



Singapore

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in some circumstances.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government has banned Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church. The Government does not tolerate speech or actions that could adversely affect racial or religious harmony.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 254 square miles, and its total population is approximately 4 million, of whom 3.3 million are citizens or permanent residents. According to a 2000 government survey, 85 percent of citizens and permanent residents profess some religious faith or belief. Of this group, 51 percent practice Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship, or other faiths traditionally associated with the ethnic Chinese population. Approximately 15 percent of the population is Muslim, approximately 15 percent is Christian, and approximately 4 percent is Hindu. The remainder are adherents of other religions, agnostics, or atheists. Among Christians, the majority of whom are ethnic Chinese, Protestants outnumber Roman Catholics by slightly more than two to one. There are also small Sikh, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Jain communities.

Approximately 77 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, approximately 14 percent is ethnic Malay, and approximately 8 percent is ethnic Indian. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim and most ethnic Indians are Hindu. The ethnic Chinese population is divided among Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity, or is agnostic or atheist.

Foreign missionaries are active in the country and include Catholics, Mormons, and Baptists.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in some circumstances. The Constitution provides that every citizen or person in the country 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.

All religious groups are subject to government scrutiny and must be registered legally under the Societies Act. The Government deregistered the Singapore Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1972 and the Unification Church in 1982, making them unlawful societies.

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 publicly subsidized 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 semi-official relationship with the Muslim community through the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS) set up under the Administration of Muslim Law Act. The MUIS advises the Government on concerns of the Muslim community, has some regulatory functions over Muslim religious matters, and oversees a mosque building fund financed by voluntary payroll deductions.

The Constitution acknowledges ethnic Malays as "the indigenous people of Singapore" and charges the Government to support and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social, cultural, and language interests.

The Presidential Council on Minority Rights examines all pending bills to ensure that they do not disadvantage a particular group. It also reports to the Government on matters affecting any racial or religious community and investigates complaints.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools.

There is one official holiday for each major religion in the country: Hari Raya Haji for Muslims, Christmas for Christians, Deepavali for Hindus, and Vesak Day for Buddhists.

The Government does not promote interfaith understanding directly; however, it sponsors activities to promote interethnic harmony, and because the primary ethnic minorities each are predominantly of one faith, government programs to promote ethnic harmony have implications for interfaith relations. For example, the Inter-Racial Confidence Circles were created in 2002 to foster greater interaction and understanding among the different ethnic and religious groups.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government restricts certain religions by application of the Societies Act. In 1982, the Minister for Home Affairs dissolved the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, also known as the Unification Church. In 1972, the Government deregistered and banned the Singapore Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses on the grounds that its existence was prejudicial to public welfare and order because its members refuse to perform military service (obligatory for all male citizens), salute the flag, or swear oaths of allegiance to the State. At the time, there were approximately 200 Jehovah's Witnesses in the country; now there are approximately 2,000. Although the Court of Appeals in 1996 upheld the rights of members of Jehovah's Witnesses to profess, practice, and propagate their religious belief, and the Government does not arrest members for being believers, the result of deregistration has been to make public meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses illegal. Nevertheless, since the 1996 ruling, no charges have been brought against persons attending or holding Jehovah's Witness meetings in private homes.

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, which was prompted by actions that the Government perceived as threats to religious harmony, including aggressive and "insensitive" proselytizing and "the mixing of religion and politics," allows the Government to restrain leaders and members of religious groups and institutions from carrying out political activities, "exciting disaffection against" the Government, creating "ill will" between religious groups, or carrying out subversive activities. The act also prohibits judicial review of its enforcement or of any possible denial of rights arising from it.

The Presidential Council on Religious Harmony reports to the Minister for Home Affairs on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony that are referred to the council by the Minister or by Parliament. The council also considers and makes recommendations to the Minister on restraining

orders referred to the council by the Minister. Such orders are directed at individuals to restrain them from causing feelings of enmity, hatred, ill will, or hostility among various religious groups or to restrain them from mixing religion with politics. The orders place individuals on notice that they should not repeat such acts, and advise them that failure to comply would result in prosecution in a court of law.

The Government does not tolerate speech or actions, including ostensibly religious speech or action, that affect racial and religious harmony and sometimes issues restraining orders barring persons from taking part in such activities.

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 prohibit evangelical activities, in practice it discourages activities that might upset the balance of intercommunal relations. In the period covered by this report, authorities did not detain any members of Jehovah's Witnesses for proselytizing.

The Government has banned all written materials published by the International Bible Students Association and the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, both publishing arms of Jehovah's Witnesses. In practice this has led to confiscation of Bibles published by the groups, although the Bible itself has not been outlawed. A person in possession of banned literature can be fined up to \$1,176 (S\$2,000) and jailed up to 12 months for a first conviction.

In 2003, the authorities seized Jehovah's Witnesses' literature on 30 occasions from individuals attempting to cross the Malaysia-Singapore land border. In 13 cases, authorities warned Jehovah's Witnesses but did not press charges. The other 17 cases remain open. At the end of the period covered by this report, 11 individuals were detained briefly for attempting to bring Jehovah's Witnesses publications into the country. The literature was confiscated, but no charges had been filed.

During the period covered by this report, two Jehovah's Witnesses students were suspended for failure to sing the national anthem and participate in the flag ceremony. Letters received by their parents stated clearly that they were welcome to return to school if they were willing to sing the anthem and salute the flag. In April 2001, a public school teacher, also a member of Jehovah's Witnesses, resigned after being threatened with dismissal for refusing to participate in singing the national anthem.

In October 1999, the Government proposed compulsory education for all children, which prompted concern from the Malay/Muslim community regarding the fate of madrassas (Islamic religious schools). In response the Government exempted madrassa students from compulsory attendance in national schools when the legislation was enacted in October 2000. However, madrassas were given 8 years from the time the law went into effect to achieve minimum academic standards or they would no longer be allowed to teach core secular subjects such as science, mathematics, and English. Compulsory education began with the school term that started in January 2003.

The debate over the "tudung" (woman's headscarf) continued. In early 2002, three female Muslim secondary school students were suspended from public schools for continuing to wear the tudung in violation of school uniform requirements. A fourth girl's parents withdrew her from school over the same issue. The girls' parents objected to the suspensions and filed a lawsuit. The lawsuit was later withdrawn. In February 2002, an opposition leader criticized the Government's ban on wearing of tudungs in public schools during a speech at "Speakers' Corner," which occupies a portion of a public park. He continued despite a police warning that the speech violated the venue's restrictions against discussing sensitive ethnic or religious issues in public. In July 2002, he was convicted of violating the Public Entertainment and Meetings Act and was fined \$1,765 (S\$3,000); fines over \$1,176 (S\$2,000) automatically bar a person from seeking public office for 5 years.

The Women's Charter, enacted in 1961, gives women, among other rights, the right to own property, conduct trade, and receive divorce settlements. Muslim women enjoy most of the rights and protections of the Women's Charter; however, for the most part, Muslim marriage law falls under the administration of the Muslim Law Act, which empowers the Shari'a court to oversee such matters.

Those laws allow Muslim men to practice polygyny. Requests to take additional wives may be refused by the Registry of Muslim Marriages, which solicits the views of existing wives and reviews the financial capability of the husband. Of the approximately 4,000 Muslim marriages registered in 2001, only 20 were polygynous.

At the end of the period covered by this report, there were 21 members of Jehovah's Witnesses incarcerated in the Armed Forces Detention Barracks because they refused to carry out the legal obligation for all male citizens to serve in the Armed Forces. There were no known conscientious objectors other than members of Jehovah's Witnesses during the period covered by this report. The initial sentence for failure to comply with the military service requirement is 15 months' imprisonment, to which 24 months are added upon a second refusal. Subsequent failures to perform required annual military reserve duty result in 40-day sentences; a 12-month sentence is usual after four such refusals.

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Nearly all ethnic Malay citizens are Muslim, and ethnic Malays constitute the great majority of the country's Muslim community. Attitudes held by non-Malays regarding the Malay community and by Malays regarding the non-Malay community are based on both ethnicity and religion, which in effect are impossible to separate.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy maintains contacts with the various religious communities in the country.

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