



## **Singapore: Take steps towards the abolition of the death penalty**

(Bangkok/Singapore 30 September 2020) Singapore should take steps towards the total abolition of the death penalty, keeping in mind the international human rights standards on the right to life, and the absolute prohibition of torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development and Think Centre said in a statement today.

The case of Syed Suhail Syed Zin, who was scheduled to be executed on September 18, 2020, has highlighted Singapore's continuous reliance on the death penalty, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Syed Suhail Syed Zin was sentenced to death in January 2016, under Section 17 of the Misuse of Drugs Act, having been found guilty of trafficking 38.84 grams of heroin.<sup>1</sup> The law specifies that anyone found in possession of more than 2g of diamorphine (heroin) is presumed to have the drug for the purpose of trafficking. It carries a mandatory death penalty for the 'uncontrolled traffic' of more than 15g of this substance.<sup>2</sup> He was given a last-minute reprieve, and on 22 September, the Court decided to put a further hold on his execution, pending arguments from both sides.

'Singapore's continuous use of the death penalty is inconsistent with the vision of the progressive State that it has tried to present to the world. Behind the scenes, the fundamental rights of individuals like Syed Suhail Syed Zin continue to be violated, often with very little transparency,' said Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu, FORUM-ASIA's Executive Director.

Think Centre has continued to highlight the cruelty surrounding the government's use of the death penalty. Syed Suhail Syed Zin's family was allegedly informed of the planned date of his execution just a week prior. The government failed to make arrangements to enable the travel of his family from Malaysia to Singapore.<sup>3</sup>

In May 2020, the Singapore High Court sentenced to death Punithan Genasan, 37, over the platform Zoom for his participation in a drug deal.<sup>4</sup> Civil society groups have highlighted the cruelty of an online sentencing, the first this was done anywhere.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.malaymail.com/news/singapore/2020/09/23/singapores-execution-of-drug-trafficking-convict-put-on-hold-pending-court/1905755>

<sup>2</sup> <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/MDA1973>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=32875>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52739676>

Think Centre continues to highlight the cruelty surrounding the government's use of the death penalty. According to information shared by Syed Suhail to his lawyer, 55 individuals are currently awaiting execution, the majority whom are either of Singaporean Malay or Indian origin.

'Singapore's death penalty, aside from being cruel and ineffective, may be disproportionately targeting individuals from these ethnic minorities. This demonstrates inequalities around access to justice, and deeper issues on a societal level that the death penalty is only exacerbating. The government needs to verify the alleged data, and if found to be true, initiate a dialogue on the disproportionate impact of the death penalty on minority groups, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.' said Ted Tan of Think Centre.

Singapore has an uncompromising stance on illegal drugs. It is reportedly one of four countries known to have executed people for drug-related charges in recent years.<sup>5</sup> An estimated 106 countries have abolished the death penalty for all crimes, as of the end of 2019.<sup>6</sup>

While Singapore took steps to provide information on individuals on death row following recommendations given during its previous Universal Periodic Review, civil society say this information is often limited. The government has been accused of restricting information related to capital punishment. In January 2020, it invoked the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) after Malaysia-based rights group Lawyers for Liberty (LFL) alleged 'unlawful and cruel' procedures were carried out during hangings at Singapore's prisons.<sup>7</sup> LFL maintains these claims stem from credible information, refusing to comply with the correction direction.<sup>8</sup> LFL's website is now inaccessible to Singaporean users.<sup>9</sup>

'This lack of transparency has stifled the discussion on the death penalty, which has allowed Singapore to continue executing individuals seemingly with the approval of its people, whereas the rest of the world has gone the other way. The people have the right to know what happens in these prisons, and to be part of these wider conversations,' the groups said.

'There remains no evidence that capital punishment deters crime. Singapore should immediately adopt a moratorium for all forms of capital punishment, as a first step towards its full abolition,' they concluded.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/09/singapore-halt-imminent-execution-of-man-convicted-of-drugrelated-offence/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/death-penalty-in-2019-facts-and-figures/#:~:text=At%20the%20end%20of%202019,penalty%20in%20law%20or%20practice.>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/01/24/singapore-to-block-lawyers-for-liberty-website-over-dispute-on-cruel-hangings/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2020/02/24/singapore-ramping-use-fake-news-law-against-critics-ahead-elections/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://mothership.sg/2020/01/lawyers-for-liberty-website-blocked-singapore/>