Singapore executes first woman in nearly two decades for drug trafficking

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<https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/27/asia/singapore-female-prisoner-execution-saridewi-djamani-intl-hnk/index.html>

Singapore on Friday hanged a woman convicted of attempting to traffic an ounce of heroin, the first execution of a female prisoner in nearly two decades in what human rights groups decried as a “grim milestone” for the city state and its [notoriously harsh](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/25/asia/singapore-cannabis-execution-tangaraju-suppiah-intl-hnk/index.html) anti-drug laws.

Saridewi Djamani, a 45-year-old Singaporean, was put to death on Friday in Changi Prison, the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) said in a statement issued hours after the hanging took place.

She was sentenced to the mandatory death penalty in 2018 after being convicted of possessing 31 grams of heroin.

“She was accorded full due process under the law and was represented by legal counsel throughout the process,” the CNB said, adding that Singapore’s laws permit the death penalty for trafficking anything above 15 grams of heroin.

Saridewi is the first woman to be hanged in Singapore since hairdresser Yen May Woen, 36, in 2004, also convicted of drug trafficking.

Singapore maintains some of the world’s harshest drug laws and its government remains adamant that capital punishment works to deter drug traffickers and maintain public safety.

Under the law, anyone caught trafficking, importing or exporting certain quantities of illegal drugs like methamphetamine, heroin, cocaine or [cannabis products](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/25/asia/singapore-cannabis-execution-tangaraju-suppiah-intl-hnk/index.html) receives the mandatory death sentence.

Singapore has now hanged 15 people – including foreigners and an intellectually disabled man – since resuming executions for drug convictions last year, in what activists say is an accelerated pace after ending a two-year hiatus due to the pandemic.

“Capital punishment is used only for the most serious crimes, such as the trafficking of significant quantities of drugs which cause very serious harm, not just to individual drug abusers, but also to their families and the wider society,” the CNB said.

**Chorus of criticism**

Saridewi’s hanging triggered renewed outrage from rights groups.

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“The government of Singapore violates human belief in redemption and the capacity for rehabilitation by insisting instead on taking drastic and irreversible action,” said Celia Ouellette, founder of the non-profit group Responsible Business Initiative for Justice.

“Singapore risks not only its international reputation but its financial future as well. It’s time for it to abolish capital punishment once and for all.”

Adilur Rahman Khan, secretary general of France-based NGO International Federation for Human Rights called Saridewi’s execution a “grim milestone” and renewed calls for the Singaporean government to stop executions.

Amnesty International’s death penalty expert Chiara Sangiorgio said the latest execution “defied international safeguards on the use of the death penalty.”

“There is no evidence that the death penalty has a unique deterrent effect or that it has any impact on the use and availability of drugs. As countries around the world do away with the death penalty and embrace drug policy reform, Singapore’s authorities are doing neither,” she said in a [statement](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/07/singapore-stop-two-imminent-and-unlawful-executions-for-drug-trafficking/).

[Figures](https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/21/asia/singapore-executions-death-penalty-drug-trafficking-intl-hnk/index.html) shared by the Ministry of Home Affairs with CNN in 2022 said about 50 people were on death row, the majority of whom were men. The number of women inmates on death row is not known.

Criminal lawyer Joshua Tong said those convicted of drug trafficking were usually men, but he had seen “his fair share” of women drug offenders.

On the issue of drug crimes, Tong said there was generally “no distinction between men and women for criminal punishments.”

“The only distinction made would be on whether caning is to be imposed,” he added, noting that Singaporean law only permits the caning of men.

**Capital punishment for cannabis**

Saridewi’s death was the second execution carried out in Singapore this week.

On Wednesday [Mohd Aziz bin Hussain](https://www.cnb.gov.sg/NewsAndEvents/News/Index/statement-in-response-to-media-queries-26Jul2023), 57, was put to death for trafficking around 50 grams (1.7 ounces) of heroin.

The execution of another Singaporean, a delivery driver, is scheduled for next Wednesday, activist Kirsten Han from the local anti-death penalty group Transformative Justice Collective (TJC) said.

“TJC condemns, in the strongest terms, the state’s bloodthirsty streak. We demand an immediate moratorium on the use of the death penalty,” the group wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter.

A [growing tally](https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/21/asia/singapore-executions-death-penalty-drug-trafficking-intl-hnk/index.html) of inmates are being sent to the gallows but a complete list of death row inmates are not made public, rights groups say, making Singapore’s drug trafficking enforcement extremely opaque.

In May, a Singaporean man named Tangaraju Suppiah was executed after he was convicted of trying to traffic around 2.2 pounds of [cannabis](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/25/asia/singapore-cannabis-execution-tangaraju-suppiah-intl-hnk/index.html), an execution that sparked particularly loud international criticism, partly because a growing number of jurisdictions around the world have either legalized or decriminalized the drug.

Last year, the hanging of 34-year-old Malaysian [Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingam](https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/27/asia/singapore-nagaenthran-dharmalingam-execution-intl-hnk/index.html" \t "_blank) sparked international outcry following psychologists’ assessment he was intellectually disabled.

The case put Singapore’s zero-tolerance drug laws back under scrutiny, with rights advocates arguing the mandatory death penalty for drug trafficking is an inhumane punishment.

The death penalty has done little to curtail the illegal drug trade across the region, activists say.

The illegal drug trade in Asia surged to “[extreme levels](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/02/asia/unodc-asia-drug-report-2023-intl-hnk/index.html),” according to report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in June. The report said crime groups were establishing new trafficking routes to evade enforcement crackdowns and methamphetamine prices had hit fresh lows.

It said meth seizures in East and Southeast Asia, which spiked to record highs during the pandemic as cartels switched to bigger and riskier bulk shipments, returned to pre-Covid numbers last year.