



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report](#) » [East Asia and Pacific](#) » [Singapore](#)

## Singapore

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report**

Report

**September 13, 2011**

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. However, the government restricts speech or actions that it deems could adversely affect racial or religious harmony.

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

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

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 270 square miles and a population of approximately 5.1 million, of whom 3.77 million are citizens or permanent residents, according to official estimates as of June. According to the most recent decennial census, taken in 2000, 85 percent of citizens and permanent residents profess a religion. Approximately 42.5 percent of the population is Buddhist, 15 percent Muslim, 15 percent Christian, 8.5 percent Taoist, and 4 percent Hindu. Adherents of other religious groups, including small Sikh, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Jain communities, make up less than 1 percent of the population. The remainder of the population, approximately 15 percent, does not profess a religious belief.

According to the 2010 census, 74.1 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, 13.4 percent ethnic Malay, 9.2 percent ethnic Indian, and 3.3 percent other, including Eurasians. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim. Among ethnic Indians, 55 percent are Hindu, 25 percent are Muslim, and 12 percent are Christian. The ethnic Chinese population includes mainly

Buddhists (54 percent), Taoists (11 percent), and Christians (16.5 percent). There are no current membership estimates for Jehovah's Witnesses or the Unification Church, the two religious groups that the government has banned.

There has been a small Jewish community since the early 19th century. Estimates of its current size range from 300 to 1,500, excluding foreign residents living in the country temporarily. The country has two operating synagogues, both of which are listed as national monuments.

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

### Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution protects religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections; however, other laws and policies restricted this right in some circumstances. The constitution states that every person has a constitutional right to profess, practice, or propagate religious belief so long as such activities do not breach any other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality. There is no state religion.

Religious groups, like all associations of 10 or more persons, must be registered under the Societies Act. Registered societies were subject to potential deregistration by the government on a variety of grounds, such as having purposes prejudicial to public peace, welfare, or good order. Such a designation makes it impossible to maintain a legal identity as a religious group, with consequences relating to owning property, conducting financial transactions, and holding public meetings. Anyone who acted as a member of or attended a meeting of an unlawful society may be punished with a fine, imprisonment, or both.

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

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

The Administration of Muslim Law Act allows Muslim men to practice polygamy, but requests to take additional wives may be refused in accordance with Islamic law by the Registry of Muslim Marriages, which solicits the views of existing wives and reviews the financial capability of the husband. In the second half of the year, there were 18 applications for polygamous marriage; one was approved. The rest were rejected, withdrawn, or remained pending at the end of the

reporting period. Under the act certain criminal offenses apply only to those who profess Islam, including cohabitation outside of marriage and publicly expounding any doctrine relating to Islam in a manner contrary to Islamic law.

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

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act established a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. The country's president appoints its members on the advice of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights. Two-thirds of the members were required to be representatives of the major religions in the country. The Council for Religious Harmony considers and reports on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony that are referred to it by the minister for home affairs or by parliament.

Encouragement of religious harmony and toleration is part of the official primary and secondary public school curricula. The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools. Religious instruction is allowed in private schools, including madrassahs (Islamic schools) and Christian schools. There were 10 private religious schools offering primary and secondary education, six of which were madrassahs and four private and privately funded regular schools affiliated with Christian churches. All private school students must meet or exceed the public school performance standard on annual achievement exams.

Urban Redevelopment Authority guidelines regulate the use of commercial space for religious activities and religious organizations; the guidelines apply to all religious groups. Enacted in July, no more than 20,000 square meters (215,000 square feet) or 20 percent of a commercial complex's gross floor area may be used for religious purposes. Activities are permitted no more than twice weekly. Religious organizations are limited to using 10,000 square meters (108,000 square feet) of commercial space.

In October the Humanist Society (Singapore) was registered (gazetted); it is the first group of its kind to be recognized by the government. Its members are secular humanists, mainly atheist and agnostics.

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

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. By application of the Societies Act, the government deregistered the country's congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1972 and the Unification Church in 1982, making them unlawful societies. No charges were brought against persons attending or holding religious meetings in private homes during the reporting period.

Missionaries, with the exception of members of Jehovah's Witnesses and representatives of the Unification Church, are permitted to work and to publish and distribute religious texts; however, while the government does not formally prohibit proselytism, in practice it discouraged activities that it deemed may upset the balance of intergroup relations. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act authorizes the minister for home affairs to issue a restraining order against any person in a position of authority within a religious group where the minister is satisfied that the person was causing feelings of enmity or hostility between different religious groups, promoting political causes, carrying out subversive activities, or exciting disaffection against the government under the guise of practicing religion. Any restraining order must be referred to the Council for Religious Harmony, which has the duty of recommending to the president that the order be confirmed, cancelled, or amended. Restraining orders lapse after 90 days at most, unless confirmed by the president. The

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minister must review a confirmed restraining order at least once every 12 months and may revoke such an order at any time. The act prohibits judicial review of restraining orders issued under its authority. Between 1990 and the end of the reporting period, no restraining orders were issued under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act.

All written materials published by the International Bible Students Association and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, both publishing arms of Jehovah's Witnesses, remain banned by the government under the Undesirable Publications Act. The government also prohibited importation of publications by the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, the Children of God (also known as the Family of Love, the Family, and Family International), and the Church of Satan. A person in possession of a prohibited publication can be fined up to S\$2,000 (\$1,500) and jailed up to 12 months for a first conviction. There were no government seizures of publications by any of these groups during this reporting period.

In December authorities convicted five Falun Gong practitioners of committing or abetting vandalism for temporarily affixing posters to public property. At their sentencing (to occur in 2011), they face possible penalties of fines or imprisonment. Other Falun Gong practitioners in the country reported facing difficulties in renewing permanent residency or temporary immigration status, obtaining reentry permits, and obtaining permission to work. In August police used their power to issue "move on" orders, created under the 2009 Public Order Act, to compel Falun Gong members to disperse from an area. One practitioner was arrested and was facing deportation.

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

### Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

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

Since 2002 the government has supported the operation of an "interracial and religious confidence circle" (IRCC) in each of the country's 84 electoral constituencies. The IRCCs give racial and religious group leaders a dialogue forum to promote racial and religious harmony at the municipal level. Under the auspices of the Ministry for Community Development, Youth, and Sports, the IRCCs conducted local interreligious dialogues, counseling and trust-building workshops, community celebrations, and similar activities.

The government continued to promote harmony among ethnic and religious groups through the Community Engagement Program (CEP), created in 2006 primarily to foster social cohesion to minimize ethnic or religious discord in the event of a terrorist attack or other civil emergency. The CEP is supported by the work of the IRCCs and other local "clusters" of participants. The government trained community leaders involved in the CEP in emergency preparedness and techniques for promoting racial and religious harmony. The CEP also conducted youth outreach activities and engaged local celebrities such as radio disk jockeys and television personalities to reinforce messages of communal harmony.

A nongovernmental Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), which traced its origins to 1949, brought together leaders of the 10 religious communities with the most adherents in the country: Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and the Bahai Faith. The IRO listed among its objectives inculcating a spirit of friendship among the leaders and followers of these different groups and promoting mutual respect, assistance, and protection. The IRO organized seminars and public talks, conducted interreligious prayer services, and kept in print a reference booklet entitled "Religious Customs and Practices in Singapore."

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy actively maintained contacts with the various religious communities in the country including the holding of an iftar (evening meal during Ramadan) and a Hanukkah party at the ambassador's residence. Embassy

officers participated in Ramadan on Wheels and at Christmas events organized by various churches. The U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities visited in December.

[Back to Top](#)