



5 October 2017

Issue no.3

ACT 50/7111/2017



Hideko and Iwao Hakamada at their home in Japan. ©Amnesty International Japan

Campaigning around emblematic cases has been one of drivers for change in the Asia-Pacific region. The temporary release, pending retrial, of iconic prisoner [Iwao Hakamada](#) – who spent more than 45 years on death row – in March 2014 bears testament to the relentless efforts of his sister Hideko and supporters in Japan and around the world. His release put the spotlight on the adverse impact of secrecy on the mental health of those under sentence of death in Japan, as well as the urgent need to improve safeguards in criminal investigations.

Just two months after his release, the Chinese Supreme People's Court overturned the death sentence imposed on [Li Yan](#), who had been convicted of killing her husband after suffering months of domestic abuse. Her case drew widespread attention, as prior to the murder she had contacted the authorities on several occasions to seek protection, but no action was taken. Following the overturning of her death sentence, in March 2015 the authorities issued new guidelines on sentencing for cases involving victims of domestic violence who commit crimes against their abuser.

Among other emblematic cases is that of [Yong Vui Kong](#), a young Malaysian national who was convicted and sentenced to the mandatory death penalty in Singapore for trafficking a small amount of heroin – while his Singaporean boss had the charges against him dropped. Legislative amendments were later introduced to allow judges sentencing discretion under limited circumstances.

Campaigning against the death penalty has also been effective to prevent setbacks in the region, including recently in the [Philippines](#) (see below) and against the resumption of executions in [Maldives](#) after more than 60 years.

TAKE ACTION The Maldivian President has announced that the government will resume executions in the country. Help us ask him to maintain the country's positive death penalty record: [Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.https://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/urgent-stop-executions-maldives](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/urgent-stop-executions-maldives)

ABOLITIONIST REFLECTIONS

On 11 December 1977 Amnesty International and participants of the International Conference on the Abolition of the Death Penalty issued the [Stockholm Declaration](#) – the first international abolitionist manifesto – which called on all governments to bring about the immediate and total abolition of the death penalty.

At the time, only 16 countries had abolished the death penalty. Forty years on, that figure stands at 105. Let's not make it another 40 years before the death penalty is consigned to history.

ASIA-PACIFIC

In 1977, every country in the Asia-Pacific region retained the death penalty, although Australia, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, Maldives, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea had long stopped carrying out executions. Sri Lanka performed its last shortly afterwards, in 1978.

The regional picture is quite different now. The Pacific is nearly a death penalty-free zone, with Nauru and Fiji the latest states to abolish the punishment. Papua New Guinea and Tonga still retain the death penalty in their laws, but only Papua New Guinea has been imposing death sentences. Outside the Pacific, eight states have completely abolished the death penalty, while a further eight are abolitionist in practice. Meanwhile, Thailand is set to mark ten years without executions in 2019.

That said, Asia-Pacific still hosts almost half of the countries in which Amnesty International reported executions in 2016 – including China, believed to execute and sentence to death thousands of people each year. But even in these countries, recent decades have seen a significant reduction in resort to the death penalty. Occasional, semi-official disclosures reported in Chinese state media, for example, point to a drastic drop in the number of yearly executions over the past ten years, apparently going from above 10,000 to a “four-digit number”. Executions in Singapore have dropped from a peak of 70 per year in the mid-1990s to a handful. While it is difficult to determine the reasons for the decrease in executions in the region, international pressure and the progressive change in the public discourse on the death penalty – shifting its perception from that of a criminal justice issue to one centred in the human rights framework – are likely to be critical factors behind these developments.

Recent years have also seen negative setbacks, with governments resuming executions under the pretext of tackling crime and terrorism, despite the lack of evidence for the effectiveness of this. In 2012 India resumed executions for terrorism-related acts in 2012 after a hiatus of eight years, while a year later Indonesia did so for drug-related offences, after four years. Pakistan lifted a six-year long moratorium on executions of civilians in the wake of an attack on a school in December 2014.

Where it is still used, the death penalty in the region is often associated with concerns on unfair trials and convictions based on coerced statements, as well as other violations of international safeguards. The authorities of several countries in the region do not make publicly available information on their resort to this punishment, preventing informed debates on its retention and actively conceal information on executions, before or after these are carried out.

But as more and more unsound convictions get thrown out by the courts and people are exonerated from death row – including last year in Bangladesh, China, Taiwan and Viet Nam – a new awareness of the flaws of the death penalty gains ground, as does the inevitability of its consignment to the history books.

IN FOCUS – CAMPAIGNING AGAINST THE DEATH PENALTY IN THE PHILIPPINES

Wilnor Papa is Amnesty International Philippines' Human Rights Officer. He started working against the death penalty as a member of the Amnesty International University of the Philippines-Diliman Group in 1995. He later joined the section where he has been coordinating campaigning on several issues, including the abolition of the death penalty. We talk to Wilnor about the section's campaigning against draft legislation that would bring back this punishment in the Philippines.

Just under a year ago it looked as though the death penalty was going to be reintroduced in the Philippines. But the Senate is now not prioritizing the consideration of bills on this issue. How did we get to this point?

The Duterte administration promised to bring back the death penalty by October 2016, a promise that received a resounding applause in the gallery during the President's inaugural speech at Congress. While the House of Representatives adopted proposed measures to bring back capital punishment in March 2017, local and international efforts to block them were not in vain.



First of all, our push back prompted an elevated debate on the death penalty in the country, making it harder for this government to easily get what it wants. The coordinated efforts –from civil society as well as key actors in the Philippines and abroad, such as the Catholic Church –undoubtedly bought us some critical time, particularly at the end of last year, before the bills were considered. This in turn gave us the necessary leeway to prepare better arguments regarding the effects of the death penalty, including on the economy and political status of the Philippines in the world stage. We at Amnesty International – through the coordinated efforts between the Philippine Section, the International Secretariat and other Sections and structures from all over the world– were therefore able to implement better advocacy strategies, getting real time information, conveying better messaging to targeted legislators and mobilizing apt and effective actions.

While the proposal to reintroduce the death penalty was adopted with overwhelming support at the House of Representatives, it had a less than a lukewarm reception at the Philippine Senate. Direct engagement through face to face meetings; letters and emails to key Senators supporting their efforts to oppose the death penalty, or counter their position on their support to the death penalty, have all proven effective to ensure that this legislative branch take its time. Which is a good result, all considered. Some Senators have also implored us to tell Amnesty International members and supporters from all over the world to stop sending letters to their offices, as they have already decided that they will vote against the death penalty!

You have been involved in a major anti-death penalty campaign in the Philippines already in 2006, when it was last abolished. Have the arguments changed much, in your experience? What was the context when the current President first mentioned reintroducing the death penalty in the Philippines?

While arguments *against* capital punishment have been fine-tuned over the past decade – statistical proof based on decades-long research on its non- deterrent effect, and the growing list of international instruments deeming the death penalty as obsolete, just to name a few – the arguments *for its return* used in the halls of Congress and the public realm did not really evolve. Public support on the death penalty has remained the same over the past years, even during its abolition in 2006, relying heavily on equating aspects of retribution to attaining justice. These mainly appeal to the public's outrage against the perpetrators of so-called “heinous” crimes, with special focus on those committed by people who were supposedly under the influence of prohibited drugs.

In the run-up to its abolition in 2006, the anti-death penalty forces were more organized and vocal wherever and whenever the death penalty was being tackled, be it in the media, in street mobilizations or in academia. Although the same can be said about the situation today, what is different this time is the Duterte administration's well-resourced propaganda machine within the halls of Congress, the media, social media and their activities in the communities. While the death penalty was re-introduced in the time of President Ramos, utilized in the time of President Estrada and during the first years of President Arroyo, none of these previous administrations really actively promoted executions in the public as a main means or recourse to providing justice.

How is it to work for human rights in the Philippines at the moment? Are you and other human rights defenders concerned?

The current environment in the Philippines is quite difficult indeed. The wave of unlawful killings, as a result of the government's lethal anti-drugs policies may now have reached more than 12,000, a little more than a year after Duterte was voted into the presidency. These killing are not only unprecedented, but have also taken a heavy toll on our human rights work as well as on the Philippine psyche overall. The support that the public continue to give to the President has enabled the state to continue the killings unabated and without accountability.

The President, on different occasions, vowed that those who oppose his drug war, particularly human rights defenders, will be either harvested together with the criminals, beheaded or charged with conspiracy. While there is no reported case of an activist or defender being victimized as of late, nevertheless such threats may embolden state agents or his supporters to make good with his promise, as they have done with targeting alleged drug offenders.

Any final thoughts you want to share with Amnesty International activists?

Please continue on campaigning to block the passage of the death penalty in the Philippines and for the government to do all steps necessary to stop the extra-judicial executions in the country. Although it seems bleak at times, we must not let the current situation dishearten us and need instead to work harder to ensure that human rights, now under attack in various parts of the world, is recognized, respected, protected and fulfilled in the country. There is no other way. There is no other recourse.