

**Karpal, The Tiger of Jelutong, on frontlines of Malaysia's Death Row**  
**Malaysian Insider**  
**Aug 20 , 2013**  
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One of the issues that divides many nations is whether a society has the right to take the life of a person as punishment for a crime.

Even those who may largely agree on the death penalty can still be split on how that life should be severed. Is hanging too barbaric? What about stoning? Is there even such a thing as a civilised way to kill someone?

So it's no surprise that The Tiger of Jelutong - otherwise known as DAP chairman Karpal Singh (pic) - has devoted a part of his new 325-page biography, due to be released next month, to a frontline account of what Death Row is like in Malaysia.

The book is actually about his own life but a large part of his 40-year career as a lawyer has been his political battles against the death penalty and his equally vigorous legal battles to tear up that dreaded ticket to Death Row for his clients.

He still has "nightmares of screaming mothers when the final goodbye takes place", Karpal says in the book.

Malaysia has at least 860 prisoners on Death Row, says Amnesty International in its 2013 annual report, quoting the Prisons Department. The government has not disclosed how many were executed last year.

As an observer at the frontline, to Karpal, the oddity is that it can be the prisoners who in their last moments take on the role of counsellor and consoler to family and friends.

The family of the condemned is always allowed one last visit. Karpal is often there at the family's request - as was the case of Australian Kevin Barlow, one of the two first westerners to be hanged in Malaysia for drug trafficking.

Often the families are hoping Karpal can pull off a miraculous eleventh-hour reprieve. It hasn't happened yet. At this last visit, the family tries to console the prisoner. But it can also be the prisoner who tries their best to console the family - all through a glass or metal grilled barrier.

Karpal told of how one condemned man lit a cigarette for his father. The son's hand was shaking uncontrollably.

The lawyer said the worst part of these final visits is when the prison guards announce to the visitors that it is time to leave.

"I do not offer my clients any advice on the intensely personal subject of how they should face their inevitable deaths," Karpal said.

He added that the condemned only came to terms with their mortality when they were introduced to the hangman, whose first duty is to record the weight and height of the prisoner.

Journalist Tim Donoghue who wrote "Karpal Singh - Tiger of Jelutong", also interviewed hangman Yusof Bakar for his perspective.

The hangman has a workaday view of the whole thing. If there is soul-searching or doubts, it does not come through in the narrative.

Yusof said he wanted the prisoners as calm and cooperative as possible when he arrived at their cell door early in the morning.

He told the author that anyway most of the men he hanged asked him to go about his work as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

In Yusof's experience, the men and women to be hanged at dawn did not sleep during the final night of their lives.

The hangman and his assistant always arrive outside the prisoner's cell five minutes before the scheduled time of execution.

The prisoner's hands are handcuffed behind his back and a loose-fitting hood is placed over his head. In an ideal world, the prisoner cooperates by walking calmly to the large single trapdoor capable of dropping three people at the same time.

Once the prisoner is positioned on the trap door, it is the hangman's job to pull the noose tight under the prisoner's left jawbone. When the trapdoor opens, the end comes, not always that neatly. - August 19, 2013.

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