

Racism and the Malaysian drug war — Fifa Rahman

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OCT 11 — There's a fantastic documentary on Netflix called *13th* which talks about the high levels of incarceration of black people in the US, and talks about Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan's "War on Drugs" as a genocide decimating young coloured communities.

In Malaysia, the "War on Drugs" isn't often thought about in racial terms.

Politically, racism is recognised in other things — like lackadaisical attitudes towards people who protest the building of new churches, preventing the translation of Bibles into Malay, proposing things like halal and non-halal trolleys.

But the fact is, poor Malay communities are disproportionately the key targets of the War on Drugs in Malaysia.

Their houses are barged into, children watch as their fathers are taken away, or they cry and scream as social workers take them away from their mothers, because they think that a woman who uses drugs is an unfit mother and it simply would be too much work to provide her with support.

We've got to remember that UNODC statistics show that worldwide, only, 11.14 per cent of all drug use is problematic.

This means that 89 per cent of people who use drugs are people who use drugs functionally, e.g. they smoke a joint on the weekend, go to work on Monday, pick up their kids from school, pay their electricity bills, go to the gym, etc.

You get the point.

When people are arrested and incarcerated for drug use, the state removes the functionality. This person now has a criminal record, which means they can't get a job. When they can't get a job, and they need money to feed their kids, they might have to resort to criminal activity to feed them. These are called survival crimes, and they are caused by a system that is broken.

This is a bit cynical, but evidence that a system is broken isn't often enough to initiate policy change.

Paradoxically, people say "hidup Melayu", but they support the War on Drugs.

We know today that problematic drug use is caused by a lack of human connection, and not because the individual is just inherently problematic and unsalvageable.

At the same time, heaven knows Malaysia doesn't need any more racial tension, and there simply isn't enough data on racism and the Malaysian drug war.

But the drug war-racism link is still worth thinking about in our context, because we've done this drug war for 60 years, and now we have more drugs and more drug harms, and most of the people incarcerated for drugs are Malay.

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