

2009 International Religious Freedom Report: Singapore

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BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR
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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, other laws and policies restricted this right in some circumstances.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period. The Government does not tolerate speech or actions that it deems could adversely affect racial or religious harmony.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of the U.S. Government's overall policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 270 square miles and a population of 4.8 million, of whom 3.6 million are citizens or permanent residents. According to the last decennial census taken in 2000, 85 percent of citizens and permanent residents profess a religion. Approximately 42.5 percent of the population is Buddhist, 15 percent Muslim, 15 percent Christian, 8.5 percent Taoist, and 4 percent Hindu. Adherents of other religious groups, including small Sikh, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Jain communities, comprise less than one percent of the population. The remainder of the population, approximately 15 percent, does not profess a religion.

Approximately 74.7 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, 13.6 percent ethnic Malay, and 8.9 percent ethnic Indian. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim. Among ethnic Indians, 55 percent are Hindu, 25 percent are Muslim, and 12 percent are Christian. The ethnic Chinese population includes mainly Buddhists (54 percent), Taoists (11 percent), and Christians (16.5 percent). There are no current membership estimates for the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Unification Church, the two religious groups that the Government has declined to recognize.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Although the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, other laws and policies restricted this right in some circumstances. The Constitution states that every person has a constitutional right to profess, practice, or propagate his or her religious belief so long as such activities do not breach any other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality. There is no state religion.

Religious groups, like all associations of 10 or more persons, must be registered under the Societies Act. Registered societies are subject to potential deregistration by the Government on a variety of

grounds, such as having purposes prejudicial to public peace, welfare, or good order. The Government deregistered the country's congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1972 and the Unification Church in 1982, making them unlawful societies. Such a designation makes it impossible to maintain a legal identity as a religious group, with consequences relating to owning property, conducting financial transactions, and holding public meetings.

The Government plays an active but limited role in religious affairs. For example, the Government seeks to ensure that citizens, most of whom live in government-built housing, have ready access to religious organizations traditionally associated with their ethnic groups by helping such institutions find space in these housing complexes. The Government maintains a semiofficial relationship with the Muslim community through the Majlis Ulama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, MUIS), which comprises Muslims appointed by the President to serve three-year terms. The MUIS advises the Government on concerns of the Muslim community, drafts the approved weekly sermon used in mosques throughout the country, regulates some Islamic religious matters, and oversees a mosque-building fund financed by voluntary payroll deductions. The Constitution states that Malay Muslims are "the indigenous people of Singapore" and requires the Government to protect and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social, cultural, and linguistic interests.

The Administration of Muslim Law Act provides Muslims with the option to have their family affairs governed by Muslim law, "as varied where applicable by Malay custom." Under the Act, a Shari'a Court has non-exclusive jurisdiction over the marital affairs of Muslims, including maintenance payments, the disposition of property upon divorce, and custody of minor children. Orders of the Shari'a Court are enforced by the ordinary civil courts. Appeals within the Shari'a system are made to an Appeal Board composed of three members of the MUIS, drawn by the President of the MUIS from a panel of seven nominated every two years by the President of Singapore. The ruling of the Appeal Board is final and may not be appealed or called into question in any other court.

The Administration of Muslim Law Act allows Muslim men to practice polygamy, but requests to take additional wives may be refused in accordance with Muslim law by the Registry of Muslim Marriages, which solicits the views of existing wives and reviews the financial capability of the husband. In the reporting period there were 43 applications for polygamous marriage, 11 of which were approved. The remainder were rejected, were withdrawn, or remained pending at the end of the reporting period. Under the Act, certain criminal offenses apply only to those who profess Islam, including cohabitation outside of marriage and publicly expounding any doctrine relating to the Muslim religion in a manner contrary to Muslim law.

The Presidential Council for Minority Rights examines all legislation to ensure that it does not disadvantage particular racial or religious communities. The Council for Minority Rights also considers and reports on matters concerning any racial or religious community that are referred to it by Parliament or the Government.

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act establishes a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. The President of Singapore appoints its members on the advice of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights. Two-thirds of the members are required to be representatives of the major religions in Singapore. The Council for Religious Harmony considers and reports on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore that are referred to it by the Minister for Home Affairs or by Parliament.

Encouragement of religious harmony and toleration is part of the official primary and secondary public school curricula. The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools. Religious instruction is allowed in private schools, such as madrassahs (Islamic schools). During the reporting period, there were 11 private religious schools offering primary and secondary education, nine of which were madrassahs and two of which were affiliated with Christian churches. All private school students must meet or exceed the public school performance standard on annual achievement exams.

The Government observes Hari Raya Haji and Hari Raya Puasa (Islamic), Good Friday and Christmas (Christian), Deepavali (Hindu), and Vesak Day (Buddhist) as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period. By application of the Societies Act, the Government restricts certain religious groups, such as the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses. Section 24(1)(a) of the Act allows the Government to deregister any society if it is deemed to have "purposes prejudicial to public peace, welfare or good order in Singapore." Deregistration makes a religious group an "unlawful society." Anyone who acts as a member of or attends a meeting of an unlawful society may be punished with a fine, imprisonment, or both. No charges were brought against persons attending or holding religious meetings in private homes during the reporting period.

Missionaries, with the exception of members of Jehovah's Witnesses and representatives of the Unification Church, are permitted to work and to publish and distribute religious texts; however, while the Government does not formally prohibit evangelical activities, in practice it discourages activities that it deems may upset the balance of intergroup relations. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act authorizes the Minister for Home Affairs to issue a restraining order against any person in a position of authority within a religious group where the Minister is satisfied that the person is causing feelings of enmity or hostility between different religious groups, or is promoting political causes, carrying out subversive activities, or exciting disaffection against the Government under the guise of practicing religion. Any restraining order must be referred to the Council for Religious Harmony, which has the duty of recommending to the President that the order be confirmed, cancelled, or amended. Restraining orders lapse after 90 days at most, unless confirmed by the President. The Minister must review a confirmed restraining order at least once every 12 months and may revoke such an order at any time. The Act prohibits judicial review of restraining orders issued under its authority. No restraining order has been issued since the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act was enacted in 1990.

All written materials published by the International Bible Students Association and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, both publishing arms of the Jehovah's Witnesses, remain banned by the Government under the Undesirable Publications Act. The Government also prohibits importation of publications by the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, the Children of God (also known as the Family of Love, the Family, and Family International), and the Church of Satan. A person in possession of a prohibited publication can be fined up to \$1333 (S\$2,000) and jailed up to 12 months for a first conviction. There were no government seizures of publications by any of these groups during this reporting period.

A married couple was convicted of several offenses, including sedition, for distributing illustrated Christian religious tracts to Singaporean Muslims. The trial court held that the defendants violated the Sedition Act because the tracts promoted ill will and hostility between different religious groups. One of the tracts features a character describing Islam as "dangerous" and another character calling the Prophet Mohammed a pedophile. Each defendant received a prison sentence of eight weeks, but the couple remained free on bond at the end of the reporting period pending appeals of their convictions.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Government continued to promote harmony among different ethnic and religious groups through the Community Engagement Program (CEP). The CEP began in 2006, primarily to foster social cohesion to minimize ethnic or religious discord in the event of a terrorist attack on Singapore. During the reporting period, the CEP held community-based seminars, sports outreach events, and interfaith community events, as well as administering working groups on religious and community harmony.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of the U.S. Government's overall policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Embassy maintains contacts with the various religious communities in the country.