Different Approaches in the Fight Against Drugs

Until recently there are a number of very different approaches in the fight against drugs, namely decriminalization, zero tolerance, and legalization. A very interesting way of addressing the matter is what is currently being applied in Portugal, known formally as the Portuguese Republic. In this country drugs have been decriminalized in 2001, making it the first country in the world to do so, with a more 'friendly' approach delivered to those who use it. The government claims victory in its fight against drugs though the implementation of the law. But not everyone, even in Portugal itself, finds content in how the government appears to facilitate drugs in the country. Meanwhile the government of Japan is applying a contradicting approach to that in Portugal with its "zero-tolerance" policy to the illicit substances. The country's culture is known to view drugs as taboo and hence has been known as some of the countries in the world with the least drug user. However, time seems to have changed that and Japanese people themselves concluded that the country's "Dame Zattai" or "Just Say No" campaign is not working very well. And some states in the US have applied the legalization of marijuana, and although the governments of the states have come up with good news regarding the matter, the debate whether it is right to legalize drugs or not, continues. This article will look at these three different perspectives with data collected from various sources.

"Portugal is a developed country with a high-income advanced economy and a high living standard. It is the 5th most peaceful country in the world…It has the highest social progress in the world, putting it ahead of other Western European countries like France, Spain and Italy. A founding member of NATO and the Community of Portuguese Language Countries, it is also a member of the United Nations, the European Union, the Eurozone and OECD."[1]

Portugal has raised a lot of attention globally. Their Law 30/2000 refers in cases such as the consumption, purchase, or possession of up to ten days' supply of an illicit drug would be addressed with treatment, fines, warnings, or other penalties. However, if a person has drug which quantities exceeds a ten days' supply, of if a person is found trafficking and cultivating illicit substances, he or she will be seen as committed criminal offenses. The quantity of one gram of heroin, two grams of cocaine, 25 grams of marijuana leaves or five grams of hashish, one gram of meth or one gram of speed could be legally possessed and purchased in Portugal.[2]

Harvard Political Review states further that when a person is caught with up ten days of illicit substances, they are brought to an administrative body consisting of a lawyer, a judge and a psychologist or a social worker, with the options of recommended treatment; levy a small fine or nothing. But if a person is caught with more than the legal amount of illegal substances, penalties such as jail time and augmented fees are applied. And dealers are fined and/or jailed regardless of the amount of drug being trafficked.

João Goulão, a former family physician, participated in creating Law 30/2000. He took the risk in an experiment approach to drug control, because this kind of approach is unprecedented and Goulão himself admitted that there was no result to show that the law would work. But Goulão went ahead given the country was in a desperate need of a solution to the country's addiction to drugs. Goulão decided to see drug users as sick people instead of criminals and hence deserve treatment instead of repercussion.

After more than a decade of the implementation of Law 30/2000, Goulão answered an interview by the Inter Press Service that the most significant groups of users are gradually starting to approach the treatment centers, the use of almost illegal substances has been reduced among the youngest segments of the population, there is a drastic decline in intravenous drug use, and drug-related crime has gone down. So a lot of people would agree that Goulão's approach as the president of Portugal's Institute of Drugs and Drug Abuse has succeeded. And that would explain the number of countries studying this model of approach and considering applying it in their countries. Has the world found 'the' solution to drug issue?

Dr Manuel Pinto Coelho, President of the Association for a Drug Free Portugal does not seem to have the same point of view about the policy. In the World Federation Against Drug website, he wrote that "…with 219 deaths from 'overdose' per year, Portugal has one of the worst results, with one death every two days…Portugal registered an increase of deaths by more than 30% in 2005…Portugal remains the country with the highest increase of AIDS as a result of injecting drugs...the consumption of drugs in Portugal increased by 4,2% from 7,8% in 2001 to 12% in 2007." The article also showed how in fact, the

consumption of cocaine, hashish, and the number of homicides related to drugs, have all increased since Law 30/2000 was implemented.

Another side of it is that with this type of approach, a lot of money is greatly needed in order to provide the social workers, psychologists, treatment centers, which at this moment is still readily available in Europe. But when a government is starting to lack the funds to run its country, services for drug user for countries applying this approach, might decline significantly.

In another part of the world, Japan, according to worldnomads.com, applies a “zero-tolerance” policy in place for crimes related to drugs with heavy penalties. This policy, according to Harvard Political Review, has resulted in some of the lowest rates of drug use worldwide. The Telegraph stated that “Japan has the toughest drug laws in the developed world…some products that are available over the counter as cold and flu remedies are banned and possession of even small amounts of drugs is punishable by lengthy imprisonment.” So is Japan’s model of zero-tolerance policy against drugs more successful?[3]

Even though drugs in Japan is considered to be a taboo which explains why people did not use it, the new generation does not see it that way anymore. Drug use in Japan has hit its new peak with no less than 2,76 million Japanese used illegal drugs just in 2010, compared to a relatively no drug problem country in 1997. Japan Times elaborated that following the end of World War II-where Japan produced its own drugs for their people to heal fatigue, causing 550,000 addicts in the country-Japan enacted The Stimulant Control Law in 1951, banning the production, import, possession or use of methamphetamine across the board. Apart from the Stimulant Control Law, Japan also applied the Cannabis Control Law, the Narcotics and Psychotropic Control Law and the Opium Law.[4]

Japan Times wrote how the health ministry of Japan has more than 1370 chemicals outlawed compared from the 68 banned earlier in 2012 in order to avoid the creation of loophole drugs, a type of drugs that typically consists of a mixture of a number of chemicals that are regulated by the Pharmaceutical Affairs Law, yet causes similar effects, if not more harmful, to illegal drugs such as methamphetamine and marijuana. Right now experts in the country are suggesting to follow a new trend in western nations to shift away from a harsh punishment for the possession of drugs. And Sakae Kumori, a Japanese lawyer specializing in drug cases believes that the government must be prepared to fight a prolonged war of drugs given the massive global market that supports these synthetic drugs to be made available.

Legalization is another approach used in countries such as the US and Uruguay. According to Wikipedia, drug legalization “calls for a return to the pre-20th century situation in which almost all drugs were legal. The Drug Policy Alliance wrote in their website that in 2015, it is shown that one year following the legalization of drugs in the state of Washington, filling for low-level marijuana offenses are down 98% for adults 21 years and older, the state has saved millions of dollars in law enforcement resources, violent crime has decreased in Washington, and that the state has collected $83 million in marijuana tax revenue, the number of traffic fatalities remained stable, youth marijuana use has not increase, among others. Tamar Odd, the Director of Marijuana Law and Policy at the Drug Policy Alliance said, “Marijuana prohibition has been a costly failure-to individuals, communities, and the entire country.”

However, a number of the cons of the legalization of drugs; addiction, altered perception of users, being a gateway drug status, meaning introducing users to more harmful illicit substances, increased of the risk of driving under the influence of drugs as well as other crimes such as robbery and rape, which could be caused by the lapse of judgment due to smoking cannabis, the increased chances of the drug to falling into the hands of children, danger of second-hand smoke to bystanders, damage to the brain, poor lung health, risk of heart disease and poor mental health.[5]

The State of Washington stated that traffic accidents and violent crimes have not increased in Washington since the implementation of the legalization of marijuana, yet other risks as mention above have not been studied and those risks are not to be ignored. Does a government willing to risk poor lung health of their people, or brain damage, heart disease, or children being able to have drugs in their possessions?

Each approaches has its pros and cons and would be debated for a very long time with no one solution to the matter. One country cannot take another country’s approach to drugs apple to apple because each country is unique in their culture and history and eradicating drug use will not be an easy task. If there can be a collaboration and brain storming among the thinkers from the decriminalization, zero tolerance

approach, and legalization of drugs, maybe, just maybe, we might save a lot of lives…

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[3] Footnote if possible

[4] Thecabinchiangmai.com wrote that

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