



2008 Human Rights Report: Singapore

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

[2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#)

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Singapore is a parliamentary republic in which the People's Action Party (PAP), in power since 1959, overwhelmingly dominates politics. The population was approximately 4.6 million, with foreign workers accounting for nearly one fifth of the total. Opposition parties exist, and the May 2006 parliamentary elections were generally fair and free of tampering; however, the PAP placed formidable obstacles in the path of political opponents. Civilian authorities generally maintained effective control of the security forces.

The government has broad powers to limit citizens' rights and to handicap political opposition, which it used. Caning is an allowable punishment for numerous offenses. The following human rights problems also were reported: preventive detention, executive influence over the judiciary, infringement of citizens' privacy rights, restriction of speech and press freedom and the practice of self-censorship by journalists, restriction of freedoms of assembly and association, limited restriction of freedom of religion, and some trafficking in persons.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices, and the government generally respected these prohibitions.

The penal code mandates caning, in addition to imprisonment, as punishment for approximately 30 offenses involving violence, such as rape and robbery, and for nonviolent offenses such as vandalism, drug trafficking, and violation of immigration laws. Caning is discretionary for convictions on other charges involving the use of force, such as kidnapping or voluntarily causing grievous hurt. All women, men over age 50 or under age 16, and anyone determined medically unfit are exempt from punishment by caning. Through September, 4,078 convicted persons were sentenced to caning, and 98.7 percent of caning sentences were carried out.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions, while Spartan, generally met international standards.

The government did not allow human rights monitors to visit prisons; however, diplomatic representatives were given consular access to citizens of their countries.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the government generally observed these prohibitions.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the police force and the armed forces, and the Ministry of Home Affairs has effective mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. There were no reports of impunity involving the security forces during the year.

Arrest and Detention

The law provides that, in most instances, arrests are to be carried out after issuance of an authorized warrant; however, some laws, such as the Internal Security Act (ISA), provide for arrests without warrants. Those arrested under warrants must be charged before a magistrate within 48 hours. The majority of those arrested were charged expeditiously and brought to trial. A functioning bail system exists. Those who face criminal charges are allowed counsel; however, there is no access to counsel during an initial arrest and investigation before charges are filed. The Law Society administered a legal aid plan for those who could not afford to hire an attorney.

Some laws--the ISA, the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act (CLA), the Misuse of Drugs Act (the drug act), and the Undesirable Publications Act (UPA)--have provisions for arrest and detention without a warrant, and under the ISA, CLA, and drug act, executive branch officials can order continued detention without judicial review. The ISA has been employed primarily against suspected security threats. In the past these threats were Communist related; however, in recent years the ISA has been employed against suspected terrorists. The CLA has been employed primarily against suspected organized crime and drug trafficking.

The ISA and the CLA permit preventive detention without trial for the protection of public security, safety, or the maintenance of public order. The ISA gives broad discretion to the minister for home affairs, at the direction of the president, to order detention without filing charges if it is determined that a person poses a threat to national security. The initial detention may be for up to two years and may be renewed without limitation for additional periods of up to two years at a time. Detainees have a right to be informed of the grounds for their detention and are entitled to counsel. However, they have no right to challenge the substantive basis for their detention through the courts. The ISA specifically excludes recourse to the normal judicial system for review of a detention order made under its authority. Instead, detainees may make representations to an advisory board, headed by a Supreme Court justice, which reviews each detainee's case periodically and must make a recommendation to the president within three months of the initial detention. The president may concur with the advisory board's recommendation that a detainee be released prior to the expiration of the detention order, but he is not obligated to do so.

At year's end, 22 detainees were being held under the ISA as suspected terrorists. Of these detainees, 19 were suspected of belonging to the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) or to the Philippines based Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). In January the authorities detained Muhammad Zamri Abdullah and Maksham Mohammad Shah under the ISA for involvement in activities deemed to pose a potential terrorist threat. The government placed a third man, Mohammad Taufik Andjah Asmara, under a Restriction Order (RO) limiting his movements. In March the government announced that it had detained alleged JI member Rijal Yadri bin Jumari.

A religious rehabilitation program designed to wean detained terrorists from extremist ideologies is in effect, and between January and September, 12 detainees were released under the program. Between January and March, five JI detainees and one MILF detainee, all held since 2001, and JI detainee Anis bin Mohamad Mansor, held since 2004, were released. On September 15, the government announced that five additional alleged JI members were released between March and September. Three brothers, Muhamad Ismail bin Anwarul, Abdul Rashid bin Anwarul, and Abdul Nassir bin Anwarul, held since 2006, were released from detention on March 28 and placed on ROs. On September 14, detainees Ab Wahab bin Ahmad and Sanin bin Riffin, held since 2002, were released and placed on ROs. The authorities said all of the detainees released had cooperated in investigations and responded positively to rehabilitation.

At year's end, 41 others were on ROs. This number included both released detainees and suspected terrorists who were never arrested. A person subject to an RO must seek official approval for a change of address or occupation, for overseas travel, or for participation in any public organization or activity.

The CLA comes up for renewal every five years. Under the CLA the minister for home affairs may order preventive detention, with the concurrence of the public prosecutor, for an initial period of one year, and the president may extend detention for additional periods of up to one year at a time. The minister must provide a written statement of the grounds for detention to the Criminal Law Advisory Committee (CLAC) within 28 days of the order. The CLAC then reviews the case at a private hearing. CLAC rules require that detainees be notified of the grounds of their detention at least 10 days prior to this hearing, in which a detainee may represent himself or be represented by a lawyer. After the hearing the committee makes a written recommendation to the president, who may cancel, confirm, or amend the detention order. Persons detained under the CLA have recourse to the courts via an application for a writ of habeas corpus. Persons detained without trial under the CLA are entitled to counsel, but they may challenge the substantive basis for their detention only to the CLAC. The CLA was used almost exclusively in cases involving narcotics or criminal organizations and has not been used for political purposes. The last CLA renewal occurred in 2004, at which time 211 persons were in detention under its provisions. More recent data has not been made available. Persons who allege mistreatment while in detention may bring criminal charges against government officials alleged to have committed such acts.

Both the ISA and the CLA contain provisions that allow for modified forms of detention such as curfews, residence limitations, requirements to report regularly to the authorities, limitations on travel, and, in the case of the ISA, restrictions on political activities and association.

The drug act permits detention without trial. Under the drug act, the director of the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) also may commit--without trial--suspected drug abusers to a drug rehabilitation center for a six-month period, which is extendable by a review committee of the institution for up to a maximum of three years. As of September, 612 persons were held in drug rehabilitation centers. Under the Intoxicating Substances Act, the CNB director may order the treatment of a person believed to be an inhalant drug abuser for up to six months.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence; however, in practice laws that limit judicial review permit restrictions on constitutional rights. Some judicial officials, especially Supreme Court judges, have ties to the ruling party and its leaders. The president appoints judges to the Supreme Court on the recommendation of the prime minister and in consultation with the chief justice. The president also appoints subordinate court judges on the recommendation of the chief justice. The term of appointment is determined by the Legal Service Commission (LSC), of which the chief justice is the chairman. Under the ISA and the CLA, the president and the minister for home affairs have substantial de facto judicial power, which explicitly (in the case of the ISA) or implicitly (in the case of the CLA) excludes normal judicial

review. These laws provide the government with the power to limit, on vaguely defined national security grounds, the scope of certain fundamental liberties that otherwise are provided for in the constitution.

Government leaders historically have used court proceedings, in particular defamation suits, against political opponents and critics. Both this practice and consistent awards in favor of government plaintiffs raised questions about the relationship between the government and the judiciary and led to a perception that the judiciary reflected the views of the ruling party in politically sensitive cases.

The judicial system has two levels of courts: the Supreme Court, which includes the High Court and the Court of Appeal, and the subordinate courts. Subordinate court judges and magistrates, as well as public prosecutors, are civil servants whose specific assignments are determined by the LSC, which can decide on job transfers to any of several legal service departments. The subordinate courts handle the great majority of civil and criminal cases in the first instance. The High Court may hear any civil or criminal case, although it generally limited itself to civil matters involving substantial claims and criminal matters carrying the death penalty or imprisonment of more than 10 years. The Court of Appeal is the highest and final court of review for matters decided in the subordinate courts or the High Court. Supreme Court justices may remain in office until the mandatory retirement age of 65, after which they may continue to serve at the government's discretion for brief, renewable terms at full salary. Some observers believed that the LSC's authority to rotate subordinate court judges and magistrates and the government's discretion with regard to extending the tenure of Supreme Court judges beyond the age of 65 undermined the independence of the judiciary.

In addition the law provides for Islamic courts whose authority is limited to Islamic family law, which is applicable only to Muslims.

A two-tier military court system has jurisdiction over all military personnel, civilians in the service of the armed forces, and volunteers when they are ordered to report for service. The system handled approximately 450 cases each year. The Military Court of Appeal has jurisdiction to examine an appeal from a person convicted by a subordinate military court. Trials are public, and defendants have the right to be present. An accused individual also has the right to defense representation.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair trial, and independent observers viewed the judiciary as generally impartial and independent, except in a small number of cases involving direct challenges to the government or the ruling party. The judicial system provides citizens with an efficient judicial process. In normal cases the Criminal Procedure Code provides that a charge against a defendant must be read and explained to him as soon as it is framed by the prosecution or the magistrate. Trials are public and heard by a judge; there are no jury trials. Defendants have the right to be present at their trials and to be represented by an attorney; the Law Society administers a criminal legal aid plan for those who cannot afford to hire an attorney. In death penalty cases, the Supreme Court appoints two attorneys for defendants who are unable to afford their own counsel. Defendants also have the right to question opposing witnesses, to provide witnesses and evidence on their own behalf, and to review government-held evidence relevant to their cases. Defendants enjoy a presumption of innocence and the right of appeal in most cases. Despite the general presumption of innocence, the drug act stipulates that a person who the prosecution proves has illegal narcotics in his possession, custody, or control shall be assumed to be aware of the substance and places the burden on the defendant to prove otherwise. The same law also stipulates that, if the amount of the narcotic is above set low limits, it is the defendant's burden to prove he or she did not have the drug for the purpose of trafficking. Convictions for narcotics trafficking offenses carry lengthy jail sentences or the death penalty, depending on the type and amount of the illegal substance.

Persons detained under the ISA or CLA are not entitled to a public trial. In addition, proceedings of the advisory board under the ISA and CLA are not public.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

There is no differentiation between civil and criminal judicial procedures. The subordinate courts handled the majority of civil cases. Access to the courts is open, and citizens and residents have the right to sue for infringement of human rights. However, there were no known attempts to use legal action against the government for human rights violations.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution does not address privacy rights; remedies for infringement of some aspects of privacy rights are available under statutory or common law. The government generally respected the privacy of homes and families; however, it had a pervasive influence over civic and economic life and sometimes used its broad discretionary powers to infringe on these rights. To prevent housing segregation, the government enforced ethnic ratios in publicly subsidized housing where the majority of citizens lived. Normally the police must have a warrant issued by a court to conduct a search; however, they may search a person, home, or property without a warrant if they decide that such a search is necessary to preserve evidence or under the discretionary powers of the ISA, CLA, the drug act, and the UPA.

Law enforcement agencies, including the Internal Security Department and the Corrupt Practices Investigation Board, have extensive networks for gathering information and conducting surveillance and highly sophisticated capabilities to monitor telephone and other private conversations. No court warrants are required for such operations. It was believed that the authorities routinely monitored telephone conversations and the use of the Internet. It was widely believed that the authorities routinely conducted surveillance of some opposition politicians and other government critics.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and freedom of expression but permits official restrictions on these rights, and in practice the government significantly restricted freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Government intimidation and pressure to conform resulted in self-censorship among journalists; however, there was a moderate level of debate in newspapers and on the Internet on some public issues such as rising income inequality and whether to repeal a statute that bans homosexual activity.

Under the ISA the government may restrict or place conditions on publications that incite violence; counsel disobedience to the law; have the potential to arouse tensions in the country's diverse population; or might threaten national interests, national security, or public order. While the ISA has not been invoked in recent years against political opponents of the government, political opposition and criticism remained restricted by the government's authority to define these powers broadly.

Government leaders urged that news media support the goals of the elected leadership and help maintain social

and religious harmony. In addition to strict defamation and press laws, the government's demonstrated willingness to respond vigorously to what it considered personal attacks on officials led journalists and editors to moderate or limit what was published.

Citizens do not need a permit to speak at indoor public gatherings outside the hearing or view of nonparticipants, unless the topic refers to race or religion.

The government effectively restricts the ability to speak freely in public to a single location called Speakers' Corner, which is located in a public park. Prospective speakers must be citizens or permanent residents and must show their identification cards. In August the government announced it was no longer necessary for citizens to register in advance with the police, but only to preregister the event on-line with the government. While it was not necessary to declare speech topics in advance, regulations governing the Speakers' Corner state that "the speech should not be religious in nature and should not have the potential to cause feelings of enmity, ill will, or hostility between different racial or religious groups." On August 18, the government announced demonstrations would also be allowed to take place at Speakers' Corner under the same rules and restrictions.

The government strongly influenced both the print and electronic media. Two companies, Singapore Press Holdings Limited (SPH) and MediaCorp, owned all general circulation newspapers in the four official languages--English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. MediaCorp was wholly owned by a government investment company. SPH was a private holding company with close ties to the government; the government must approve (and can remove) the holders of SPH management shares, who have the power to appoint or dismiss all directors or staff. As a result, while newspapers printed a large and diverse selection of articles from domestic and foreign sources, their editorials, coverage of domestic events, and reporting of sensitive foreign relations topics usually closely reflected government policies and the opinions of government leaders.

Columnists' opinions and letters to the editor expressed a moderate range of opinions on public issues.

Government-linked companies and organizations operated all domestic broadcast television channels and almost all radio stations. Only one radio station, the BBC World Service, was completely independent of the government. Some Malaysian and Indonesian television and radio programming could be received, but satellite dishes were banned, with few exceptions. Cable subscribers had access to seven foreign television news channels and many entertainment channels, including some with news programs; these were not censored.

The Media Development Authority (MDA), a statutory board under the Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Arts (MICA), continued to censor broadcast media, Internet sites, and all other media, including movies, video materials, computer games, and music. Banned publications consisted primarily of sexually oriented materials but also included some religious and political publications. Both the MDA and MICA developed censorship standards with the help of a citizen advisory panel. The ISA, the UPA, and the Films Act allow the banning, seizure, censorship, or restriction of written, visual, or musical materials by these agencies if they determine that such materials threaten the stability of the state, contravene moral norms, are pornographic, show excessive or gratuitous sex and violence, glamorize or promote drug use, or incite racial, religious, or linguistic animosities. The MDA has the power to sanction broadcasters for airing what it believes to be inappropriate content. All content airing between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. must be suitable for viewers of all ages.

A substantial number of foreign media operations were located within the country, and a wide range of international magazines and newspapers could be purchased uncensored. However, under the Newspaper and Printing Press Act (NPPA), the government may limit the circulation of foreign publications that it determines interfere with domestic politics. The NPPA requires foreign publications that report on politics and current events in Southeast Asia, with circulation of 300 or more copies per issue, to register, post a S\$200,000 (approximately \$150,000) bond, and

name a person in the country to accept legal service. The government has granted exemptions to 19 of the 24 publications to which these requirements could apply. The Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER) continued to be subject to a 2006 government ban for failing to comply with the NPPA. Importation or possession of FEER for sale or distribution is an offense. Readers could access FEER through the Internet. Newspapers printed in Malaysia cannot be imported.

The government may limit (or "gazette") the circulation of publications. The government also may ban the circulation of domestic and foreign publications under provisions of the ISA and the UPA. The Broadcasting Act empowers the minister for information, communication, and the arts to gazette or place formal restrictions on any foreign broadcaster deemed to be engaging in domestic politics. Once gazetted, a broadcaster can be required to obtain express permission from the minister to continue broadcasting in the country. The government may impose restrictions on the number of households receiving a broadcaster's programming, and a broadcaster may be fined up to S\$100,000 (approximately \$75,000) for failing to comply.

Critics charged that government leaders used defamation lawsuits or threats of such actions to discourage public criticism and intimidate opposition politicians and the press. Under the country's defamation laws, some plaintiffs can easily win substantial judgments for damages and legal costs. Conviction on criminal defamation charges may result in a prison sentence of up to two years, a fine, or both. There were no known new defamation suits or threats of defamation suits against media organizations during the year. On September 23, the High Court issued a summary judgment in favor of the plaintiffs in the 2006 defamation suit brought by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew against the editor and publisher of FEER in connection with a 2006 interview with opposition politician Chee Soon Juan. On October 22, FEER announced it would seek to appeal the judgment. If the ruling stands, damages will be assessed at a later date.

The attorney-general may bring charges for contempt of court, and he used this power to charge several persons who published criticisms of the judiciary.

On June 2, the High Court found opposition party leaders Chee Soon Juan and Chee Siok Chin guilty of contempt of court and sentenced them to 12 and 10 days in jail, respectively. The contempt proceeding stemmed from comments they made during a three-day hearing to determine damages in connection with a 2006 conviction of the Chees and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) for libeling Minister Mentor Lee Kwan Yew and his son, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in an SDP newsletter article that drew parallels between the management style of the ruling party and that of a local charity that had been the subject of a corruption scandal. On October 13, the High Court ordered the SDP and the Chee siblings to pay the two Lees a total of S\$610,000 (approximately \$458,000), a sum that could bankrupt the SDP.

On November 24, a judge found three SDP members, including the party's Assistant Secretary General John Tan, in contempt of court. The attorney general brought the charges because the three attended one of the court proceedings against Chee Soon Juan and Chee Siok Chin wearing T-shirts bearing the image of a kangaroo in judicial robes. On November 27, the court sentenced the defendants to prison terms of 15 days (for Tan) and seven days (for the other defendants).

On November 25, the High Court found Dow Jones, publisher of Wall Street Journal Asia, in contempt of court for publishing three items, including a letter to the editor, questioning the independence of the courts from the PAP government. Dow Jones had also published in full two rebuttals submitted by the government. The court fined Dow Jones S\$25,000 (approximately \$18,750) and ordered it to pay S\$30,000 (approximately \$22,500) in court costs.

Internet Freedom

Although residents generally have unrestricted access to the Internet, the government subjected all Internet content to the same rules and standards as traditional media. Internet service providers (ISPs) are required to ensure that content complies with the MDA's Internet code of practice. The MDA also regulates Internet material by licensing the ISPs through which local users are required to route their Internet connections. The law permits government monitoring of Internet use, and the government closely monitored Internet activities such as blogs and podcasts. The MDA was empowered to direct service providers to block access to Web sites that, in the government's view, undermined public security, national defense, racial and religious harmony, or public morals. Political and religious Web sites must register with the MDA. Although the MDA ordered ISPs to block 100 specific Web sites that the government considered pornographic, in general the government focused on blocking only a small number of sites. The Internet was widely available.

In May a 24-year-old blogger was charged with posting a "racist rant" on his Web site; he was released after posting an apology. In June a visiting foreign citizen, Gopalan Nair, was arrested for comments he made in his blog about the High Court judge presiding in the hearing to assess damages in the Chee defamation case. He was charged with insulting a public servant, which carried a maximum fine of S\$5,000 (\$3,759) or one year in prison. In September Nair was found guilty and sentenced to three months in prison. While Nair was serving this sentence, the attorney general charged him with contempt of court for posting statements critical of the judiciary on his Web site. Nair retracted and apologized for those statements, and the court imposed no additional punishment. In November authorities released Nair from prison and permitted him to leave the country.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

All public institutions of higher education and political research have limited autonomy from the government. Although faculty members are not technically government employees, in practice they were subject to potential government influence. Academics spoke and published widely and engaged in debate on social and political issues. However, they were aware that any public comments outside the classroom or in academic publications that ventured into prohibited areas--criticism of political leaders or sensitive social and economic policies or comments that could disturb ethnic or religious harmony or appeared to advocate partisan political views--could subject them to sanctions. Publications by local academics and members of research institutions rarely deviated substantially from government views.

In October the local branch of Australia-based James Cook University suspended John Tan, assistant secretary general of the SDP and a lecturer at the university, indefinitely from his teaching duties after the attorney general announced his intention to bring contempt-of-court charges against Tan for wearing a protest T-shirt to court.

The Films Act bans political advertising using films or videos as well as films directed towards any political purpose. The act does not apply to any film sponsored by the government, and the act allows the MICA minister to exempt any film from the act.

In May the MDA censors interrupted the private screening of political activist Seelan Palay's film *One Nation Under Lee*, which portrays the country as lacking press and political freedoms. The MDA confiscated the film because it had not been submitted to the Board of Film Censors for classification and certification. At year's end the Board of Film Censors still had not certified the film, with the result that any public screening remains unlawful.

A list of banned films was available on the MDA Web site. Certain films that were barred from general release may be allowed limited showings, either censored or uncensored, with a special rating. In April the MDA censors gave an NC-16 (no children below 16 years old) rating to a documentary by filmmaker Martyn See focused on the activities of SDP chief Chee Soon Juan and others during a three-day protest at the Speakers' Corner.

In January the MDA stopped the Complaints Choir from performing in public, stating that foreigners should not get involved in domestic politics. The choir included six foreigners among its 50 members and refused to perform without the six. The performance was moved to an indoor venue and was recorded and posted on YouTube, where it received over 10,000 viewings.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution provides citizens the right to peaceful assembly but permits Parliament to impose restrictions "it considers necessary or expedient" in the interest of security, public order, or morality; in practice the government restricted this right. Public assemblies of five or more persons, including political meetings and rallies, require police permission; however, citizens do not need permits for some indoor speaking events. Spontaneous public gatherings or demonstrations were virtually unknown.

On August 18, the government announced it would relax restrictions on public gatherings at Speakers' Corner (see section 2.a.).

The government closely monitored political gatherings regardless of the number of persons present. Plain-clothes police officers often monitored political gatherings.

Freedom of Association

Most associations, societies, clubs, religious groups, and other organizations with more than 10 members are required to register with the government under the Societies Act. The government denied registration to groups that it believed were likely to have been formed for unlawful purposes or for purposes prejudicial to public peace, welfare, or public order. The government has absolute discretion in applying criteria to register or dissolve societies. During the year the Registry of Societies received 289 registration applications. No application processed during the year was denied.

The government prohibits organized political activities except by groups registered as political parties or political organizations. This prohibition limits opposition activities disproportionately and contributes to restricting the scope of unofficial political expression and action. The PAP was able to use nonpolitical organizations, such as residential committees and neighborhood groups, for political purposes far more extensively than opposition parties. Political parties and organizations are subject to strict financial regulations, including a ban on receiving foreign donations. Due to laws regulating the formation of publicly active organizations, there were few nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) apart from nonpolitical organizations such as religious groups, ethnically oriented organizations, and providers of welfare services.

c. Freedom of Religion

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the government restricted this right in some circumstances. The constitution provides that all citizens or persons in the country have the right to profess, practice, or propagate their religious belief so long as such activities do not breach any other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality.

All religious groups were subject to government scrutiny. These groups must be registered under the Societies Act. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) gives the government the power 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. Violation of a restraining order issued under the MRHA is a criminal offense. The act also prohibits judicial review of its enforcement or of any possible denial of rights arising from its implementation.

The government played an active but limited role in religious affairs. It did not tolerate speech or actions, including those of a religious nature, that it interpreted as adversely affecting racial and religious harmony. The government may issue restraining orders barring participation in activities adversely affecting religious harmony. The Presidential Council for Religious Harmony reviews such orders and makes recommendations to the president on whether to confirm, cancel, or alter a restraining order. The Presidential Council for Minority Rights examines all pending legislation to ensure it is not disadvantageous to a particular group, reports to the government on matters that affect any racial or religious community, and investigates complaints. The government maintains a relationship with the Muslim community through the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), which was established under the Administration of Muslim Law Act. The MUIS advises the government on the Muslim community's concerns, drafts a weekly approved sermon, maintains regulatory authority over Muslim religious matters, and oversees a fund financed by voluntary payroll deductions and used for mosque building and social and educational purposes.

The Jehovah's Witnesses and Unification Church are banned along with all written materials published by the Jehovah's Witnesses' publishing affiliates, the International Bible Students Association and the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. A person in possession of banned literature can be fined up to S\$2,000 (approximately \$1,500); for holding a meeting, the fine can be as high as S\$4,000 (\$3,000). There were no arrests of Unification Church members reported during the year. The government declined to make data available to the public concerning arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses during the year.

While the government did not prohibit evangelical activities, in practice it discouraged activities that could upset intercommunal relations, such as unsolicited public proselytizing.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The size of the Jewish community was approximately 800-1,000. There were no reports of societal religious discrimination or of anti-Semitic acts.

For a more detailed discussion, see the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report at www.state.gov/g/drl/irf/rpt.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights in practice; however, it limited them in a few respects. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

Citizens' choice of where to live sometimes was limited by the government's legal requirement for ethnic balance in publicly subsidized housing, in which the majority of citizens lived. The government required all citizens and permanent residents over the age of 15 to register and to carry identification cards. The government may refuse to issue a passport and did so in the case of former ISA detainees. Under the ISA a person's movement may be restricted. According to official press releases, at year's end there were 41 suspected terrorists subject to such restrictions.

The law prohibits forced exile, and the government did not employ it.

The right of voluntary repatriation was extended to holders of national passports. The government actively encouraged citizens living overseas to return home or at least to maintain active ties with the country. A provision of the law allows for the loss of citizenship by citizens who resided outside the country for more than 10 consecutive years, but it was not known to have been used.

In June the authorities refused to grant Chee Siok Chin permission to travel overseas to participate in a foreign fellowship program. She was required to have government approval to leave the country as a result of her bankruptcy stemming from failure to pay fines related to a 2005 protest she and three others staged outside a government building.

Men are required to serve 24 months of national service upon turning 18 years of age. They also are required to undergo reserve training up to the age of 40 (for enlisted men) or 50 (for officers). Male citizens with national service reserve obligations are required to advise the Ministry of Defense if they plan to travel abroad. Boys age 13 to 16½ years are issued passports that are valid for five years but are required to obtain exit permits for trips longer than three months. From the age of 16½ until the age of enlistment, male citizens are granted one-year passports and are required to apply for exit permits for travel that exceeds three months. A bond of S\$75,000 (approximately \$56,250) is needed for exit permits of two years or more for both age groups.

The law stipulates that former members of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) residing outside the country must apply to the government to be allowed to return. They must renounce communism, sever all organizational ties with the CPM, and pledge not to engage in activities prejudicial to the country's internal security. In addition, the law requires them to submit to an interview by the Internal Security Department and to accept any restrictive conditions imposed on them.

Protection of Refugees

The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status in accordance with the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, to which the country is not a party. The government has established a system for providing protection to refugees on a case-by-case basis. In practice, the government provided protection against expulsion or return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be threatened.

During the year the government required some Burmese nationals who held permanent residence status in Singapore to leave the country upon expiration of their visas. The authorities determined that these persons had attempted to hold demonstrations without approval and had ignored police warnings. They were not required to return to Burma but departed for third countries.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The constitution provides citizens the right to change their government peacefully. Opposition parties can contest elections, and the voting and vote-counting systems are fair and free from tampering; however, the PAP, which has held power continuously and overwhelmingly for almost five decades, has used the government's extensive powers to place formidable obstacles in the path of political opponents.

Elections and Political Participation

Following the 2006 elections, the PAP (having captured 66.6 percent of the vote) held 82 of 84 elected constituency seats in Parliament; the opposition Singapore Democratic Alliance (13.1 percent) and the Workers' Party (16.3 percent) each held one elected seat. Because three seats are reserved by law for opposition parties, the Workers'

Party obtained a second, "nonconstituency" seat as the opposition party with the highest vote total.

The opposition continued to criticize what it described as PAP abuse of its incumbency advantages to handicap opposition parties. The PAP maintained its political dominance in part by developing voter support through effective administration and its record in bringing economic prosperity to the country and in part by manipulating the electoral framework, intimidating organized political opposition, and circumscribing political discourse and action. The belief that the government might directly or indirectly harm the employment prospects of opposition supporters inhibited opposition political activity; however, there were no confirmed cases of such retaliation. As a result of these and other factors, opposition parties were unable to challenge seriously the ruling party. The PAP claimed that the lack of an effective opposition was due to disorganization, weak leadership, and the absence of persuasive alternative policies.

The PAP has an extensive grassroots system and a carefully selected, highly disciplined membership. The establishment of government-organized and predominantly publicly funded Community Development Councils (CDCs) further strengthened the PAP's position. The CDCs promoted community development and cohesion and provided welfare and other assistance services. The PAP dominated the CDCs even in opposition-held constituencies from which it threatened to withdraw publicly funded benefits.

The PAP completely controlled key positions in and out of government, influenced the press and courts, and limited opposition political activities. Often the means were fully consistent with the law and the normal prerogatives of a parliamentary government, but the overall effect (and many argued the ultimate purpose) was to disadvantage and weaken political opposition. Since 1988 the PAP changed all but nine single-seat constituencies into group representational constituencies (GRCs) of five to six parliamentary seats, in which the party with a plurality wins all of the seats. According to the constitution, such changes are permitted to ensure ethnic minority representation in Parliament; each GRC candidate list must contain at least one ethnic minority candidate. These changes made it more difficult for opposition parties, all of which had very limited memberships, to fill multimember candidate lists. The constitutional requirement that members of Parliament resign if expelled from their party helped ensure backbencher discipline.

Although political parties legally were free to organize, they operated under the same limitations that applied to all organizations, and the authorities imposed strict regulations on their constitutions, fundraising, and accountability. There were 24 registered political parties in the country; however, only six of these were active. Political parties and organizations were subject to strict financial regulations, including a ban on receiving foreign donations. Government regulations hindered attempts by opposition parties to rent office space in government housing blocks or to establish community foundations. In addition government influence extended in varying degrees to academic, community service, and other NGOs.

The law provides for a popularly elected president to be elected for a six-year term from among candidates who are approved by a constitutionally prescribed committee selected by the government. In 2005 the committee decided that the PAP endorsed incumbent, President S.R. Nathan, was the only qualified candidate out of four applicants. The election was cancelled, and Nathan was inaugurated for a second term. The government placed significant obstacles in the way of opposition political figures' presidential candidacies. For example, opposition members were much less likely to satisfy the requirement that candidates have experience in managing the financial affairs of a large institution, since many of the country's large institutions were run by or linked to the government.

Voting is compulsory, and 95 percent of eligible voters voted. There is no legal bar to the participation of women in political life; women held 17 of the 84 elected parliamentary seats. There were three female ministers of state, although none of cabinet rank. Three of the 15 Supreme Court justices were women. On April 11, the government appointed the country's first female solicitor general.

There are no restrictions in law or practice against minorities voting or participating in politics; they actively participated in the political process and were well represented throughout the government, except in some sensitive military positions. Malays made up approximately 15 percent of the general population and held approximately the same percentage of elected seats in Parliament. Indians made up approximately 9 percent of the general population and held approximately 11 percent of the elected seats in Parliament. There were four ethnic Indian ministers and one ethnic Malay minister. Three of the 14 members of the Supreme Court were ethnic Indian; there were no Malays on the court.

Government Corruption and Transparency

There were no reports of government corruption during the year. In the past the government actively prosecuted officials involved in corruption. The salaries of senior officials are public information, and political parties must report donations; however, there is no financial disclosure law.

There are no laws that specifically provide for public access to government information; however, significant amounts of information were available on government Web sites.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Efforts by independent organizations to investigate and evaluate government human rights policies faced the same obstacles as those faced by opposition political parties. NGOs were subject to registration under the Societies Act. Some domestic NGOs criticized restrictions on human rights or suggested changes that would relax or remove restrictions. NGOs working in the area of trafficking in persons described cooperation from the authorities as "excellent."

The Presidential Council on Minority Rights monitors pending legislation for anything possibly disadvantageous to minorities.

The government permitted international human rights organizations to observe human rights related court cases.

Section 5 Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The constitution states that all persons are equal before the law and entitled to the equal protection of the law, and the government generally respected these provisions in practice; there is no explicit provision granting equal rights to women and minorities. Mindful of the country's history of intercommunal tension, the government took measures to ensure racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural nondiscrimination. Social, economic, and cultural benefits and facilities were available to all citizens regardless of race, religion, or gender.

Women

The government enforced the law against rape, which provides for imprisonment of up to 20 years and caning for offenders. Under the law, rape can be committed only by a man, and spousal rape is not a crime; however, husbands who force their wives to have intercourse can be prosecuted for other offenses, such as assault. During the year 10 persons were prosecuted for rape; there were two convictions, and eight persons were awaiting trial. The Ministry of Education and the police both carried out programs aimed at preventing rape.

The law criminalizes domestic violence and intentional harassment; however, violence or abuse against women occurred. A victim of domestic violence can obtain court orders barring the spouse from the home until the court is

satisfied that the spouse has ceased aggressive behavior. The number of court orders for protection against violent family members increased in recent years, in part because the definition of violence includes intimidation, continual harassment, or restraint against one's will. The law prescribes mandatory caning and a minimum imprisonment of two years for conviction on any charge of "outraging modesty" that caused the victim fear of death or injury. The press gave prominent coverage to instances of abuse or violence against women. Several organizations provided assistance to abused women. The Association of Women for Action and Research operated a hot line that offered counseling and legal advice. The Family Protection and Welfare Service, an office of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth, and Sports (MCYS), documented physical and psychological abuse and provided counseling and other support services to abused women. The Star Shelter accepted children, women, and men and could accommodate up to 30 persons. In 2006 there were more than 2,600 applications for Personal Protection Orders, 70 percent of which were filed by wives for protection against their husbands. The government did not provide more recent data concerning such orders.

Prostitution itself is not illegal; however, public solicitation, living on the earnings of a prostitute, and maintaining a brothel are illegal. The authorities periodically carried out crackdowns on solicitation for prostitution and arrested and deported foreign prostitutes, particularly when their activities took place outside informally designated red-light areas. In practice police unofficially tolerated and monitored a limited number of brothels; prostitutes in such establishments were required to undergo periodic health checks and carry a health card.

There are no specific laws prohibiting stalking or sexual harassment; however, the Miscellaneous Offenses Act and laws prohibiting insults to modesty were used successfully to prosecute these offenses. Sexual harassment was not considered a significant problem; there was an active education program in place for workers.

Women accounted for 56 percent of civil service employees. They enjoyed the same legal rights as men, including civil liberties, employment, commercial activity, and education. The Women's Charter gives women, among other rights, the rights to own property, conduct trade, and receive divorce settlements. Muslim women enjoyed most of the rights and protections of the Women's Charter. For the most part, Muslim marriage falls under the administration of the Muslim Law Act, which empowers the Shari'a (Islamic law) court to oversee such matters. The laws allow Muslim men to practice polygyny, although requests to take additional spouses may be refused by the Registry of Muslim Marriages, which solicits the views of an existing wife or wives and reviews the financial capability of the husband. During the year there were 53 applications for polygynous marriages. As of year's end, 21 of those applications were approved, 11 were rejected, six had been withdrawn, and 15 remained pending. Polygynous marriages constituted 0.5 percent of Muslim marriages.

Both men and women have the right to initiate divorce proceedings; however, in practice women faced significant difficulties that often prevented them from pursuing such proceedings. This included the lack of financial resources to obtain legal counsel. Men do not have the right to seek alimony from their wives in cases of divorce or separation.

As of June women constituted 43.3 percent of the labor force and were well represented in many professions. The percentage of women between the ages of 30 and 54 in the workforce increased to 68.9 percent in 2007, with 46.8 percent of women 55 and over employed. However, women held few leadership positions in the private sector and no cabinet level positions in the government. Women were overrepresented in low wage jobs such as clerks and secretaries. Salaries for women ranged upwards from 66 percent of men's salaries depending on the occupational grouping. In some occupations women earned more than their male counterparts. Observers noted that the wage differential was smaller in professional jobs and that wage disparities could be attributed in part to differences in average educational levels and work experience.

Children

The government demonstrated a strong commitment to children's rights and welfare through well-funded systems of public education and medical care, and access was equal for all children. The Children and Young Persons Act created a juvenile court system and established protective services for children orphaned, abused, "troubled," and with disabilities. The MCYS worked closely with the National Council for Social Services to oversee children's welfare cases. Voluntary organizations operated most of the homes for children, while the government funded from 50 to 100 percent of living expenses and overhead, as well as expenses for special schooling, health care, and supervisory needs.

Some child prostitution occurred. During the year authorities arrested 40 female prostitutes believed to be under the age of 18. In 2007 the government revised the penal code to criminalize commercial sex with any individual under the age of 18, whether the offense occurs in Singapore or elsewhere. One person was prosecuted for and convicted of this offense during the year. The age of consent remains 16 years of age. Sexual intercourse with anyone under the age of 16 is illegal, and the law prescribes punishment of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to S\$10,000 (approximately \$7,500). The authorities may detain persons under age 18 who are believed to be engaged in prostitution, as well as to prosecute those who organize or profit from prostitution, who bring women or girls to the country for prostitution, or who coerce or deceive women or girls into prostitution.

The MCYS sponsored activities promoting children's causes, including family stability. The ministry and several NGOs focused on keeping fathers involved in their children's lives and on preventing child abuse.

Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits all forms of trafficking in persons; however, the country was a destination for women and girls trafficked from Southeast Asia and China for prostitution. A small number of foreign domestic workers faced seriously abusive labor conditions that amounted to involuntary servitude. Some women from Thailand, the Philippines, China, and Indonesia who traveled to the country voluntarily for prostitution or other work were deceived.

Three major laws govern trafficking and prostitution: the Women's Charter, the Children and Young Persons' Act, and the penal code. Trafficking in women and children, regardless of whether it is related to prostitution, is punishable by up to five years' imprisonment, a S\$10,000 (approximately \$7,500) fine, and caning. Traffickers could be prosecuted under provisions governing kidnapping, abduction, slavery, and forced labor, which carry maximum punishments of 10 years' imprisonment and a fine. Convicted traffickers could be found guilty of violating more than one law. There was no specific campaign to combat or prevent the use of fraud or coercion to recruit foreign women as prostitutes, although some persons were prosecuted and punished for crimes involving such acts. During the year one person was prosecuted in relation to forced prostitution and importing women under false pretenses for the purpose of prostitution.

In practice successful investigation and prosecution of trafficking in persons required that victims remain in or return to the country to testify. Police urged victims to remain in the country until a case was prosecuted, and generally they did; some abused domestics who left were brought back to testify. Victims did not receive government assistance during this period or at other times and sometimes were not granted permission for alternative employment and were dependent on support from their embassy. Laws prohibiting the harboring, aiding, or abetting of illegal immigrants could hamper assistance to trafficking victims by putting NGOs in the position of harboring a victim who has no legal status; however, the authorities did not appear to investigate or prosecute such assistance.

The authorities notified embassies of the arrest of nationals, including for prostitution-related offenses, and allowed consular access. Prostitutes rarely contacted embassies voluntarily, unless detained for solicitation or immigration

offenses during police sweeps. However, victims of crimes, including domestics alleging abuse, sometimes requested and received assistance from their embassies.

The State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report can be found at www.state.gov/g/tip.

Persons with Disabilities

The government maintained a comprehensive code on barrier-free accessibility; this established standards for facilities for persons with physical disabilities in all new buildings and mandated the progressive upgrading of older structures. There was no legislation addressing equal opportunities for persons with disabilities in education or employment; however, the National Council of Social Services, in conjunction with various voluntary associations, provided an extensive job training and placement program for persons with disabilities. The government also ran vigorous campaigns to raise public awareness of issues confronting persons with disabilities and the services available to them. A tax deduction of up to S\$100,000 (approximately \$75,000) was available to employers to defray the expense of building modifications to benefit employees with disabilities. The country allows guide dogs for the blind into public places and on public transportation. During the year, 6.5 percent of public trains and buses were wheelchair accessible.

Informal provisions in education permitted university matriculation for the visually impaired, those hard of hearing, and students with other physical disabilities. More than 4,000 children with intellectual disabilities attended mainstream schools. There were 20 special education schools that enrolled approximately 4,800 students. Approximately 20 percent of primary and secondary schools were equipped with full-handicap facilities, and all schools were outfitted with basic handicap facilities such as handicap toilets and first-level wheelchair ramps. The government provided funds for six childcare centers to take in 60 children with special needs.

The government allowed a tax deduction of up to S\$3,500 (\$2,625) per individual for families caring for a sibling, spouse, or child with a disability. Mental and physical disabilities were treated in the same way. Press coverage of the activities and achievements of persons with disabilities was extensive, and discrimination or abuse of persons with disabilities did not appear to be a problem.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic Malays constituted approximately 15 percent of the population. The constitution acknowledges them as the indigenous people of the country and charges the government to support and to promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social, cultural, and language interests. The government took steps to encourage greater educational achievement among Malay students. However, ethnic Malays have not yet reached the educational or socioeconomic levels achieved by the ethnic Chinese majority, the ethnic Indian minority, or the Eurasian community. Malays remained underrepresented at senior corporate levels and, some asserted, in certain sectors of the government and the military. This reflected their historically lower educational and economic levels, but some argued that it also was a result of employment discrimination. The government issued guidelines that call for eliminating language referring to age, gender, or ethnicity in employment advertisements; restrictive language pertinent to job requirements, such as "Chinese speaker" remains acceptable. These guidelines were generally followed.

The Presidential Council on Minority Rights examined all pending bills to ensure that they were not disadvantageous to a particular group. It also reported to the government on matters that affected any racial or religious community and investigated complaints.

Government policy enforced ethnic ratios for publicly subsidized housing to prevent ethnic or racial ghettos.

Other Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Some individuals with HIV/AIDS claimed that they were socially marginalized and faced employment discrimination if they revealed they were suffering from the disease. The government discouraged discrimination, supported initiatives that countered misperceptions about HIV/AIDS, and publicly praised employers that welcomed workers with HIV/AIDS.

Consensual homosexual sex is illegal but in practice was not prosecuted.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

The constitution provides all citizens the right to form associations, including trade unions; however, parliament may impose restrictions based on security, public order, or morality grounds. The right of association was restricted by the Societies Act and by labor and education laws and regulations. Under these laws any group of 10 or more persons is required to register with the government. The Trade Unions Act authorizes the formation of unions with broad rights, albeit with some narrow restrictions such as prohibitions on the unionization of uniformed personnel or government employees. The Amalgamated Union of Public Employees was declared exempt from these provisions, and its scope of representation expanded to cover all public sector employees except the most senior civil servants.

The Trade Unions Act restricts the right of trade unions to elect their officers and to choose whom they may employ. Foreigners and those with criminal convictions may not hold union office or become employees of unions. However, the minister of manpower may grant exemptions. The Trade Unions Act limits the objectives for which unions can spend their funds and prohibits payments to political parties or the use of funds for political purposes. In 2007 the national labor force consisted of approximately 2.9 million workers, nearly 500,000 of whom were represented by 69 unions. Almost all of the unions (which represented virtually all union members) were affiliated with the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), an umbrella organization with a close relationship with the government.

The NTUC acknowledged that its interests were linked closely with those of the ruling PAP, a relationship often described by both as symbiotic. The NTUC's secretary general, Lim Swee Say, a PAP MP, was a member of the cabinet as minister in the Prime Minister's Office. Young PAP MPs with no union experience were often elected to leadership positions in the NTUC or a member union. NTUC policy prohibited union members who supported opposition parties from holding office in affiliated unions. While the NTUC is financially independent of the PAP, the two shared a common ideology and worked closely with management in support of nonconfrontational labor relations. The NTUC is free to associate regionally and internationally.

Workers in "essential services" are required to give 14 days' notice to an employer before striking, and there is a prohibition on strikes by workers in the water, gas, and electricity sectors. Other workers have the legal right to strike but rarely did so. No specific laws prohibit retaliation against strikers. The law provides that before striking, 51 percent of unionized workers must vote in favor of the strike by secret ballot, as opposed to the more common practice of 51 percent of those participating in the vote.

Most disagreements were resolved through informal consultations with the Ministry of Manpower. If conciliation failed, the disputing parties usually submitted their case to the tripartite Industrial Arbitration Court (IAC), which is composed of representatives from labor and management and chaired by a judge. In limited situations the law provides for compulsory arbitration, which has not been used since 1980. Besides these labor dispute mechanisms and the close working relationship and shared views among labor, management, and the government, the

maintenance of labor peace has been a product of high economic growth rates, regular wage increases, and a high degree of job mobility in a virtual full employment economy.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Collective bargaining was a normal part of labor-management relations in the industrial sector. The IAC must certify collective agreements before they go into effect. The IAC may refuse certification at its discretion on the ground of public interest. Union members may not reject collective agreements negotiated between their union representatives and the employer. Transfers and layoffs are excluded from the scope of collective bargaining. However, in practice employers consulted with unions on both issues, and the Tripartite Panel on Retrenched Workers issued guidelines calling for early notification to unions of layoffs.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, including by children, and there were no reports that such practices occurred.

d. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The government enforced the Employment Act, which prohibits employment of children under the age of 12. Restrictions on the employment of children between the ages of 12 and 16 are rigorous and were fully enforced. Children under the age of 14 generally are prohibited from employment in the industrial sector. Exceptions include family enterprises; children may work in a business in which only members of the same family are employed. A child age 12 or older may be employed in light work, subject to medical clearance. Employers must notify the commissioner of labor within 30 days of hiring a child between the ages of 14 and 16 and attach a medical certification of the child's fitness for employment. The incidence of children in permanent employment was low, and abuses were almost nonexistent.

Ministry of Manpower regulations prohibit night employment of children and restrict industrial work for children between the ages of 14 and 16 to no more than seven hours a day, including the hours spent in school. Children may not work on commercial vessels, with moving machinery, on live electrical apparatus lacking effective insulation, or in any underground job. The minister of manpower effectively enforced these laws and regulations.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There are no laws or regulations on minimum wages or unemployment compensation. Agreements between management and labor were renewed every two to three years, although wage increases were negotiated annually. The National Wages Council, a group composed of labor, management, and government representatives, issued yearly guidelines on raises and bonus pay that served as the starting point for bargaining agreements. Subject to negotiation in each enterprise, up to 10 percent of salaries was considered "variable" each month, allowing companies to eliminate that portion of pay if there were financial problems. The labor market generally offered citizens and permanent residents good working conditions and relatively high wages, which provided a decent standard of living for a worker and family.

The Employment Act sets the standard legal workweek at 44 hours and provides for one rest day each week.

The Ministry of Manpower effectively enforced laws and regulations establishing working conditions and

comprehensive occupational safety and health laws. Enforcement procedures, coupled with the promotion of educational and training programs, were implemented to reduce the frequency of job-related accidents. While workers have the right under the Employment Act to remove themselves from a dangerous work situation, their right to continued employment depended upon an investigation of the circumstances by the ministry.

Because of a domestic labor shortage, approximately 600,000 foreign workers were employed legally, constituting approximately 30 percent of the total work force. There were no reliable estimates of the number of foreigners working illegally. Most foreign workers were unskilled laborers and household servants from other Asian countries. Foreign workers faced no legal wage discrimination; however, they were concentrated in low-wage, low skill jobs and were often required to work long hours. Employers are required by law to provide their workers with a minimum standard of housing.

Although the great majority of the approximately 180,000 maids (mainly from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka) worked under clearly outlined contracts, their low wages, dependence on their employers for food and lodging, and relative isolation made them vulnerable to mistreatment, abuse, and labor conditions that in some cases could amount to involuntary servitude. The authorities fined or imprisoned employers who abused maids. During the year the Ministry of Manpower collected unpaid wages on behalf of maids in 276 cases. The government prosecuted abusive employers in numerous cases. For example in July, a man was sentenced to 2½ years in jail for repeatedly molesting his Indonesian maid, and, in a separate case, a housewife was sentenced to a 20-month jail term for causing her dog to bite her maid. In June a man was sentenced to 10 months in jail and three strokes of the cane for molesting his domestic employee. In September two siblings were sentenced to six weeks and 26 months in jail, respectively, for abusing their Indonesian maid.

Public debate continued about how to prevent abuse of maids. The Ministry of Manpower operated a demerit points system that penalized employment agencies for violating government regulations. The accumulated points are shown on the ministry's Web site to help potential employers identify errant agencies. Agencies with too many demerits faced license suspension. The ministry sets the minimum age for maids at 23 and requires all maids to show that they had eight years of formal education before allowing them to enter the country. All new maids and new employers of maids must undergo mandatory training on maids' rights and responsibilities. Maids must take a written entrance exam that covers topics such as safety and English comprehension. In July the ministry issued regulations that prohibit employers both from receiving payment as consideration for employing foreign workers and from recovering from employees any employment-related costs, such as mandatory health insurance, fees, and training costs.

Most maids worked six days per week from early morning until late in the evening. The ministry required employers to deposit a maid's salary directly into her bank account if she so requests. The ministry also regularly distributed pamphlets in four different languages alerting maids to their rights. The law mandates a standard employment contract for maids and stipulates that maids are to be provided either a minimum of one day off each month or cash compensation.

Maids often had to set aside most or all of their wages for the first several months of employment to reimburse their placement agents. Work permits for low-wage foreign workers may be cancelled if a worker applies to marry or married a citizen or permanent resident.

The Employment Act protects foreign workers such as the many employed in the construction industry; however, domestic servants are not covered by the act and are not eligible for limited free legal assistance from the government. The NTUC reported that it advocated for the rights of all migrant work-permit holders through its Migrant Workers' Forum. In addition, the Ministry of Manpower offered conciliation services for all employees, foreign or local. The Foreign Workers Unit of the ministry provided free advisory and mediation services to foreign

workers experiencing problems with employers. The government allowed complainants to seek legal redress and operated a hot line for maids. During the year the hot line received approximately 4,800 calls, 97 percent of which were general inquiries.