

US has much to learn from others about multiculturalism

America needs to face up to its systemic racism, in the issue of African Americans being discriminated against by police

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For The Straits Times

In the many years that I have conducted research with African-American communities in the United States, the concept of race has emerged as salient.

In my fieldwork, I have listened to stories of young African-American men recounting the fear they experience when going out to do everyday chores, scared for their health and well-being.

This fear is often directed at the police, at the uncertainty that one might get arrested or even killed just for walking on the street, wearing a hoodie, or driving. According to a study published in the journal *Crime & Delinquency*, nearly half (49 per cent) of African-American men have been arrested by the age of 23. According to a report on the state of human rights in the US, published by China, "racial discrimination has been a chronic problem in the US human rights record".

The recent instances of deaths of African Americans in the US at the hands of the police have drawn attention to this large-scale racism written into American society.

The state of police abuse of African Americans in the US has reached disproportionate levels.

Starting from the killing of teenager Michael Brown to the recent death of Ms Sandra Bland, the incidents depict the systemic oppression of African Americans in the US at the hands of the police. In most cases, the level of police response is incoherent with the nature of the suspected crime.

In the most recent case of the death of Ms Bland, who had travelled to Texas to take up a new job, a police officer who had pulled her over for a minor traffic violation orders her out of her car, holds her against the ground, and arrests her.

A video captured by a bystander documents the abuse, with Ms Bland being heard stating that officers "slammed my head into the ground". The video later released by the police department further documents the disproportionate level of the police response, with the police officer threatening to use his Taser on Ms Bland, stating "I will light you up" while pointing a stun gun at her. We also hear Ms Bland asking 14 times the reason for



her arrest without being provided an answer.

According to the New York Times: "What started as a traffic stop escalated to an arrest and a charge of assaulting a public servant. On July 13, three days after she was arrested and jailed, Ms Bland was found hanged in a cell at the Waller County Jail."

An autopsy found her injuries consistent with suicide, although family and friends disputed this.

The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, replete with links to videos and images documenting police atrocities, offers insights into the violence being experienced by African Americans in the US.

One of my African-American students posted on my Facebook wall: "I am afraid to drive."

He then added: "Please help us".

I would argue that America's treatment of its African-American people constitutes an abuse of human rights of the African-American community, and that the issue is so serious, America should start looking at how other countries handle racial issues to improve its own system. Likewise,

Just as America does not hesitate to interfere in rights abuses in other countries, so other countries watching on the sidelines should not hesitate to take America to task for the abuse of its own minorities by its criminal justice system.

the international community should also respond by noting the issue, expressing its concern and sharing best practices.

America might then be able to put in place policies of reform attentive to nurturing and protecting the dignity and life of people from diverse backgrounds, with diverse histories, lived experiences, and skin colour.

Culturally sensitive training programmes need to be developed to educate police on racial

prejudice and equip members of the police force with communication strategies for addressing such prejudice.

In addition to reforming the criminal justice system, efforts need to be put in place for cultivating an appreciation for minority communities in the majority White culture.

The US has much to learn from countries across the globe on issues of multiculturalism and race.

Singapore, for instance, offers one such model of how to handle issues of race. Its multicultural model takes a proactive stance on creating a space for celebrating differences, for practising cultural diversity, and for fostering dialogues towards working on a common national vision.

The Singapore model, with its emphasis on protecting racial harmony, provides a valuable recipe for learning how to build a multiracial society that appreciates diverse cultures and carefully protects the space for diversity through progressive policies. In the Singapore model, racial harmony as a concept takes precedence in

public discourse and public life. Also, multiculturalism is built into the education system, actively cultivating the spirit of intercultural dialogue through the curriculum.

Criminal justice reforms in the US addressing the disproportionate burden of incarceration borne by African Americans need to be complemented by cultural reforms that open up spaces for dialogue and appreciation for African Americans within the broader US culture.

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The state of police abuse of African Americans in the US has reached disproportionate levels, and the issue is so serious, America should start looking at how other countries handle racial issues to improve its own system, says the writer.
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