

Not In My Name: Working against the Death Penalty in Singapore

Kirsten Han¹

Activist, Transformative Justice Collective

Abstract

Given the Singapore government's enthusiastic defense of capital punishment, abolitionist activism in the city-state is politically sensitive and faces many of the challenges that typically confront civil society in environments generally hostile to resistance and dissent. This paper draws on my experience as a Singaporean activist working toward the abolition of the death penalty since 2010. It recounts my involvement in the country's anti-death penalty movement, which has grown from a small, fringe issue to one that has gained increasing momentum and attention, despite facing many obstacles and challenges.

Keywords

capital punishment, Singapore, anti-death penalty movement

I've started a Google Calendar where I log the anniversaries of executions in Singapore. I use a database compiled by another volunteer, which stretches all the way back to 1965, the year Singapore left Malaysia and became a sovereign state. It's a long list, but the information is still incomplete—there are some executions for which there's no specific date, only a month or a year. They don't make it into the calendar. I wonder if there are names we've missed completely. I wouldn't be surprised if there were.

¹ Kirsten Han is a Singaporean writer, journalist, and activist who has been campaigning for the abolition of the death penalty since 2010. She is an executive committee member of the Transformative Justice Collective.

I'm still double-checking every entry, making sure everything has been entered correctly, but it's a grim sight. The names, listed in little black bars, populate weeks and months. Some days have so many names they don't fit in the box. There are stretches of five, six, eight days where every single one marks at least one death. There are names I recognize—high-profile cases from Singapore's past or cases I've personally documented in my capacity as an anti-death penalty activist—and many more I don't. I look at these names and think about how, behind each one, there are loved ones who might still be grieving, whose lives have been irrevocably changed by this violence. Or perhaps some of these people were so isolated, so marginalized, so deprived in their lives that no one remembers them, making it almost as if they never existed at all.

This the destruction that Singapore's capital punishment regime has wrought.

Joining Singapore's Anti-Death Penalty Movement

There isn't much space in Singapore for abolitionist perspectives to be aired. It's better now, thanks to the accessibility of social media platforms and the occasional interest of the international media, but when I was growing up in the 1990s and 2000s, I didn't encounter any criticism of capital punishment at all. The best I can recall was the horror on the face of a teacher from France, who asked our class how we felt about the death penalty and was stunned by our indifference. "How can you support this?" he said. I was about fifteen years old and shrugged him off. At the time, I attributed his reaction to a stereotype I had internalized from a young age: Asians and Europeans are just built differently. They can have their own opinions, but we Singaporeans have the grit to do what's needed to solve a problem. Everything I'd heard about drugs as a child emphasized that it was a problem—a big, dangerous one—and I was persuaded that the government knew what they were doing. If they said the death penalty was the solution, they were surely right.

I carried this attitude into my twenties, until life intervened to set me on a different path. In early 2010, newly returned to Singapore after three-and-a-half years as an undergraduate in New Zealand, I fell into volunteering for a citizen journalism website, *The Online Citizen* (TOC). They were pushing for the abolition of the mandatory death penalty, building a campaign around one death row prisoner: Yong Vui Kong, a young Sabahan who had been convicted of

trafficking 47.27 grammes of diamorphine (more commonly known as heroin).

Yong had a compelling life story that tugged on heartstrings and spoke powerfully to capital punishment's denial of second chances and its disproportionate impact on marginalized people. He was young, only in his early twenties, and had undergone through a significant transformation from a hot-tempered boy to a devout Buddhist who worked hard to learn how to read and write. M Ravi, a human rights lawyer, managed to save him from the gallows in December 2009, obtaining a stay of execution just a day before he had been scheduled to hang.² That stay not only gave Yong a chance to ask the Court of Appeal to restore the appeal he had previously withdrawn³, but also bought activists precious time to launch a cross-border campaign to save him.

My entry into Singapore's tiny anti-death penalty movement was first a coincidence, then a plunge. I'd accepted a friend's suggestion to volunteer for TOC because I had time on my hands, and it just so happened that my first task was to shoot vox pops in various parts of Singapore, asking people what they thought about the mandatory death penalty. With the exception of the interviews we conducted on the campus of a law school, many, if not most, of the people we approached didn't know very much. I wasn't much better; like so many of our interviewees, before embarking on this project with TOC, I hadn't even realized that Singapore had the mandatory death penalty.

I had always assumed that highly qualified, intelligent, and experienced judges had full discretion to study the evidence, consider all sides of the story, and only then decide if someone was truly so wicked that there was no other choice but to put them to death. I had always imagined death row to be populated with the most heinous criminals, like serial killers or corrupt, violent drug lords. I was shocked to learn that, particularly in cases of drug trafficking, judges at that time had no discretion when it came to the death penalty—if someone was found guilty, the courts had no choice but to sentence them to death. On top of that, I learned about the presumption clauses present in the Misuse of Drugs Act: if one is caught with over two grammes of heroin, one can be presumed to have known the nature of the drug and to have been trafficking. If the amount is above the stipulated

2 Yong Vui Kong v Public Prosecutor [2009] SGCA 64. Cr M 41/2009. in https://www.elitigation.sg/gd/s/2009_SGHC_274.

3 Yong Vui Kong v Public Prosecutor [2009] SGCA 64. Cr M 41/2009. in https://www.elitigation.sg/gd/s/2009_SGCA_64.

threshold of 15 grammes, the penalty upon conviction is mandatory death.⁴ It's up to the accused to either prove that they didn't know the nature of the drug or that they weren't trafficking.

It was a rude awakening: Singapore's capital punishment regime—held up as proof of our pragmatism and determination to fight “bad guys” for the greater good—was nowhere near as watertight as I had assumed it to be. Not only that: the people on death row weren't even the irredeemable villains I had imagined. The (very) few times I'd thought about the death penalty in my youth, I'd pictured terrorists and homicidal maniacs, millionaire mobsters who smuggled tons of drugs while surrounded by henchmen with black-market machine guns. When I finally looked, I found... Yong Vui Kong.

Less than a year after my first day with TOC, I co-founded the youth-led anti-death penalty group We Believe in Second Chances. I was twenty-one years old; my co-founders, Damien Chng and Priscilla Chia, were eighteen, juggling the campaign with prep for their A Levels. It was a huge undertaking; I'm not sure any of us really grasped how huge it was back then. Still, we wanted to do it. I've never looked back.

Being an Activist in Singapore

This is where I need to describe Singapore's political landscape and attitude towards activism and dissent. I didn't have a very clear idea of the risks of activism when I started out (perhaps I would have made very different decisions if I had!) which isn't surprising because it's difficult to truly comprehend, from a distance, the hostility that the ruling People's Action Party demonstrates towards those who dare to criticize and disagree. That is something that one learns on the job.

The death penalty is a controversial issue in many parts of the world, with strong opinions on all sides. It is values-laden, emotive, and easily politicized. In Singapore, a country still governed by the same political party that introduced the mandatory death penalty for drug trafficking, abolitionist activism clearly rejects and confronts the government's narrative, which is that the death penalty is both effective and essential for ensuring Singaporeans' safety. Those in power don't take kindly to such dissent, and

4 The Statutes of the Republic of Singapore. 2024. Misuse of Drugs Act 1973 § 18. in <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/MDA1973?ProvIds=P13-#pr18->.

anti-death penalty activists, like our counterparts working on other causes, have to navigate a minefield of excessively oppressive legislation. Public exhibitions generally require permits. Foreign speakers aren't allowed to give public speeches without police permission either. The Public Order Act criminalizes all unauthorised physical protests—and authorization, in some activists' experience, can be almost impossible to get.⁵ In recent years, people have spent time in prison for actions deemed to be “illegal assemblies”⁶ or have been summoned to police stations for “interviews” about potential Public Order Act offenses.⁷ Critics also have to be wary of accusations of defamation (civil or criminal) or contempt of court, which could potentially be financially ruinous or even lead to jail time. Since 2019, there's also the threat of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, more commonly known as POFMA, which allows the government to force the publication of “correction directions” or even to essentially defund web pages on the grounds of spreading “falsehoods”—which, of course, they have the power to define in the first instance.

My first police investigation was in 2017. I'd participated in a vigil, hastily organized for the night before a death row prisoner's execution at dawn, outside Singapore's sprawling Changi Prison Complex. A small group of us gathered near the entrance, hovering around a bus stop because it was the only thing nearby that provided seating and shelter. The mother of Prabakaran, the prisoner about to be hanged, was there too, accompanied by a few other grieving relatives. Someone had brought tea lights and photos of Praba, so we lit them and arranged them on the pavement near the prison fence. Police officers, one armed with a video camera recording everything, arrived not long after. They told us we weren't allowed to light open flames, but that it would be all right for us to stay otherwise. The candles and photos were seized as evidence, and some officers sat across the road, keeping an eye on things throughout the night.


5 FIDH. 2022. *CORNERED Repression of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in Singapore*. in <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/singapore786ang.pdf>

6 Selina Lum. 2022. “Activist Jolovan Wham chooses to serve 15-day jail term in lieu of fine over assembly outside State Courts.” *The Straits Times* 09 September 2022. in <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/activist-chooses-to-start-15-day-jail-term-in-lieu-of-fine-over-assembly-outside-state-courts>.

7 UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders. 2023. “Singapore: investigation into HRDs Kirsten Han & Rocky Howe allegedly in connection with their advocacy against death penalty (joint communication).” in <https://srdefenders.org/singapore-investigation-into-hrds-kirsten-han-rocky-howe-allegedly-in-connection-with-their-advocacy-against-death-penalty-joint-communication/>.




The ‘surprise’ came a couple of months later, when a different pair of police officers showed up at my front door with a letter instructing me to present myself at the Singapore Police Force’s Bedok Division to “state what you know concerning” an offense under the Public Order Act. They had gone around Singapore, delivering letters to multiple people who had been there that night.

 **SINGAPORE
POLICE FORCE**

Our Ref : G/20170713/0247 Bedok Division
30 Bedok North Road
Singapore 469676

Date: 3 Sep 2017 DID: 6244 7005
FAX: 6244 6537

Han Li Ying Kirsten


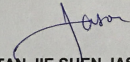
**NOTICE TO APPEAR AT A POLICE INVESTIGATION
UNDER SECTION 21(1) OF THE CRIMINAL PROCEDURE CODE,
CHAPTER 68 REVISED EDITION 2012**

Whereas an investigation is being conducted into an offence of Taking Part in a Public Assembly without a Permit under Section 16(2)(a) of the Public Order Act, Chapter 257A committed on 13 July 2017 and it appears that you may be acquainted with the facts and circumstances of the case.

2. Therefore, by virtue of the powers conferred on me by Section 21(1) of the Criminal Procedure Code, Chapter 68 (Revised Edition 2012), I hereby require you to attend before me at Bedok Division, 30 Bedok North Road, on 7 September 2017 at 2.00 p.m. and to state what you know concerning the case.

3. Your attendance is compulsory. If you are unable to turn up for the appointment, please contact the undersigned at DID: 6244 7005 or the Investigation Branch Call Centre at Tel: 6244 7200 to arrange for another date.

4. Please bring along your identity card and this letter for the interview. If you are driving, kindly note that your vehicle will not be allowed to enter the Police premises.


**TAN JIE SHEN JASON, INSP
OC COMPLIANCE INVESTIGATION SQUAD
BEDOK DIVISION**

Section 21 of the Criminal Procedure Code, Chapter 68 Revised Edition 2012:
(1) In conducting an investigation, a police officer may issue a written order requiring anyone within the limits of Singapore, who appears to be acquainted with the circumstances of the case to attend before him and that person must attend as required.
(2) If that person fails to attend as required, the police officer may report the matter to a Magistrate who may then, in his discretion, issue a warrant ordering the person to attend.

A FORCE FOR THE NATION

The police ultimately issued me a “stern warning”. I was given an official letter and told to read it through while standing in front of a senior officer’s desk, like a naughty high schooler in the principal’s office. According to this warning, our ‘illegal assembly’—the period we had gathered before the police showed up to confiscate the photos and candles—had lasted ten minutes.

This is Singapore.

Information and Strategy

We Believe in Second Chances (sometimes shortened to Second Chances) wasn't the first anti-death penalty group on the scene. There were already others, like Think Centre and the Singapore Anti-Death Penalty Campaign (SADPC), working bravely against the death penalty. Still, my early years as an anti-death penalty campaigner were somewhat haphazard, an on-and-off fire-fighting exercise. There wasn't really any other way: on top of our youth, naïveté and inexperience, we had so little to work with. The Singapore Prison Service includes the number of judicial executions carried out the previous year in its annual reports, but there's little official information about death row or the death penalty regime available. Prison officers, doctors, and counsellors who work on death row are bound by the Official Secrets Act. Unlike in the United States, it's not possible to witness an execution—as far as I know, only authorized prison staff and medical workers are allowed to be present at a long-drop hanging. Although criminal convictions and sentences are a matter of public record, the work of compiling and tracking capital cases from trial to sentencing was highly resource-intensive work, and we—a freelance journalist and a tiny number of over-stretched law students—didn't have the capacity to take on. Apart from the prisoners we knew of because we had been put in touch with or contacted by their families, we didn't know who was on death row. There wasn't even verified data on how many people were on death row.

This information vacuum left us blind, unable to fully comprehend the magnitude of the issue we were dealing with, heavily restricting our ability to conduct any serious analysis of the regime. This, plus the fact that we were all volunteers working on this in our free time, meant that we were, for the most part, reactive: we only swung into action when approached by families hoping a campaign could save their loved one. Families tended to come to us only when all other options had been exhausted, so we were often confronted by urgent, desperate cases. Campaigns would then focus on that prisoner's specific case and circumstances. There wasn't enough conversation about capital punishment as a whole—how it wasn't just about showing mercy to particular prisoners, but an entire system that was cruel and broken—because we were always too busy, too preoccupied, and too stretched running around for a specific prisoner at imminent risk of execution to do anything else.

That wasn't the only reason. Ultimately, Second Chances lacked the confidence to take on Singapore's anti-death penalty regime from all angles—

particularly the way in which Singapore's capital punishment is tightly intertwined with a "zero tolerance" drug policy.

Although capital punishment applies to over thirty offenses in Singapore, it is mainly used on three categories: drugs, murder, and firearms offenses. Most death sentences are handed down following drug trafficking convictions, which is why the debate over capital punishment tends to be quickly connected to drugs rather than murder or other violent offenses. And the topic of drugs, in Singapore, comes with a big red (moral) panic button. In the early 2010s, whenever we posted anything on social media (mostly Facebook) about abolishing the death penalty, we'd almost immediately see comments accusing us of wanting to open the floodgates to illegal and harmful drugs and cause the deaths of thousands of people.

It didn't help that we were ourselves products of Singapore's decades-long anti-drug propaganda campaigns. Illegal drugs, and the people who smuggled or sold them, were portrayed as mysterious, dangerous, immoral, and heinous, no better than violent murderers. We were taught to fear them, even though we barely understood any of the real effects or risks of different types of drug use. *All it takes is one puff, and your life is over*—that was the message I'd internalized from childhood. From that standpoint, I could totally understand why people would support tough measures to keep this "evil" as far away from us as possible.

So we didn't talk about the need for a bigger overhaul of Singapore's drug policies. Instead, we focused on the specifics of each prisoner's case, highlighting sympathetic and heart-wrenching mitigating factors and featuring interviews with their families to humanize the prisoner and make capital punishment seem less abstract.

Some of the talking points we deployed in those early days ended up playing into the stigma against drugs and drug users. "He's not even an addict," I remember saying of Yong Vui Kong in those early days. "He was just a poor, uneducated boy who had fallen into the wrong company and was misled into smuggling drugs." The idea was that Vui Kong wasn't "like them" those people who sold drugs to fund their own habits. He was just a kid who didn't know better. I hadn't realized then how counterproductive this narrative was, in the way it perpetuated the demonization of drug users and justified criminalizing and subjecting them to harsh punishments that did nothing to address their issues or support their health and well-being.

Second Chances challenged the notion that the death penalty was an effective deterrence but tried not to get drawn into conversations about drugs, drug use, and what we thought Singapore should do. I did this at first because I, too, thought drugs were a Big Bad that we had to fight against. But even after my views evolved, after I had woken up to the devastation and injustice of drug wars, I refrained from delving too deeply into this topic publicly. I worried about the almost certain public backlash and didn't feel ready to handle it. There was so much unlearning and relearning I still had to do.

A New Path with the Transformative Justice Collective

Syed Suhail bin Syed Zin received an execution notice in 2020. His sister spoke about how he had struggled with drug use in his life and how people like Syed needed healthcare and support instead of imprisonment and death. This was different from the usual pleas for forgiveness and mercy that other families had made before. The outpouring of support Syed received signalled another shift: this message was resonating. The anti-drug sentiment was still strong nationally, of course, but it also felt like, at least among some pockets of Singapore's population, there was a growing willingness to question the status quo and consider alternative paths. A Change.org petition, initiated by the rapper Subhas Nair to ask President Halimah Yacob to grant clemency to Syed, amassed tens of thousands of signatures.⁸

This public reaction made what had previously seemed risky and impossible feel not only possible, but necessary. By 2020, Second Chances was pretty much defunct; other members had graduated from law school and were wholly absorbed by full-time employment. As a freelancer, I still had some flexibility in my schedule and continued to support families where I could, but there wasn't much I could do alone. There were many executions I didn't hear about at all—and the government wouldn't report or publicize them if no one was asking—and those that I did hear about often came to my attention at a very late stage, usually just days before the execution. By then, there was very little that could be done; I would accompany family members to the Istana to submit last-ditch pleas for mercy or write something on social media in the hopes of getting at least some attention and solidarity. But just as often, I found myself attending funerals.

8 Change.org Official Website. in <https://www.change.org/p/singapore-an-open-letter-to-president-halimah-yacob-save-syed-suhail>.

Something new, something more, needed to be done. The relatively positive response to Syed’s case provided the motivation and encouragement for some of us to come together and start something new. From the very beginning, we agreed that this new group wouldn’t just focus on the death penalty. We would broaden our scope to recognize the interconnectedness of multiple issues, from policing and surveillance to the criminal punishment system, prison conditions, and executions. This was the beginning of the Transformative Justice Collective, or TJC.

Having a new team, especially with Kokila Annamalai and Rocky Howe as coordinators, meant that much more could be accomplished. We organized TJC into working groups focused on different areas—death penalty, drug policy, prisons, policing, etc.—and got to work with research, public outreach through social media, and building connections with as many like-minded people as we could. I began introducing the family members I had met through Second Chances to TJC, and, with help from Syed and his family, started reaching out to families of prisoners I hadn’t known before.

2022: The Killing Begins Again

Looking back, I’m glad we started TJC when we did, because it meant that, when Nagaenthran K Dharmalingam’s family received an execution notice in late 2021, we were already a team and could spring into action together.

A letter had been sent all the way to Nagaen’s family in Ipoh, giving them about two weeks’ notice of his planned execution. We were still in the middle of the pandemic, and travel was a complicated and expensive affair. The family was immediately overwhelmed by what was being asked of them.⁹

We put out a crowdfunding call on social media to raise the money needed to cover the costs of flights, Covid tests, insurance, accommodation, travel, and meals. The response was swift. A photo of the execution notice sent to Nagaen’s family had been published on Facebook, where it went viral.¹⁰ Many people were seeing an execution notice for the first time and were horrified that a mother was being informed of her son’s imminent death

9 Kirsten Han. 2021. “Death by bureaucracy.” *We, The Citizens* 31 Oct 2021. in <https://www.wethecitizens.net/death-by-bureaucracy/>.

10 Heather Chen. 2021. “Chilling Letter Details Execution of ‘Intellectually Disabled’ Inmate.” *VICE Media* 29 October 2021. in <https://www.vice.com/en/article/death-penalty-singapore/>.

in such a cold, clinical way. There was also indignation that such cruelty was being displayed in the middle of a pandemic that had already caused so much suffering.

We exceeded our fundraising goal in less than twenty-four hours, raising enough to bring four members of the family over, with funds left over for other related needs.¹¹

While supporting the family with their needs, TJC also worked on a public campaign to save Nagaen. We published posts on platforms like Instagram and Facebook, making use of both the collective's and our own accounts to reach the largest audience possible within a short time. M Ravi, the human rights lawyer, filed an application to the court that won Nagaen a temporary reprieve—one that was later extended when it was discovered, at the time of his Court of Appeal, he'd tested positive for Covid.¹² As it turned out, the Singapore state didn't want to kill someone who was ill. They'd wait until he got better.

We tried to make the most of every bit of time left to Nagaen. We encouraged Singaporeans to write their own letters, addressed to the president and the prime minister, asking for clemency. People gathered to walk to the Istana to deliver these letters. There were letters of solidarity from various segments of society: social workers, healthcare workers, students, and more.

On 3 April 2022, TJC organized a protest in Hong Lim Park—the only place in Singapore where citizens and permanent residents can demonstrate without first applying for a police permit—to bring people together to take a stand against capital punishment. I kept my expectations low; it had been many years, but we organized Hong Lim Park events against the death penalty before, and they generally had modest turnouts. As a speaker at the event, I had to register my details on the park authorities' web portal. The online registration form asked how many people I expected to attend the event. My guess was around fifty.

11 See Transformative Justice Collective Official Website: <https://transformativejusticecollective.org/tjc-support-fund/>.

12 Lydia Lam. 2021. "Execution of Malaysian drug trafficker stayed after he gets COVID-19." *CNA* 09 November 2021. in <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/execution-nagaenthran-dharmalingam-malaysian-drug-trafficker-death-row-stayed-covid19-2300661>.



Four hundred people showed up in Hong Lim Park that afternoon, wielding placards and spreading out picnic mats to sit with their friends. There were speakers and performers expressing our opposition to capital punishment from various angles. We displayed placards with the names of every death row prisoner we knew and read out all their names. The crowd participated enthusiastically. “End oppression, not life!” they chanted. “Fuck the death penalty!” I’d been involved in anti-death penalty activism in Singapore for about twelve years by that point, and I had not seen anything like that before. The little flame of hope that I’d carefully cultivated within myself burned a little brighter that day.

The countdown clock started again for Nagaen later that month; a second

execution notice arrived for him. It was swiftly followed by an execution notice for another prisoner, Datchinamurthy a/l Kataiah. This one came as a shock because, at the time the notice arrived, Datch was still a party to a joint application in court, relating to the revelation that the Singapore Prison Service had forwarded thirteen death row prisoners' private correspondence to the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) without their knowledge or consent. We were horrified that the state thought it possible to hang Datch before the conclusion of this legal proceeding.

We went back to Hong Lim Park on 25 April 2022, two days before Nagaen's scheduled execution. This time, we gathered at night. Open flames were not allowed in the park, so we distributed electric candles. Once again, there were speeches, readings, and chants. As Malaysians, Nagaen and Datch's families weren't allowed to participate, but they stood on the fringe of the park, buoyed by the sight of Singaporeans in solidarity with their loved ones.



Nagaen's case marked a milestone for the anti-death penalty movement in Singapore. Since Yong Vui Kong, there hadn't been a death row prisoner who had attracted so much attention. There was widespread international media interest in Nagaen's story: Singapore was going to execute a man with psychosocial disabilities for a non-violent drug offense. Nagaen had an IQ test score of 69, far below the average of 100, cognitive impairments, and a diagnosis of Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) that affected his executive functioning. (Despite this, the Singapore state did not accept that he was disabled, and the courts found that his actions showed "the

working of a criminal mind”¹³) Multiple United Nations human rights experts issued a joint statement calling on Singapore not to hang him. International human rights organizations made similar demands, as did prominent personalities like Richard Branson, the billionaire businessman and active campaigner for drug policy reform, and the British actor, writer, and TV personality Stephen Fry.

It felt like all eyes were on Singapore, but the government was stubborn and determined. They hanged Nagaen on 27 April; after a short memorial in Singapore, his body was repatriated home to Ipoh that same day.

On 28 April, a day before his scheduled execution, Datch represented himself in court and won a stay of execution. He had to enter this nerve-wrecking fight twice: he represented himself before the High Court in the morning and was granted a stay of execution, only to discover that the AGC had immediately appealed the decision. The appeal was fixed for that very afternoon, so Datch had to argue for his life again. He also won at the Court of Appeal.¹⁴

Datch’s success came as a massive relief in a week of mourning for Nagaen, but our grief continued to grow over the course of 2022 as the state issued execution notice after execution notice. By the end of that year, eleven men had been hanged, all for drug trafficking.

The Way Forward

2022 was a brutal year. Thankfully, we have not seen such a bloodbath since. That doesn’t mean that the state has stopped killing: since the beginning of 2023, Singapore has hanged ten more people, including men convicted for trafficking cannabis and the first woman to be executed in almost twenty years.

Court proceedings, mostly filed by death row prisoners as litigants-in-person, have bought some time, much to the frustration of the state. It is now common to see post-appeal applications described as an “abuse of the legal

13 Central Narcotics Bureau. 2024. “Execution of a Convicted Drug Trafficker.” *Central Narcotics Bureau News* 4 October 2024. in <https://www.cnb.gov.sg/newsandevents/news>.

14 Transformative Justice Collective. 2022. “The AGC’s Appeal Proceedings against Datchinamurthy Kataiah’s Stay of Execution.” in <https://transformativejusticecollective.org/2022/04/29/the-agcs-appeal-proceedings-against-datchinamurthy-kataiahs-stay-of-execution/>.

process”, and the government has taken steps to clamp down on them. The Post-Appeal Applications in Capital Cases Act (PACC) came into force in 2024, making it even more difficult for death row prisoners to file such cases in court.¹⁵

These guys are just filing cases to buy themselves time and delay their hangings, the government’s narrative goes, portraying these actions as frivolous and disruptive to the efficiency of the Singaporean criminal punishment system. It’s befuddling to me that this would be treated with such disdain and suspicion. Of course, death row prisoners will try what they can to delay their executions. People tend to avoid death for as long as they can. It’s not abnormal for people to try to not get killed. What is abnormal is expecting healthy people to accept their fate and obediently wait to be led to the gallows.

As it becomes increasingly difficult for death row prisoners to fight for their lives in court, it is even more urgent that momentum against capital punishment grows in Singapore. It’s absolutely essential for us to tell the stories of these prisoners and their families, even if the government hates us for it and accuses us of “glorifying drug traffickers”. The more the state tries to shroud the death penalty in darkness, the more we need to drag its horrors, kicking and screaming, into the light. This is being done in all our names, so Singaporeans must know of the cruelty and pain that the state is inflicting on our behalf.

As an activist and a journalist, I cannot force anyone to change their minds about the death penalty. But I can at least present them with information and stories, and hope that they’ll be prompted to think more deeply about an issue for which the stakes could not be higher. The men (and, for now, one woman) on death row depend on those of us outside to draw attention to their plight and exert political pressure on those in power to stop the killing.

It’s also not always a losing game. Yong Vui Kong, the young man whose story pulled me into this movement, is still alive today because amendments made in 2012 and 2013 provided limited carve-outs to the mandatory death

15 Transformative Justice Collective. 2022. “The Post-Appeal Applications in Capital Cases Bill: A brief.” in <https://transformativejusticecollective.org/2022/11/30/the-post-appeal-applications-in-capital-cases-bill-a-brief/>.

penalty. These tweaks are, of course, nowhere near sufficient, but they have saved some lives, Vui Kong's among them.

The ruling People's Action Party might be belligerent and hostile, but we've seen hopeful displays of solidarity and compassion among Singaporeans. People have donated to TJC and to the families of death row prisoners, attended our events, written letters to their elected officials and signed petitions calling for a moratorium on the death penalty. There is better understanding of the deep injustice of the capital punishment regime today than when I started working on this issue over a decade ago. While I'm often asked during media interviews if I have a message for my government, I'm actually far less interested in trying to appeal to politicians than in reaching my fellow citizens. I have much more faith in ordinary Singaporeans than in powerful men who are willing to send other human beings to the gallows and get upset when these people do anything they can to stay alive.

Unlike the Second Chances of the past, today's TJC openly addresses Singapore's senseless and cruel war on drugs. We talk about the need for significant policy change, for moves towards harm reduction, decriminalisation, regulation, and perhaps even legalization, done carefully and thoughtfully. We've learnt that it isn't enough just to appeal to public sympathy for individual death row prisoners; if we really want to make a change, we have to tackle the entire system head-on. We also need to recognize that the damage of Singapore's current system extends far beyond death row to the many others whose lives, families, and communities have been damaged by policing, surveillance, detention, imprisonment, and stigma.

No one in the abolitionist movement is naive about our struggle. We're acutely aware of how tough this fight is going to be—unlike encouraging moves away from capital punishment taking place elsewhere (including in neighbouring Malaysia), Singapore's government is stubbornly committed to the death penalty and has been doubling down on its determination to kill. Singaporeans involved in anti-death penalty activism have been subjected to police investigation, doxxing, harassment, and smear campaigns. But surrender is not an option, because so many lives depend on us pushing forward towards abolition. And, as the calendar I mentioned at the beginning of this piece shows, too many lives have been lost already.

不以我的名義：在新加坡反對死刑

韓俐穎

運動者，變革正義公社

摘要

鑒於新加坡政府熱衷於捍衛死刑，倡議廢除死刑在這個城市國家是一件政治敏感的工作，在普遍敵視抵抗和異議的環境中，公民社會的行動面臨許多挑戰。這篇文章取自我從 2010 年以來，作為在新加坡致力於廢除死刑運動的運動者的經歷，見證了死刑從一個微小的、邊緣的議題，發展成為在一個面對許多障礙和挑戰的同時，也引發更多關注的議題。

關鍵字

死刑、新加坡、廢死運動
