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Tangaraju's family calls on President Halimah Yacob to halt his imminent execution

The loved ones of Tangaraju s/o Suppiah, supported by Singaporeans and family members of other prisoners on death row, are calling on President Halimah Yacob to halt his imminent execution. Tangaraju's family are also pleading for the courts to review his conviction and sentence.

"I know that my brother has not done anything wrong, I really urge the court to relook his case from the beginning and we would be very grateful if they were to do so," says his older sister Leelavathy. "The reason we are so distressed is because there are so many things that we wanted to raise in court and he never had that fair hearing. At this point we just don't feel he's had a fair trial."

Activists have highlighted serious problems with the evidence used to convict Tangaraju. He had never touched the drugs, and was convicted on circumstantial evidence. (*See background below for more details.*)

"Every conviction should be based on the standard of 'beyond reasonable doubt,'" says Rocky Howe, member of the Transformative Justice Collective. "In our view, Tangaraju's case just doesn't meet that standard."

"The evidence against Tangaraju is shockingly thin. There is a high risk that this planned execution is unsafe," says Kokila Annamalai, member of the Transformative Justice Collective.

"Tangaraju has spent most of his life behind bars, since he was just a 14 year-old child, for consuming or possessing cannabis, which the world is moving towards legalising. His is a story of a child discarded by our cruel systems. Singapore's drug policy is not only destructive and inhumane, it is also not evidence-based or effective in protecting individuals and communities from the harms of drug use. More than drugs, it is our drug policy that ruins lives in Singapore."



If Tangaraju is hanged on Wednesday (26 April), it will be the first execution in Singapore in about six months. Last year, Singapore hanged 11 men between the end of March and October, all for non-violent drug offences.

“This system doesn’t work at all. The system is very unfair, especially when you’re poor,” says Nazira Lajim Hertslet, sister of Nazeri bin Lajim, who was hanged for drug offences on 22 July 2022. “My brother was hanged at the age of 64. He was an old man and he had a child who lost a father. Why did they hang an old man?”

The execution spree last year attracted both domestic and international attention. The heightened visibility of an issue rarely discussed in public increased the momentum for a growing anti-death penalty movement in Singapore.

In solidarity with Tangaraju and his family, attendees of a solidarity event on 23 April prepared clemency appeals for Tangaraju. The 59 letters were then delivered to the Istana, the official residence and office of the President of Singapore.

“We want assurance that the President will open and read the clemency letters submitted and consider them seriously,” says Tangaraju’s niece Subhashini. Families of death row prisoners are never given reasons for why their clemency appeals are rejected, leaving them wondering how much attention was paid to their pleas.

Tangaraju is currently one of over 50 people on death row in Singapore, the majority of whom were convicted of nonviolent drug offences and come from ethnic minority groups.

“By clinging on to this brutal death penalty regime, Singapore is increasingly out of step with international trends *away* from capital punishment and uncompromising ‘war on drugs’ approaches that have disproportionately affected the most marginalised and minoritised in society,” says Kirsten Han, member of the Transformative Justice Collective.

“It is clear that executions for nonviolent drug offences – such as the ones that Singapore has carried out for decades – are a breach of international law that says capital punishment, if retained, should only be reserved for the ‘most serious crimes.’”



## **BACKGROUND**

Tangaraju s/o Suppiah (use his given name, Tangaraju, on second mention) is a 46-year-old Singaporean. He was convicted and sentenced to death in October 2018 for abetting by conspiracy to traffic 1,017.9g of cannabis.

Tangaraju never touched the cannabis he is accused of attempting to traffic. The case against him is largely circumstantial and based on inferences. He was tied to the offence by two phone numbers found on the mobile phones of two men arrested by the Central Narcotics Bureau, one of which had been used to coordinate the cannabis delivery. However, Tangaraju was already in remand for a separate offence by the time he was linked to this case, and his mobile phones were never recovered for analysis.

Aspects of the investigation also raise serious concerns of due process and fairness. As is standard practice in Singapore, Tangaraju was interrogated by the police without being accompanied by legal counsel. Furthermore, his requests for a Tamil interpreter during the recording of his statement were denied. He said that he had trouble properly understanding the investigating officer's questions, or the recorded statement when it was read back to him. For the trial, witness statements and phone records were also not disclosed to Tangaraju's defence.

Tangaraju's supposed co-conspirator, Mogan Valo, was the one arrested in possession of the cannabis. He pleaded guilty to a non-capital offence of possession for the purposes of trafficking 499.99g of cannabis (just 0.01g below the 500g threshold for the mandatory death penalty for trafficking cannabis). Others involved in the offence were given discharges not amounting to acquittal.

Tangaraju filed an application at the end of 2022 seeking a review of his case. Despite his family's best efforts, they were unable to find a lawyer willing to represent him. Tangaraju was left to self-represent, and his application was dismissed summarily at the beginning of this year.

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