

An act of barbarism

Nguyen Tuong Van executed in Singapore

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Nguyen Tuong Van, a 25-year-old Australian, was executed in Singapore's Changi Prison at 6 a.m. yesterday morning, local time. The state murder stands as an indictment not just of the dictatorial Singaporean regime, but of the entire Australian political establishment as well. The Howard government and the Labor Party opposition closed ranks in the weeks leading up to the hanging to ensure that the outrage of ordinary people did not undermine Canberra's tacit agreement with the killing. Above all else, no harm was to be done to any aspect of Australia's commercial and political ties with Singapore.

In the aftermath of Nguyen's killing, various politicians have issued sickeningly hypocritical statements of sympathy for the man's family and friends, and wept crocodile tears over Singapore's enforcement of the death penalty.

The calculated and cynical position of both the government and the Labor Party has sharply contrasted with the genuine revulsion and anger felt by millions of ordinary Australians—and Singaporeans—over Nguyen's state-sanctioned murder. Thousands of people participated in protests and vigils to mark his death.

Nguyen had been sentenced to die by hanging after his conviction on charges of transporting 396 grams of heroin through Singapore airport in December 2002, en route from Cambodia to Australia. The young man was desperate to raise money for his twin brother, Khoa, who was in serious financial trouble, pending criminal charges, over drug problems. For this tragic mistake, Nguyen, the son of a Vietnamese refugee who had never had any previous trouble with the law, paid with his life.

Nguyen's killing was an act of unmitigated barbarism. Every aspect of his treatment—by the Singaporean government, Australian politicians, and the media—reeks of hypocrisy, cynicism, and cruelty.

On Thursday, Nguyen was weighed and measured by the Singaporean prison authorities, in order to gauge the length of rope required for a "successful" hanging. This calculation relied on the "Official Table of Drops", first published by the British Home Office in 1913. After being granted independence, Singapore maintained a series of repressive laws previously enforced by the British colonial authorities, including capital punishment. The island-state also retained the British Empire's macabre preparations for death by hanging.

If the hangman's rope is too long, the victim's falling body weight can result in death by decapitation. If too short, death by strangulation can take as long as 45 minutes. When the rope is

correctly measured, the victim loses consciousness when his or her neck is broken in the fall. Brain death then takes about six minutes, while full body death takes a further ten minutes. According to the US-based Death Penalty Information Center: "If the inmate has strong neck muscles ... or the noose has been wrongly positioned, the fracture-dislocation is not rapid and death results from slow asphyxiation. If this occurs the face becomes engorged, the tongue protrudes, the eyes pop, the body defecates, and violent movements of the limbs occur."

Underscoring the inhumanity of Nguyen's hanging, Singaporean authorities rejected a plea by the young man's mother that she be allowed a final embrace with her son. The government conceded what it termed "limited physical contact ... agreed on an exceptional basis"; Nguyen was only permitted to hold hands with his mother and brother through a metal grille.

Shortly after Nguyen was hanged, John Howard attended the Prime Minister's XI cricket match in Canberra. The callous display was indicative of his government's desertion of the convicted man.

From the very beginning of the case, the prime minister stressed that Australia's relationship with Singapore was the overriding priority. While the Howard government went through the motions of issuing appeals for clemency, no effort was made to place any real pressure on the Singaporean government.

On not a single occasion did the government issue a formal protest against the application of the death penalty in any diplomatic forum or court. As late as last month, Nguyen's case was ignored in favour of more amenable economic and geo-strategic matters in discussions with Singapore at both the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) meetings. The government also dismissed calls for it to challenge Singapore's mandatory death penalty in the International Court of Justice.

The Labor Party fully endorsed the Howard government's complicity in Nguyen's execution. "I'd like to pay tribute to the efforts of the Australian government, to both the prime minister and the foreign minister, for the work that they have done," Kevin Rudd, shadow minister for foreign affairs, declared on Wednesday. "I know for a fact that the foreign minister feels very deeply about this, and he has been working on this for a very long time. Regrettably he, like the rest of us, have failed in our efforts."

Opposition leader Kim Beazley similarly backed the government's efforts, and endorsed its position that Singapore

should not face any diplomatic or economic repercussions for its killing of Nguyen. “I’m not one of those who goes around advocating punitive actions and that sort of thing,” he stated. “I don’t think that’s appropriate here.”

The Howard government rejected a call by church groups and others opposed to the death penalty to mark one minute’s silence at the moment of Nguyen’s execution. Labor politicians quickly backed this position. Victorian state premier Steve Bracks told reporters that he would go about his business as normal when the hanging took place in Singapore.

“Van Nguyen is not Florence Nightingale,” South Australian Labor premier Mike Rann added on November 30. “Van Nguyen is one of a number of people who want to peddle death to our young people and make money out of it, and it doesn’t come much lower than that. I mean, drug dealers in my view are murderers, therefore should get life sentences for their actions.”

The prime minister similarly sought to defuse public sympathy for Nguyen by repeatedly referring to him as a drug trafficker in the weeks before his death. Yesterday morning, shortly after Nguyen’s execution, Howard gave a radio interview and was asked if he thought the killing had achieved anything. “I don’t believe in capital punishment,” the prime minister replied. “He was a convicted drug trafficker and that is to be wholly condemned. I hope the strongest message that comes out of this, above everything else, is a message to the young of Australia—don’t have anything to do with drugs... I think that is the most important message that should come out of this traumatic and tragic event, over and above anything else, if there’s to be a message...[O]ut of this event, we must interpret the message in the right way. I hope the anti-drugs message is stronger, or as least as strong as the anti-capital punishment measure.”

Rather than seizing upon Nguyen’s case to press for the abolition of capital punishment in Singapore and other countries, Howard’s “anti-drugs” message amounts to a thinly-veiled assertion that Nguyen, and any other young person forced to act as a drug “mule”, deserves whatever punishment is meted out.

But, as Nguyen’s case has tragically demonstrated, it is precisely those desperate individuals who play the most minor role in the illicit drug trade who typically are caught and punished. The major international suppliers—generally working in league with powerful political, business, and police figures—are virtually never prosecuted.

Moreover, the Howard government’s anti-drug rhetoric is consciously aimed at excluding any examination of the social and economic factors involved in the demand for drugs. This holds not just for addicts whose lives are destroyed, but also for those like Nguyen, whose desperation and poverty lead them to act as couriers—taking life-threatening risks for minimal financial gain. While the government and the media—especially the Murdoch press—have attempted to vilify Nguyen as an evil drug trafficker, the reality is that the young man was as much a victim of the drug industry as are the countless addicts in Australia and around the world.

Reports from his lawyers, friends and family over the past weeks indicate that Nguyen faced his execution with considerable courage and dignity, and that he was both humbled and

strengthened by messages of support from people around the world. The thousands of people who attended vigils for him in cities across Australia carried flowers and photographs of the young man, and bells were rung 25 times, representing each year of his life. In Singapore, members of the newly formed Anti-Death Penalty Committee courageously defied their government by gathering in protest outside Changi Prison.

In Nguyen’s home city of Melbourne, hundreds of people attended a service in St Ignatius Church in Richmond. Brenda Kovacevic, who did not know Nguyen or his family, was one of the mourners. “As a mother and a daughter and a sister and a friend and a human being, I just feel like I can’t believe that something like this can still occur in such a modern age, that we can’t come up with some better solutions to these sort of problems,” she told the *Age*.

Many high school and university students, retirees, workers, and professionals marked a minute’s silence, while office workers stopped to remember Nguyen at inner-city vigils. People typically expressed feelings of deep disgust and anger over the execution.

“I’m just moved for his mother,” one woman told the *Sydney Morning Herald* through tears. “I can’t imagine the pain, the devastation. Not having been able to hug him for the last time... I wish they would go after the big fish of the drug trade, instead of these poor desperate young people.”

Hundreds of lawyers in Melbourne also gathered outside the city’s county court yesterday morning. Robert Richter, prominent Victorian QC, told the media that the Howard government could have done much more to help Nguyen. “I believe a lot more could have been done both legally and otherwise, by that I mean politically,” he declared. “We know that the Singaporean government is susceptible to pressure; it has not been pressured at all... Van Nguyen is beyond whatever suffering he has gone through. We live with the legacy of the most horrible, brutal and obscene killing which takes the name of law, but which will never bear the name of justice.”

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer responded to Richter’s statement by calling the lawyer a “creep”.



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