and economic circumstances, play a much greater role in determining crime rates than whether or not a society employs the death penalty (World coalition against the death penalty, 2015).

### **Conclusion:**

The worldwide campaign to outlaw the death penalty is among the most significant developments in the history of contemporary human rights. International and regional groups have been instrumental in advancing the universal principle of the right to life over the years. The world’s perception of the death penalty has changed as a result of their persistent efforts, moving from one of legitimacy to one of human dignity. This ethical and legal change has been made possible in large part by the combined efforts of institutions like the United Nations, the European Union, the Council of Europe, and Amnesty International. Numerous significant international treaties and conventions serve as the foundation for the legal framework advocating for the repeal of the death sentence. States are urged to uphold and defend the right to life, which is acknowledged by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as the cornerstone of all human rights. This obligation is reinforced by the Covenant's Second Optional Protocol, which calls on state parties to take decisive action to put an end to executions. The Convention against Torture, which expressly forbids any kind of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, further supports this idea. Even during times of conflict, the European Convention on Human Rights and its Protocols 6 and 13 forbid the use of executions, providing a powerful model for other regions to emulate. Collectively, these accords show how the rule of law can influence moral perception and motivate countries to change their penal structures. All things considered, the trajectory we describe corresponds to constructivist norm dynamics: 10 Entrepreneurship, regional cascade, and partial internalization, depending on the culture and type of regime. To accomplish complete eradication, however, legal tools by themselves are insufficient. Prior to joining international treaties, several ratifying nations had strong abolitionist inclinations. This demonstrates that rather than generating political will, treaties frequently reflect it. The strength of a nation’s institutions and the character of its political system have a significant impact on the effectiveness of international law. International human rights commitments are more likely to be upheld by countries with democratic governments, independent courts, and vibrant civil societies. Authoritarian governments, on the other hand, usually disregard these standards, using tradition and sovereignty as justifications for their ongoing use of executions. Religious and cultural customs are also very important in determining a nation’s stance on the death penalty. It can be challenging to stop using executions in some societies due to ingrained traditions that link justice to retaliation. In others, moral and religious beliefs promote abolition by emphasizing rehabilitation, forgiveness, and mercy. Social views on justice and retribution have changed over time, and many nations today understand that demands for vengeance must be subordinated to the preservation of life and dignity. The world is still divided. Several governments still routinely apply the death sentence even though it has been abolished in



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more than half of the world's countries. This shows that the path to complete abolition is still unfinished by establishing a glaring discrepancy between national actions and international pledges. Furthermore, studies continually demonstrate that other forms of punishment are just as successful at deterring crime as the death penalty. Strict laws have little effect on crime rates compared to social and economic factors like poverty, inequality, and education. The decrease of executions worldwide demonstrates that moral advancement is achievable when political will, legal improvements, and ethical knowledge are combined. Therefore, abolishing the death penalty is not just a legal triumph but also a moral and cultural shift, reaffirming the essential reality that all human life has worth and that justice must always be led by compassion and decency.

### **Recommendations:**

**Make International Monitoring Stronger** The way that international bodies keep an eye on adherence to treaties that forbid the death penalty needs to be improved. Clearer guidelines for reporting and public assessment can be developed by regional organizations and the UNHRC. Countries will find it more difficult to break their obligations if assessments are conducted on a regular basis.

**Encourage Education on Human Rights** Schools, colleges, and law enforcement training should all incorporate human rights instruction. Public opinions can be gradually changed by educating people about the value of equality, fairness, and dignity.

**Make Use of Regional Incentives and Pressure** Regional groups might associate advancements in human rights reforms with political or economic gains. The European Union's and the Council of Europe's achievement demonstrates how strongly attaching funding or membership to abolition can spur reform.

**Encourage Democratic Reforms** International organizations ought to keep advocating for free courts, democracy, and free elections. Abolition and adherence to international human rights standards are more likely in democratic states.

**Promote Religious and Cultural Communication** Discussions with religious and cultural leaders should be a part of abolition efforts. The objective of putting an end to executions can be linked to the emphasis that many traditions already place on mercy and forgiveness.

**Enhance the Gathering of Data** Understanding and dealing with the death penalty require accurate statistics. Information about executions, erroneous convictions, and court procedures should be gathered and disseminated by governments and NGOs.

**Encourage Execution Alternatives** Programs for rehabilitation and life in jail should be strengthened by nations. This provides public safety and justice without compromising human dignity.

**Foster More Collaboration** States that have abolished the death penalty might assist one another by exchanging legal knowledge and experiences. Regional collaborations can offer moral support and disseminate best practices.

**Encourage Civil Society and the Families of Victims** Discussions about justice at the national level should involve human rights organizations, scholars, and the relatives of victims. Their tales can influence public opinion to choose humanity over retaliation.

Reaffirm that human rights are universal. Lastly, every state ought to keep in mind that everyone has the unalienable right to life. Politics and culture do not limit human rights. When human dignity is prioritized over all else, the deathpenalty cannot be justified.



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