



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

Singapore

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, other laws and policies restricted this right in some circumstances.

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

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

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of 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 5.08 million, of whom 3.77 million are citizens or permanent residents, according to official estimates as of June 2010. According to the last decennial census taken in 2000, 85 percent of citizens and permanent residents profess a religion. Approximately 42.5 percent of the population is Buddhist, 15 percent Muslim, 15 percent Christian, 8.5 percent Taoist, and 4 percent Hindu. Adherents of other religious groups, including small Sikh, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Jain communities, compose 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 expatriates residing in the country temporarily. The country has two operating synagogues, both of which are listed as national monuments. There is no history of significant anti-Semitism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; 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 his or her religious belief so long as such activities do not breach any other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality. There is no state religion.

Religious groups, like all associations of 10 or more persons, must be registered under the Societies Act. Registered societies 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 ensure 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 approved weekly sermon used in mosques throughout the country, regulates 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 Muslim law, "as varied where applicable by Malay custom." Under the act, a Shari'a (Islamic law) court has non-exclusive jurisdiction over the marital affairs of Muslims, including maintenance payments, the disposition of property upon divorce, and custody of minor children. Orders of the Shari'a court were enforced by the ordinary civil courts. Appeals within the Shari'a system were 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 Muslim law by the Registry of Muslim Marriages, which solicits the views of existing wives and reviews the financial capability of the husband. As of the end of 2009, there were 43 applications for polygamous marriage, 11 of which were 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 the Muslim religion in a manner contrary to Islamic law.

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

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act establishes a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. The 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 was allowed in private schools, including madrassahs (Islamic schools) and Christian schools. As of the end of 2009, there were 11 private religious schools offering primary and secondary education, nine of which were madrassahs and two of which were affiliated with Christian churches. All private school students must meet or exceed the public school performance standard on annual achievement exams.

The government observes 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 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. As of the end of 2009, 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 authorized 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 was satisfied that the person was causing feelings of enmity or hostility between different religious groups, or was promoting political causes, carrying out subversive activities, or exciting disaffection against the government under the guise of practicing religion. Any restraining order must be referred to the Council for Religious Harmony, which has the duty of recommending to the president that the order be confirmed, cancelled, or amended. Restraining orders lapse after 90 days at most, unless confirmed by the president. The minister must review a confirmed restraining order at least once every 12 months and may revoke such an order at any time. The act prohibits judicial review of restraining orders issued under its authority. Between 1990 and 2009 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 \$1500 (Singapore Dollars \$2,000) and jailed up to 12 months for a first conviction. There were no government seizures of publications by any of these groups during the previous reporting period.

A married couple convicted in May 2009 of several offenses, including sedition, for distributing illustrated Christian religious tracts to the country's Muslims abandoned appeals of their convictions. They served five and a half weeks of their eight-week prison sentences, with the balance remitted for good behavior.

Authorities pursued charges of committing or abetting vandalism against five Falun Gong practitioners for temporarily affixing posters to public property. If convicted the practitioners faced possible penalties of fines, imprisonment, or caning. Other Falun Gong practitioners in the country reported facing difficulties in renewing permanent residency or temporary immigration status, obtaining re-entry permits, and obtaining permission to work. In November 2009, police reportedly 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.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

In his August 2009 National Day speech, the prime minister noted dangers to the country's "social cohesion" arising from aggressive proselytism and religious intolerance. He prescribed four "rules" governing religion in public life: racial and religious groups must exercise tolerance and "rules that apply only to one group cannot be made into laws that apply to everyone"; religion must be separate from politics; government must be secular, and public policy must be based on "secular, rational considerations of public interest"; and common space, notably schools and workplaces, must accommodate members of all religions. Commenting on the growth of aggressive proselytism, the minister for home affairs stated, "We cannot have unbridled freedom of religion, at the expense of nation-building and social cohesion, or to such an extent that it foments divisiveness among our people."

In February 2010 the Internal Security Department reprimanded a Protestant pastor whose church Web site carried videos of the pastor making disparaging remarks about Buddhist and Taoist beliefs. The pastor publicly apologized to the heads of the country's Buddhist and Taoist communities, who accepted his apology. In June 2010 videos of another Protestant pastor making disparaging comments about Taoism appeared on the Internet, and that pastor likewise made a public apology to the head of the Taoist Federation after the Internal Security Department announced it would investigate.

Since 2002 the government has supported the operation of an "inter racial and religious confidence circle" (IRCC) in each of the country's 84 electoral constituencies. IRCCs were intended to 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 inter-religious dialogues, counseling and trust-building workshops, community celebrations, and similar activities. In April 2010 the government launched the first IRCC youth wing with a target membership between the ages of 17 and 40.

The government continued to promote harmony among ethnic and religious groups through the Community Engagement Program (CEP). The CEP began in 2006, primarily to foster social cohesion to minimize ethnic or religious discord in the event of a terrorist attack 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; as of April 2010, 165 community leaders had received such training. The CEP also conducted youth outreach activities and engages 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 Baha'ism. 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. To achieve these objectives, 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.

[Back to Top](#)