FOREIGN activists have been vocal in opposing Singapore’s death penalty—but they should consider a more measured response, if any headway is to be made.

Making this call was law academician Professor Michael Hor (picture) at a seminar to discuss the penal code reforms at the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Bukit Timah campus on Wednesday.

International bodies such as Amnesty International, the United Nations Human Rights Council and the European Union should consider the “local impact” of their censure, the NUS don told a group of students, academics and legal practitioners.

“The moment external activists speak, the Government always bank on the ‘us-against-them’ argument and that clouds the whole issue,” said Prof Hor, adding that leaders here see it as a case of “colonialists telling us what to do”.

This shuts out the possibility of debate and also detracts from the arguments made by local activists who are seen as taking a Western line, he added.

Even so, foreign activists have “done a lot of good”, said Prof Hor. For instance, the Government has since come out with its position and statistics—data on capital punishment is otherwise difficult to obtain, he noted.

He told TODAY: “I hope the future will see some sort of rapprochement between the two—the Singapore Government and the international community both taking a few steps towards each other.”

This will happen, he added, if there is a degree of openness to discussing practices involving the death penalty. One change he hopes to see is mandatory death sentences, applied in capital offences such as murder, be made a discretionary punishment instead.

Last week, Singapore’s ambassador to the UN, Mr Vamun Gopala Menon, defended the Republic’s stand in a UN discussion, saying that capital punishment was an “important component” of its legal system.

Singapore has “proper legal safeguards to prevent miscarriages of justice”, he said, according to the IPS news service.

While foreigners have been vocal on the death penalty issue, local activists have not been organised, Prof Ho told the seminar participants. Only a few have been openly critical of Singapore’s capital punishment laws, such as lawyers M Ravi and K S Rajah as well as blogger Alex Au.

Prof Hor wondered why religious groups—which, outside Singapore, are typically at the forefront of anti-death penalty movements—have been quiet here, in contrast to their responses to the debate on Section 377A, the law against gay sex.

In the lively question-and-answer session that ensued, participants debated the impact of international development on Singapore’s judicial process. For instance, the UN is set to adopt this month an EU-backed convention of moratorium on capital punishment, said Prof Hor.

A fellow law academician at the forum said it was important the Government consider debating the death penalty because Singapore is fast becoming more multinational and it wants to attract talents, some of whom might hold libertarian views.

“The death penalty is one important thing that they will consider before moving here,” he argued.

Other issues discussed at the seminar included trial by jury, which many agreed was not cost-effective nor efficient.

FOREIGN activists, heed local impact

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