

# SINGAPORE 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution, laws, and policies provide for religious freedom, subject to restrictions relating to public order, public health, and morality. The government continued to ban Jehovah's Witnesses and the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church). The government restricted speech or actions it perceived as detrimental to "religious harmony." There is no legal provision for conscientious objection, including on religious grounds, and Jehovah's Witnesses reported 12 conscientious objectors remained detained at year's end. In April an Indian imam who uttered an Arabic prayer during which he asked for "help against Jews and Christians" was fined and deported for acts "prejudicial to the maintenance of religious harmony and likely to disturb public tranquility." Three foreign Islamic preachers were banned from entering the country in October and November, and two foreign Christian speakers were banned from preaching in September because the government reportedly viewed their teaching as damaging to social harmony. The government changed a voluntary program into a mandatory requirement that all Muslim religious teachers and centers of learning register with the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). Parliament discussed the existing prohibition on wearing the hijab for certain civil servants, but the prohibition remained. In September former Parliamentary Speaker Halimah Yacob, who wears the hijab, became president. The post was reserved in this presidential cycle for eligible Malays, who are mostly Muslim. The government made multiple high-level affirmations of the importance of religious harmony, launched an initiative to foster understanding of different religious practices, and created a fund and documentary to explore religious differences and prejudices.

Journalists wrote articles throughout the year encouraging their readers not to view Muslims with suspicion and telling Muslims they should not feel responsible for the actions of radicalized Muslims.

The U.S. embassy engaged with senior government officials, including President Halimah Yacob, at a June iftar during which the Charge d'Affaires gave a speech about religious tolerance in a pluralistic society. The embassy hosted a variety of events and programs with religious groups, including an interfaith youth forum to facilitate discussion on ways to combat religious discrimination in the religious leaders' home communities.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.9 million (July 2017 estimate). The local government estimates a total population of 5.6 million, with 3.9 million of this total citizens or permanent residents, of which 81.5 percent state a religious affiliation. Approximately 33.2 percent of the population of citizens and permanent residents are Buddhist, 18.8 percent Christian, 14 percent Muslim (predominantly Sunni), 10 percent Taoist, and 5 percent Hindu. Groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jains, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church).

According to a 2017 report by the Department of Statistics, 74.3 percent of the resident population is ethnic Chinese, 13.4 percent ethnic Malay, 9.0 percent ethnic Indian, and 3.2 percent other, including Eurasians. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim. According to a 2016 national survey, among ethnic Indians, 59.9 percent are Hindu, 21.3 percent are Muslim, and 12.1 percent are Christian. The ethnic Chinese population includes Buddhists (42.3 percent), Christians (20.9 percent), and Taoists (12.9 percent).

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states every person has a constitutional right to profess, practice, or propagate his or her religious belief as long as such activities do not breach any other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality. The constitution also prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion in the administration of any law or in the appointment to or employment in any office under a public authority. It states that every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs and it does not prohibit restrictions in employment by a religious institution.

The government maintains a decades-long ban of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church. The government banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 1972 on the grounds the Church was prejudicial to public welfare and order because it objected to national service, reciting the national pledge, or singing the national anthem. A 1996 decision by the Singapore Appeals Court upheld the rights of individual members of the Jehovah's Witnesses to profess, practice, and propagate their religious beliefs. The government does not arrest Jehovah's Witnesses for attending or holding meetings in private homes; however, it does not allow them to

hold public meetings or publish their literature, which is banned. The government banned the Unification Church in 1982 on grounds it was a “cult” that could have detrimental effects on society.

The Presidential Council for Religious Harmony reports on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony and considers cases referred by the minister for home affairs or by parliament. The president appoints the council’s members on the advice of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights. The law requires two-thirds of Council for Religious Harmony members be representatives of the major religions in the country, which according to law are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

The law authorizes the minister of home affairs to issue a restraining order against any person in a position of authority within a religious group if the minister ascertains the person causes feelings of enmity or hostility between different religious groups, promotes political causes, carries out subversive activities, or excites disaffection against the government under the guise of practicing religion. Restraining orders are discretionary, depending on the situation, and prevent a person in a position of authority within a religious group from making or participating in additional statements; failure to comply can result in criminal action. Any restraining order issued must be referred to the Council for Religious Harmony, which recommends to the president that the order be confirmed, cancelled, or amended. Restraining orders lapse after 90 days, 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 law prohibits judicial review of such restraining orders. In addition, under the penal code, “wounding the religious or racial feelings of any person” or knowingly promoting “disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred, or ill will between different religious or racial groups” can result in detention and or imprisonment.

The constitution states Malays are “the indigenous people of Singapore” and requires the government to protect and promote their interests, including religious interests. The MUIS, established under the Ministry for Culture, Community, and Youth, administers affairs for all Muslims in the country such as the construction and management of mosques, halal certification, fatwa issuances, preparation of Friday sermons, and the Hajj. The MUIS includes representatives from Sunni as well as Muslim minority groups, including Shia. Use of MUIS sermons is not compulsory, but imams who use their own content are responsible for it and may be investigated if there are complaints.

The law requires all associations of 10 or more persons, including religious groups, to register with the government. Registration confers legal identity, which allows property ownership, the ability to hold public meetings, and the ability to conduct financial transactions. Registered religious groups may apply to establish and maintain charitable and humanitarian institutions, which enable them to solicit and receive funding and tax benefits, such as income tax exemption. 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. Deregistration makes it impossible to maintain a legal identity as a religious group, with consequences related to owning property, conducting financial transactions, and holding public meetings. A person who acts as a member of or attends a meeting of an unregistered society may be punished with a fine of up to 5,000 Singapore dollars (SGD) (\$3,700), imprisonment of up to three years, or both.

Prisoners are allowed access to chaplains of various faiths.

The government may prohibit the importation of publications, including religious publications, under the law. A person in possession of a prohibited publication can be fined up to 2,000 SGD (\$1,500) and jailed for up to 12 months for a first conviction. All written materials published by the International Bible Students Association and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, publishing arms of the Jehovah's Witnesses, remain banned by the government.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) establish the guidelines on land development and use of space for religious activities. The URA regulates all land usage and decides where organizations may be located. Religious buildings are primarily classified as places of worship. A group seeking a new place of worship must apply to the URA for a permit. The Ministry of Social and Family Development and the URA determine whether a religious institution meets the requirements as a place of worship, such as being located in an allotted zone and meeting the maximum plot ratio and building height. URA guidelines regulate the use of commercially and industrially zoned space for religious activities and religious groups, and apply equally to all religious groups. Commercial or industrial premises that host religious activities but are not zoned as places of worship must be approved by the URA. They may not be owned by or leased to religious organizations and must be available to rent out for other nonreligious events. They may not display signage, advertisements, or posters of the religious use; be furnished to resemble a worship hall; or display any religious symbols, icons, or religious paraphernalia when the

premises are not in use by the religious organization. Use of the space for religious purposes must not cause parking, noise, or other problems.

Registration of religious teachers and centers of learning with the MUIS, which includes minimum standards and a code of ethics, has been mandatory since January, although reports say the majority of teachers had previously registered on a voluntary basis. As of October, there are 193 registered Islamic centers of learning and more than 3,000 registered Islamic religious teachers.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools, although it is allowed in the country's 57 government-subsidized religiously affiliated schools. Religious instruction in these schools is provided outside of regular curriculum time and must not include proselytization; students have a right to opt out and be given alternatives such as civics and moral education in lieu of religious instruction. The constitution states that no person shall be required to receive instruction or take part in any ceremony or act of worship other than his or her own. Religious instruction is allowed in private schools not aided by the government. At the primary level, the law allows seven designated private schools (six Sunni madrassahs and one Seventh-day Adventist school) to educate primary-age students, provided these schools continue to meet or exceed public school performance benchmarks in annual national exams. Other Muslim minority groups may operate part-time schools.

The law empowers the Ministry of Education to regulate schools, including prohibiting students from wearing anything not forming part of an official school uniform. The law prohibits the wearing of hijabs or headscarves in public schools. International, other private, and government-aided religious schools are not subject to the same restrictions. For example, in madrassahs, headscarves are part of the uniform. Headscarves are not banned at institutions of higher learning. All madrassahs are under the purview of the MUIS.

The law allows the Muslim community, irrespective of school of Islam or ethnicity, to have personal status issues governed by Islamic law, "as varied where applicable by Malay custom." Ordinarily the Shafi'i school of law will be used, but there are provisions for use of "other accepted schools of Muslim law as may be appropriate." Under the law, a sharia court has nonexclusive jurisdiction over the affairs of marriages where both parties are or were married as Muslims, including maintenance payments such as alimony and child support, disposition of property upon divorce, custody of minor children, and inheritance. According to legal experts in inheritance, a man will receive twice the share of a woman of the

same relational level. The law permits a person involved in a sharia court divorce case to apply for permission to begin civil proceedings concerning division of property or custody of children. Orders of the sharia court are enforced by the ordinary civil courts. Appeals within the sharia system go to an appeal board, which is composed of three members of the MUIS, selected by the president of the MUIS from a panel of seven individuals nominated every two years by the president of the country. The ruling of the appeal board is final and may not be appealed to any other court. The law allows Muslim men to practice polygamy, but the Registry of Muslim Marriages may refuse requests to marry additional wives after soliciting the views of existing wives and reviewing the husband's financial capability. Additionally, under the law, certain criminal offenses apply only to those who profess Islam, including cohabitation outside of marriage and publicly expounding any doctrine relating to Islam in a manner contrary to Islamic law. Muslim men and women who cohabit with a member of the opposite sex (including non-Muslims) to whom they are not married are liable to a maximum fine of 500 SGD (\$370) or maximum imprisonment of six months, or both. Instead of imprisonment, a women may be sentenced to a "place of safety established under any written law" for a period not to exceed 12 months. The punishment for teaching or publicly expounding any doctrine contrary to Muslim law is a maximum fine of 2,000 SGD (\$1,500), maximum imprisonment of 12 months, or both.

The law does not recognize a right to conscientious objection. Male citizens or second generation permanent residents are required to complete 24 months of uniformed national service upon reaching age 18, with no alternative provided to national service.

The Presidential Council for Minority Rights, an advisory body that is part of the legislative process, examines all legislation to ensure it does not disadvantage particular religious groups. The council also considers and reports on matters concerning any religious group that the parliament or the government refers.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

The Jehovah's Witnesses' official website reported as of December, 12 Jehovah's Witnesses were detained in the armed forces detention facility for refusing to complete national service on religious grounds. Conscientious objectors were

generally court martialled and sentenced to detention, typically for 12 to 39 months. Although they remained technically liable for national service, servicemen who had refused to serve on religious grounds were generally not called up for reservist duties. They did not, however, receive any form of legal documentation that officially discharged them from reservist duties.

Government ministers and officials regularly cited religious harmony as an important policy goal. In April the government deported Imam Nalla Mohamed Abdul Jameel to India after he was convicted and fined 4,000 SGD (\$3,000) for “committing acts known to be prejudicial to the maintenance of religious harmony and likely to disturb public tranquility.” The imam, who had worked in the country since 2010, was removed from speaking at the mosque after a video of him reciting an Arabic prayer from his home village in India asking for “help against Jews and Christians” surfaced on Facebook. The police initiated an investigation when a member of the public filed a complaint. In public meetings with various faith groups, including Christian and Jewish leaders and Minister of Home Affairs K. Shanmugam, Nalla apologized repeatedly, adding that he understood the charges against him were necessary to “preserve the sanctity of interfaith harmony.” In a separate case, two individuals investigated for uploading and commenting on the video were officially warned but not prosecuted for violating religious harmony laws.

The government said that all religions would be held equally responsible for maintaining religious harmony. In June the MUIS barred Singaporean “extremist” Islamic preacher Rasul Dahri from teaching in the country, and the Ministry of Information and Communications banned nine of his publications. In October the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) banned two foreign Islamic preachers, Ismail Menk (known as Mufti Menk) and Haslin bin Baharim, from entering the country on the grounds that their “exclusivist” and “divisive” preaching would damage social harmony. In November the ministry banned a third foreign Islamic preacher on the same grounds. In September the MHA declined applications to speak in Singapore for two foreign Christian preachers whom it said had previously made “denigrating and inflammatory comments” about Muslims and Buddhists. In September the National Council of Churches advised its member churches to exercise “careful discernment” before inviting preachers in order “to preserve the harmonious religious environment that currently exists.”

Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam told parliament in October, “Religion can be and has been a source of strength to our society, but we must also watch for exclusivist, intolerant practices because these can deepen fault lines and weaken

our entire society.” Shanmugam said the law on religious harmony is expected to be tightened in 2018 to ensure that religious groups do not sponsor foreign speakers who promote ill will. Several Christian and Muslim groups spoke against amending the legislation, on the grounds that religious groups already practiced a culture of religious sensitivity and already self-selected speakers to avoid those promoting disharmony.

Although government policy prohibited the wearing of hijabs by certain public sector professionals, such as nurses and uniformed military officers and at some schools, many statutory boards within government agencies continued to allow Muslim staff to wear the hijab while the government continued to evolve its stance “gradually and carefully.” Some in the Muslim community continued to petition for a change in government policy, as did opposition Member of Parliament Muhammad Faisal Abdul Manap in parliament in April. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong endorsed Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Masagos Zulkifli’s response that such a “deeply emotive” matter should be resolved by government and community leaders working together quietly. The prime minister said on Facebook the best way to make progress on such sensitive issues “is quietly, outside the glare of publicity.”

The September presidential election was won by former parliamentary speaker Halimah Yacob, who is Muslim and wears the hijab. President Halimah’s portrait was displayed in all schools and government buildings. In 2016 the government passed legislation that resulted in the 2017 presidential election being reserved for eligible Malay, and effectively Muslim, candidates. The legislation, which generated some controversy in social media, states that the presidency should be reserved for a certain race if a person of that community has not occupied the office for five consecutive terms, effectively 30 years.

The government assisted religious groups in locating spaces for religious observance in government-built housing, where most citizens lived. The government continued to enforce the maintenance of ethnic ratios in public housing and prevent the emergence of religious enclaves in concentrated geographic areas.

As part of the Ministry of Education’s National Education Program, the official primary and secondary public school curricula encouraged religious harmony and tolerance. All schools celebrated the annual racial harmony day in July, which promoted understanding and acceptance of all religions within the country. Children wore traditional clothing and celebrated the country’s racial and religious

diversity. Students were encouraged to recite the “Declaration of Religious Harmony.”

Missionaries, with the exception of members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and representatives of the Unification Church, were permitted to work and to publish and distribute religious texts. While the government did not formally prohibit proselytization, it continued to discourage its practice in speeches and through the application of laws regarding public speech and assembly as it deemed proselytizing might offend other religious groups and upset the balance of intergroup relations.

Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim said in parliament in October that as fears over terrorism increased, local Muslims found it “unpleasant” being “under constant scrutiny” and that “for the Malay-Muslim community, this sense of being misunderstood is deeply felt.”

Associate Professor of Sociology Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir published an op-ed in March in which he said Islam was the most regulated religion in the country and described a “culture of fear” among Muslim clerics, whom he said sensed the Muslim community’s anger at the “disciplining of Islam” but who felt limited in their response because they feared overstepping the boundaries of state-endorsed Islam.

The government launched the “BRIDGE” initiative in March, which aimed to foster understanding of different religious practices and beliefs and to encourage discussions, as well as to support interfaith initiatives through the Ministry for Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY)’s Harmony Fund. For example, one such discussion was on how “religion is hijacked by extremists” and how teenagers self-radicalize.

Minister of State and chair of NGO OnePeople.sg, Janil Puthuchery, hosted a television documentary called *Regardless of Religion* which explored religious differences and prejudices. Puthuchery attended interfaith dialogues and religious events, including those held by minority religious groups such as the Jaafari Muslim Association, a Shia Muslim organization that opened a new religious center in August in Geylang.

The government appointed all members of the MUIS and the Hindu Endowments Board, and nominated four of the 11 members of the Sikh Advisory Board. These statutory boards managed various aspects of their faith communities, ranging from

managing properties and endowments to safeguarding customs and the general welfare of the community.

The MUIS continued to operate the Harmony Center, which was set up to promote greater religious understanding. The Harmony Center housed artifacts and information about Islam, as well as nine other major religions in Singapore. It also organized interfaith programs, including dialogues with leaders from other religions. Additionally, the Ministry of Home Affairs, encouraged by the Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), encompassing the leaders of the 10 largest religious groups in the country, opened organized daily tours of the interactive Harmony in Diversity Gallery.

The government continued to support the operation of an “interracial and religious confidence circle” (IRCC) in each of the country’s 27 electoral constituencies. The IRCCs gave religious group leaders a forum for promoting religious harmony at the municipal level. Under the auspices of the MCCY, the IRCCs conducted local interreligious dialogues, counseling and trust-building workshops, community celebrations, and similar activities. Throughout the year, interfaith dialogues were held in different communities around the island.

The government continued to engage religious groups through the community engagement program (CEP), created to foster social cohesion and minimize ethnic or religious discord in the event of a terrorist attack or other civil emergency. The government trained community leaders involved in the CEP in emergency preparedness and techniques for promoting religious harmony. Throughout the year, the CEP continued to conduct outreach activities to strengthen intercommunal and interreligious bonds.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Journalist Elgin Toh and other journalists wrote articles throughout the year encouraging their readers not to view Muslims with suspicion and telling Muslims they should not feel responsible for the actions of radicalized Muslims.

According to an August op-ed in the *Singapore Straits Times*, a public Facebook group, Melayu Singapura Tolak Syiah (Singapore Malays Reject Shia) with 1,814 members, often demonizes Shia. Comments on YouTube and other social media referred to Shia as “deviant”, “apostates,” and by other negative terms.

In June vandals wrote the word “terrorist” on a cartoon image of a Muslim woman who wore a hijab on a temporary board fence surrounding a construction site. Numerous individuals subsequently posted comments online to support the Muslim community, and the Free Community Church hosted an iftar in addition to a talk on Islam by Muslim scholar Mohamed Imran Taib.

Shia and Sunni Muslims continued to cooperate and to share Sunni mosques, and held intrafaith iftars during Ramadan. The Sunni Ba’alwie Mosque hosted an iftar with Shia guests, and a Shia youth group hosted an interfaith iftar for 100 guests. Some Shia and Sunni Muslims stated that trust in the minority Shia community of approximately 5,000 persons (1 percent of the Muslim community) by the majority Sunnis declined as the influence of anti-Shia discourse in neighboring Malaysia increased. Shia continue to work with Muslim authorities to secure permission to open a second Shia mosque.

In April the Muslim community, with encouragement from the government, opened use of some facilities of its new Yusof Ishak Mosque to persons of all faiths. Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob and mosque chairman Ayub Johari said that the mosque would help spread an ethos of religious plurality.

In October a Hindu sanctum was consecrated at the multireligious Loyong Tua Pek Kong Temple, which also houses Hindu, Taoist and Buddhist deities, as well as a Muslim shrine. The deputy prime minister said the event was a good example of multireligious harmony.

The Buddhist Singapore Soka Association invited dignitaries from other religions to its Lotus Sutra Exhibition in October, during which it hosted a number of interfaith lectures, one of which was given by MUIS president Mohammad Alami Musa.

The IRO, which includes leaders of the 10 major religions in the country, has the stated objective of inculcating a spirit of friendship among the leaders and followers of various religious groups and promote mutual respect, assistance, and protection by conducting interreligious prayer services, seminars, and public talks throughout the year. The major religious groups have taken turns organizing the annual Harmony Games, an MCCY-supported sports event for youth of all faiths; the Muslim community organized the games during the year.

A number of people-to-people initiatives promoted religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. These included a meeting organized by community group

Explorations into Faith in April to discuss building inclusive interfaith public spaces; an ongoing dialogue entitled, “Religion and Atheism: A Conversation” in which atheists, Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims discussed race and religion; and dinners during which groups of strangers discussed sensitive religious issues.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The embassy’s June iftar was attended by then-Speaker of Parliament (and now President) Halimah Yacob, senior representatives from Malay Muslim organizations, representatives from many ethnic and religious groups, media representatives and government officials. The speech by the Charge d’Affaires advocated for religious tolerance and respect.

U.S. embassy representatives interacted with a variety of religious groups, including the IRO, the MUIS, and representatives from Sunni, Shia, and Christian groups, to reinforce the importance of religious freedom. The embassy utilized social media to highlight the Charge d’Affaires’ religious outreach and demonstrate appreciation of and respect for the country’s religious diversity.

The embassy supported a four-day Southeast Asian interfaith youth forum in April in collaboration with Critical Xchange, a local Muslim NGO. The forum brought together 10 young leaders for workshops, with a focus on collaborating to develop ideas for new interfaith initiatives that would tackle religious discrimination in their home communities. The interfaith forum was highlighted on the embassy’s Facebook page, and featured in *Berita Harian*, a local Malay language newspaper.