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Politics

Singaporeans decry judge's move to spare NUS student Terence Siow from jail for molest charge

The judge put Terence Siow, 23, on probation for 21 months, saying his academic results and other factors suggested he had strong 'propensity to reform'

But prosecutors appealed and even Law Minister K. Shanmugam weighed in after thousands signed a petition protesting 'favourable sentences for educated sex offenders'

Topic | Singapore**Dewey Sim**

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A Singapore judge's decision to sentence a university student who molested a woman to probation instead of jail has sparked outrage, with prosecutors on Friday appealing and the law minister endorsing their move.

Terence Siow, 23, who attends the National University of Singapore (NUS), was convicted on one count of outraging the modesty of the woman by following her after she got off a subway train and using his finger to touch the part of her shorts covering her buttocks.

On Wednesday he was given a 21-month probation order by District Court judge Jasvender Kaur, who found Siow had not been able to control his urge but that the molestation was "minor".

[Singapore student calls for tougher action after NUS peeping Tom incident](#)

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Siow's academic results showed he had the "potential to excel in life", the judge said, adding that this and other factors left her in "no doubt that there is extremely strong propensity to reform".

But after an uproar on social media and thousands signing an online petition in protest against “favourable sentences for educated sex offenders”, Minister for Law K. Shanmugam took to Facebook to say he agreed with the Attorney General’s Chambers plan to lodge an appeal at the High Court.

“This is consistent with my views as well,” he said, adding that he was “surprised” at the verdict, and the woman’s father had written to him.



Minister for Law K. Shanmugam said he agreed with the Attorney General’s Chambers plan to lodge an appeal at the High Court. Photo: AFP

The victim, whose name was withheld in court proceedings to protect her identity, has revealed on Facebook that her name is Karmen Siow. She wrote after Siow’s sentencing that she was “disappointed” with the verdict.

Siow “ran his finger along my genital area”, she wrote.

[Thitima Noraphanpiphat death: Thai models at ‘high risk from sexual predators’](#)

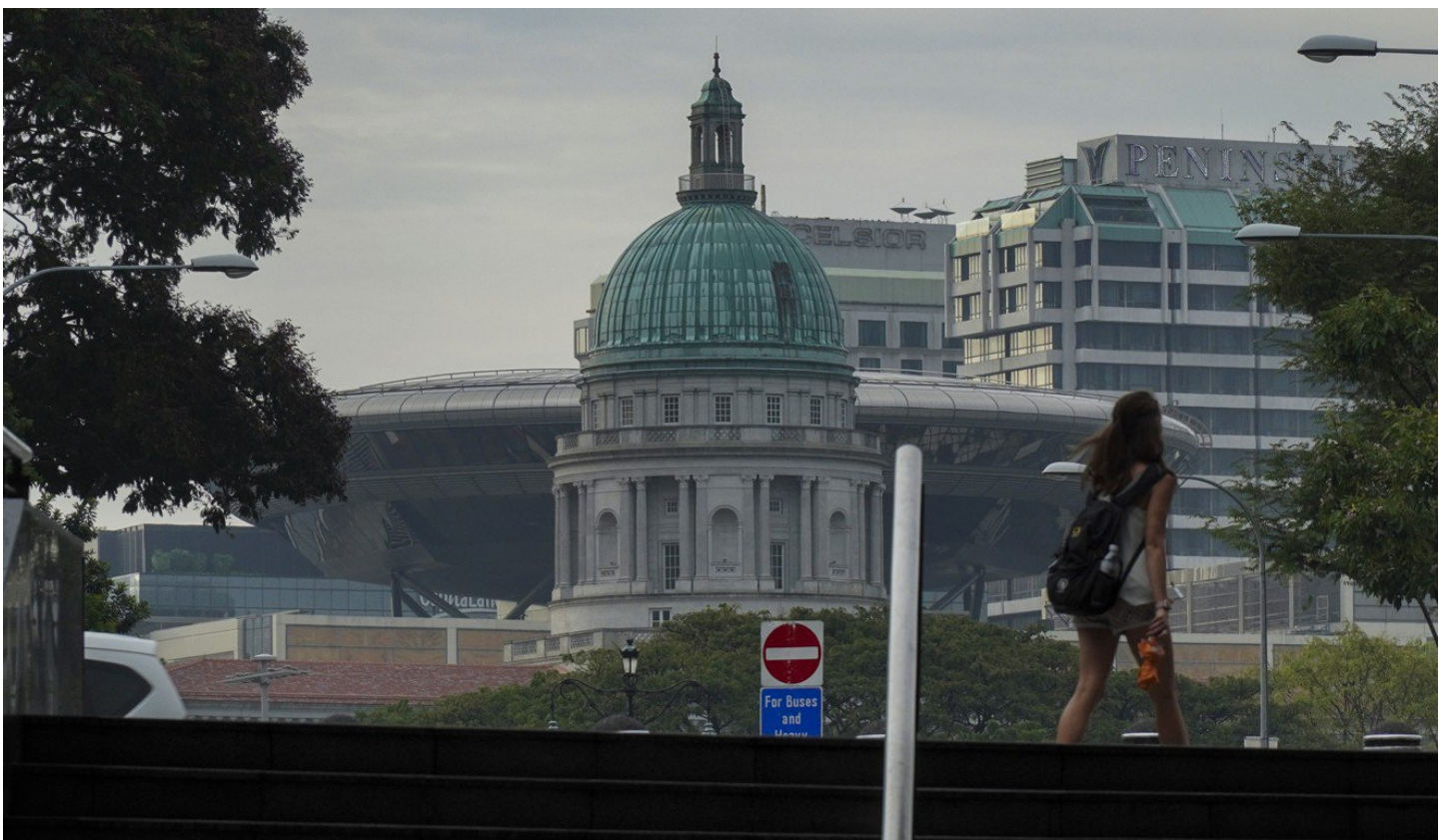
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Siew added that she had been offered S\$5,000 (US\$3,620) to compound the case for a lighter sentence.

“I refused to do so and this is the resulting sentence ... He literally got a ‘get out of jail free card’ because of his academic performance,” she wrote, before adding in the next line “Brock Turner”.

She was referring to how a California judge in 2015 gave Turner, a Stanford University swimmer convicted of sexual assault, a jail sentence of six months instead of 14 years, sparking outrage and leading to him being recalled from the bench. The woman who was assaulted, Chanel Miller, recently released a memoir.

Siew also pointed to how Siow had “committed multiple sexual offences (not only on me but on others) as a child”, a fact the deputy public prosecutor in the case, Benedict Chan, had highlighted.



The Supreme Court of Singapore, which consists of the Court of Appeal and the High Court, where the appeal will be heard. Photo: Roy Issa

A probation order in Singapore could require the offender to perform community or other activities to demonstrate good conduct. Chan had objected to the probation order and urged the court to jail Siow for six weeks, noting that he had admitted to committing similar acts since he enrolled at the university in 2016.

Chan said it was troubling that Siow was not able to recall the number of times he had committed such acts, according to local media reports.

[Malaysian woman in University of Hong Kong sex harassment case speaks up](#)

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Chooi Jing Yen, a partner at law firm Eugene Thuraisingam in Singapore, said the country's Probation of Offenders Act gave the sentencing judge the "discretion to impose probation if she thinks it [is] expedient to do so".

The overarching consideration was whether the offender had potential for rehabilitation, he

said, adding that the older the perpetrator, the harder it would be to be granted probation.

Siow was 22 at the time of the offence.

Chooi said Singapore's sentencing regime placed emphasis on the principle of rehabilitation, and how young offenders could still be turned away from a life of crime and not "become hardened" by spending time in prison with other offenders.



Chanel Miller (pictured) was assaulted by Stanford University swimmer Brock Turner. Photo: AP

“This of course must be balanced against the other three principles of deterrence and retribution. When the public imagination is seized by a particular case, the arguments usually engage the retributive principle,” Chooi said.

“But when the courts order probation, they are really engaging the question of whether

some good can still be made out of the situation.”

Wilbur Lim, managing director of WMH Law Corporation, said young offenders were among the individuals who could be “most receptive” to rehabilitation.

“For some cases deterrence may be a better option. However, the possibility of change for certain cases is undeniable and should be embraced if an individual is found to be suitable for rehabilitation,” he said.

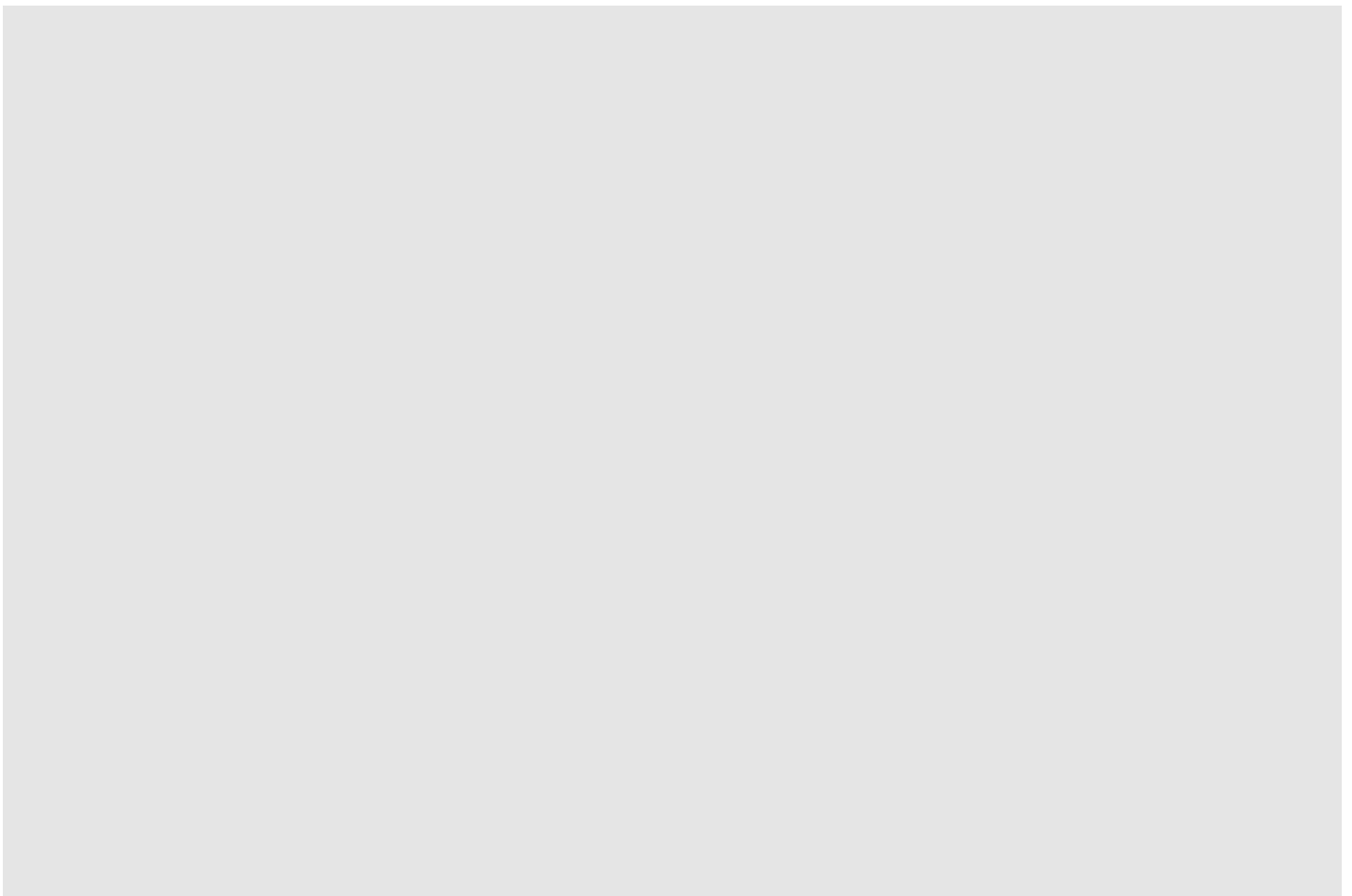
[NUS forced to overhaul handling of sexual harassment cases after backlash](#)

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The public reaction to Siow's case mirrors sentiment expressed earlier this year when NUS undergraduate Monica Baey revealed that a fellow student who filmed her in her hostel shower had been suspended from the university and given a 12-month conditional warning.

She called for a tougher punishment and the resulting public backlash led to the education minister saying that the university's penalty was "manifestly inadequate".

One person who signed the petition against Siow's sentence said: "I am a victim of outrage of modesty ... This case's verdict just pissed me off on so many levels."



The reaction to Siow's case mirrors sentiment expressed when NUS undergraduate Monica Baey (pictured) revealed that a student had filmed her in a shower. Photo: James Wilkinson

She added that the judge's decision was "unsound".

Shanmugam, who is also home affairs minister, said in his post on Friday that despite feeling strongly about the case, people should "avoid casting aspersions personally on judges – they are doing their duty, to the best of their abilities".

Among other cases Kaur has heard is that of teenage blogger Amos Yee in 2015, who was convicted of insulting Christians in a YouTube video and circulating an obscene image. The judge sentenced him to three weeks' jail, saying his offences "were not serious in nature but not trivial either".

Yee had posted an expletive-laden video after the death of Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew, comparing him with Jesus. He also posted an obscene drawing of Lee and former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

Yee was granted asylum in the United States in 2017, and according to media reports, has been making pro-paedophilia videos.

Source URL: <https://scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3030712/singaporeans-decry-judges-decision-spare-nus-student-jail-term>

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This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as: Outrage at judge's decision to spare student sex offender jail