



Singapore

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. 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.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 270 square miles and a population of 4.8 million, of whom 3.6 million are citizens or permanent residents. According to the 2000 census, 85 percent of citizens and permanent residents profess a religion. Of this group, 51 percent practice Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor veneration, or other religious practice traditionally associated with the ethnic Chinese population. Approximately 15 percent of the population is Muslim, 15 percent Christian, and 4 percent Hindu. The remainder is composed of adherents of other religious groups, including small Sikh, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Jain communities. Among Christians, the majority of whom are ethnic Chinese, 33 percent are Roman Catholic and 67 percent are Protestant. The remaining 15 percent of the population does not profess a religious faith.

Approximately 77 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, 14 percent ethnic Malay, and 8 percent ethnic Indian. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim, and a majority of ethnic Indians are Hindu. The ethnic Chinese population includes mainly Buddhists, Taoists, and Christians. In 2000 there were an estimated 2,000 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses; however, no official membership records are available for either Jehovah's Witnesses or the Unification Church, as neither group is recognized by the Government.

Section II. Status of 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 citizen or person in the country has a constitutional right to profess, practice, or propagate his or her religious belief so long as such activities do not breach any other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality. There is no state religion.

All religious groups are subject to government scrutiny and must be registered under 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. 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.

The Government plays an active but limited role in religious affairs. For example, the Government seeks to ensure that citizens, most of whom live in 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 Ugama Islamiya Singapura (MUIS), which is comprised of Muslim men appointed by the President to serve 3-year terms. The MUIS advises the Government on concerns of the Muslim community, drafts the approved weekly sermon used in mosques throughout the country, regulates some Islamic religious matters, and oversees a mosque-building fund financed by voluntary payroll deductions. The Constitution states that Malay Muslims are "the indigenous people of Singapore" and requires the Government to promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social, cultural, and linguistic interests.

The 1961 Women's Charter gives women the right to own property, conduct trade, and receive divorce settlements, among other rights. Muslim women enjoy most of the rights and protections of the Women's Charter; however, for the most part, Islamic marriage law falls under the administration of the Muslim Law Act, which empowers the Shari'a Court to oversee such matters. Appeals within the Shari'a system are made to an Appeal Board composed of three members of the MUIS, who are appointed to the Appeal Board by the President of the MUIS. The ruling of the Appeal Board is final and no other appeals are possible. The Act also allows Muslim men to practice polygamy, but requests to take additional wives may be refused by the Registry of Muslim Marriages, which solicits the views of existing wives and reviews the financial capability of the husband. In the period covered by this report, there were 44 applications for polygamous marriage, 18 of which were approved.

The Presidential Council on Minority Rights examines all pending bills to ensure that they do not disadvantage particular groups. It also reports to the Government on matters concerning any racial or religious community and investigates complaints. There were no complaints or reports to the Council from fiscal year 2006/07. Fiscal year 2007/08 data were not available by the end of the reporting period.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools. Religious instruction is allowed in private schools, such as madrassahs (Islamic schools). During the period covered by this report, there were 59 private schools offering kindergarten through 12th grade education, 9 of which were madrassahs and 6 of which were affiliated with various religions. All private school students must meet or exceed the public school performance standard on annual achievement exams.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

By application of the Societies Act, the Government restricts certain religious groups, such as the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses. Section 24(1) (a) of the Act allows the Government to deregister any society if it is deemed to have "purposes prejudicial to public peace, welfare or good order in Singapore." Deregistration effectively criminalizes the religion. Although public meetings of these religious groups are illegal, no charges were brought against persons attending or holding religious meetings in private homes during the period covered by this report.

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 evangelical activities, in practice it discourages activities that it deems may upset the balance of intergroup relations. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act made illegal actions that the Government viewed as threats to religious harmony. This includes aggressive and "insensitive proselytizing" and the "mixing of religion and politics." The Minister of Home Affairs oversees the Presidential Council on Religious Harmony, which is empowered to issue restraining orders against leaders and members of religious groups to prevent them from carrying out political activities, "exciting disaffection" against the Government, creating "ill will" between religious groups, or carrying out subversive activities. The Act also prohibits judicial review of its enforcement or of any possible denial of rights arising from it.

The Government has banned all written materials published by the International Bible Students Association and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, both publishing arms of the Jehovah's Witnesses. A person in

possession of banned literature can be fined up to \$1,460 (S\$ 2,000) and jailed up to 12 months for a first conviction. There were no government seizures of Jehovah's Witnesses literature during this reporting period.

During the period covered by this report, a couple was charged with sedition for distributing a comic strip titled "The Little Bride," which was deemed critical of Islam. The tract portrayed Islam as "dangerous" and provided instruction on how to "keep your children safe from Islam." The maximum penalty under the Sedition Act is a fine of \$3,650 (S\$ 5,000) and/or a jail term of up to 3 years. The couple remained free on bail at the end of the reporting period, and their next court appearance was scheduled for July 14, 2008.

The Government does not recognize conscientious objection to military service. During the period covered by this report, there were 23 Jehovah's Witnesses incarcerated in the armed forces' detention barracks because they refused to carry out the legal obligation for all male citizens and permanent residents to serve in the armed forces. Of these, 11 began their sentences during 2006-07. There were no other known conscientious objectors during the period covered by this report. The initial sentence for failure to comply with the military service requirement is 15 months' imprisonment, to which 24 months are added upon a second refusal. Failure to perform annual military reserve duty, which is required of all those who have completed their initial 2-year obligation, results in a 40-day sentence; a 12-month sentence is usual after four such refusals. All of the Jehovah's Witnesses in detention were incarcerated for failing to perform their initial military obligations and expect to serve a total of 39 months.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

The Government promotes interfaith understanding indirectly by sponsoring activities to promote interethnic harmony. Because of the close correlation between religion and ethnicity, government programs to promote ethnic harmony have implications for interfaith relations. In 2006 Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong unveiled the Community Engagement Program (CEP). The goal of the CEP is to promote multiracial and interreligious harmony, in part so that a strong foundation would be in place should an incident that could provoke societal discord, such as a religiously related terrorist attack, occur in the country. During the period covered by this report, the CEP held numerous community-based seminars, worked with trade unions to form cluster working groups on religious and community harmony, and launched a new website as a platform for communication and dialogue.

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 maintains contacts with the various religious communities in the country.

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