

## Singapore to reconsider death penalty

By Jeremy Grant in Singapore

Singapore has proposed relaxing its mandatory death penalty for drugs trafficking and some murder cases in the first sign that the city-state is backing off the application of tough laws in place for decades.

The move, immediately welcomed by human rights groups, comes as Singapore's ruling party is showing signs it is becoming more responsive to public opinion after a poor showing in a general election last year.

Blogs have helped raise the profile of key defendants in recent drugs trafficking cases, notably that of Yong Vui Kong, a Malaysian teenager sentenced in 2006 under Singapore's Misuse of Drugs Act, and now on death row.

In place since 1975, the law requires the death penalty for anyone caught possessing more than 15g of heroin. Visitors to Singapore are warned in red ink on landing cards that the city state requires the death penalty for drug trafficking.

Teo Chee Hean, deputy prime minister, told parliament the death penalty would no longer be mandatory and instead would be imposed at the discretion of the court in cases where the trafficker was found to "have only played the role of courier".

Discretion would only apply if the defendant also had a mental disability.

Mr Teo defended Singapore's use of the death penalty due to "the seriousness of the drug situation, and large financial rewards which traffickers hope to reap if they are not caught".

He said the approach had been effective in reducing the drug problem in Singapore "at a time when other south-east Asian countries have seen their drug problems worsen significantly"

"However, our society's norms and expectations are changing. While there is a broad acceptance that we should be tough on drugs and crime, there is also increased expectation that where appropriate, more sentencing discretion should be vested in the courts," Mr Teo said.

The ruling People's Action party has repeatedly acknowledged since its worst poll result last year that it needs to be more responsive to the country's 5.1m citizens.

Draft legislation outlining the proposed changes to the drug trafficking law will be revealed this year.

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Louise Vischer, co-ordinator of the Anti-Death Penalty Project Asia-Pacific at Amnesty International, said the move would be “a major step forward” if finalised.

Singapore executed four people last year, most on drugs offences, compared with eight in 2008. Execution is by hanging.

Eugene Tan, assistant law professor at Singapore Management University, said recent high-profile cases involving the mandatory death sentence had “revealed changing social mores towards the death penalty regime”.

But he cautioned that the proposed changes were “a calibrated refinement”.  
“I certainly hope that defence lawyers don’t get too excited because the tough stance on drug trafficking still remains,” he said.