



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Singapore

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricted this right in some circumstances.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government has banned the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church. The Government does not tolerate speech or actions that it deems could adversely affect racial or religious harmony.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues 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 its total population is approximately 4.2 million, of whom 3.5 million are citizens or permanent residents. According to a 2000 government survey, 85 percent of citizens and permanent residents professed some religious faith or belief. Of this group, 51 percent practiced Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship, or other faiths traditionally associated with the ethnic Chinese population. Approximately 15 percent of the population was Muslim, an estimated 15 percent Christian, and an estimated 4 percent Hindu. The remainder was composed of adherents of other religions, agnostics, and atheists. Among Christians, the majority of whom were ethnic Chinese; Protestants outnumbered Roman Catholics by slightly more than a two-to-one ratio. There were also small Sikh, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Jain communities.

Approximately 77 percent of the population was ethnic Chinese, 14 percent ethnic Malay, and 8 percent ethnic Indian. Nearly all ethnic Malays were Muslim, and most ethnic Indians Hindu. The ethnic Chinese population was divided among Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity, or was agnostic or atheist.

Foreign missionaries were active in the country and include Roman Catholics, Mormons, and Baptists.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricted this right in some circumstances. The constitution provides 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 legally under the Societies Act. The Government deregistered the Singapore 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, or 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 publicly subsidized 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 semi-official relationship with the Muslim community through the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), which was set up under the Administration of Muslim Law Act. The MUIS advises the Government on concerns of the Muslim community, drafts the approved weekly sermon, regulates some Muslim religious matters, and oversees a mosque-building fund financed by voluntary payroll deductions. The constitution acknowledges Malay / Muslims to be "the indigenous people of Singapore" and charges the Government specifically to promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social, cultural, and language interests.

The 1961 Women's Charter gives women, among other rights, the right to own property, conduct trade, and receive divorce settlements. Muslim women enjoy most of the rights and protections of the Women's Charter; however, for the most part, Muslim marriage law falls under the administration of the Muslim Law Act, which empowers the Shari'a court to oversee such matters. The act also allows Muslim men to practice polygamy. 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. From 2003 to 2005, there were 142 applications for polygamous marriage,

and 50 applications were approved.

The Presidential Council on Minority Rights examines all pending bills to ensure that they do not disadvantage a particular group. It also reports to the Government on matters affecting any racial or religious community and investigates complaints.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools.

There are one or more official religious holy days for each major religion in the country: Hari Raya Haji and Hari Raya Puasa for Muslims, Christmas and Good Friday for Christians, Deepavali for Hindus, and Vesak Day for Buddhists.

The Government generally promotes interfaith understanding indirectly by sponsoring activities to promote interethnic harmony. Because the primary ethnic minorities each are predominantly of one faith, government programs to promote ethnic harmony have implications for interfaith relations. On February 9, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong unveiled plans for a Community Engagement Program (CEP). The CEP's purpose would be to promote multiracial and interreligious harmony so that a strong foundation would be in place should a terrorist attack occur in Singapore. The CEP planned to include not only racial and religious groups, but also schools, businesses, and unions.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government restricts certain religious groups by application of the Societies Act. In 1982 the minister for home affairs dissolved the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, also known as the Unification Church. In 1972 the Government deregistered and banned the Singapore Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses on the grounds that its existence was prejudicial to public welfare and order because its members refuse to perform military service (obligatory for all male citizens), salute the flag, or swear oaths of allegiance to the state. At the time, there were approximately 200 Jehovah's Witnesses in the country; at the end of the period covered by this report there were approximately two thousand. Although the Court of Appeals in 1996 upheld the rights of members of Jehovah's Witnesses to profess, practice, and propagate their religious belief, and the Government does not arrest members for being believers, the result of deregistration has been to make public meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses illegal. Nevertheless, since the 1996 ruling, no charges have been brought against persons attending or holding Jehovah's Witness meetings in private homes.

The Government can also influence religious practice through the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. The act was passed in 1990 and revised in 2001, in response to actions that the Government viewed as threats to religious harmony. This includes aggressive and "insensitive" proselytizing and "the mixing of religion and politics." The act established the Presidential Council on Religious Harmony, which reports to the minister of home affairs and 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. These orders place individuals on notice that they should not repeat such acts; contravening a restraining order can result in fines of up to \$5,984 (S ten-thousand) and up to two years' imprisonment for a first offense. The act also prohibits judicial review of its enforcement or of any possible denial of rights arising from it.

In April 2005 two Falun Gong adherents were found guilty of illegal assembly and distribution of video compact disks that had not been certified by the Board of Film Censors, and in October 2005 the High Court upheld their convictions, dismissing their appeals. The two women chose to serve prison sentences rather than pay fines of \$12,092 (S twenty-thousand) and \$14,510 (S twenty-four thousand), respectively. They were released after a week once their families had paid the fines. The offenses were alleged to have taken place between November 2002 and March 2003. The law mandates police permits for outdoor assemblies of five or more persons and prohibits the distribution of films, including videodiscs, without a license.

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 prohibit evangelical activities, in practice it discourages activities that might upset the balance of intercommunal relations. Authorities did not detain any Jehovah's Witnesses for proselytizing during the period covered by this report or the previous twelve-month period.

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. In practice this has led to confiscation of Bibles published by the groups, although the Bible itself has not been outlawed. A person in possession of banned literature can be fined up to \$1,176 (S two-thousand) and jailed up to twelve months for a first conviction.

There were two government seizures of Jehovah's Witnesses literature during the period covered by this report. Four individuals were questioned by police and their literature was confiscated, but no charges were filed. There were no government seizures of Jehovah's Witnesses literature during the previous twelve-month period. In 2004 eleven individuals were detained briefly for attempting to bring Jehovah's Witnesses publications into the country from Malaysia. In each instance, the literature was confiscated but no charges were filed.

Three Jehovah's Witnesses students were suspended from school for refusing to sing the national anthem or participate in the flag ceremony during the period covered by this report. There were no such suspensions during the previous twelve-month period.

In response to concern from the Malay / Muslim community regarding the fate of madrassahs (Islamic religious schools), the Government temporarily exempted madrassah students from compulsory school attendance. If a madrassah does not meet minimum academic standards by 2008, its students would have to transfer either to a madrassah that does or to a national school, according to local press reports.

At the end of the period covered by this report, there were fifteen members of Jehovah's Witnesses incarcerated in the armed forces detention barracks because they refused to carry out the legal obligation for all male citizens to serve in the armed forces. Of these, four

began their sentence during the period covered by this report. There were no known conscientious objectors other than members of Jehovah's Witnesses during the period covered by this report. The initial sentence for failure to comply with the military service requirement is fifteen months' imprisonment, to which twenty-four 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 two-year obligation, results in forty-day sentences; a twelve-month sentence is usual after four such refusals. All of the Jehovah's Witnesses in detention were incarcerated for failing to perform their initial National Service obligations and expect to serve a total of thirty-nine months.

There were no 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

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Nearly all ethnic Malay citizens are Muslim, and ethnic Malays constituted the great majority of the country's Muslim community. Attitudes held by the Malay and non-Malay communities regarding one another are based on both ethnicity and religion, which in effect are impossible to separate.

The government enforced ethnic ratios for publicly subsidized housing, where the majority of citizens live and own their own units. The policy was designed to prevent ethnic/racial ghettos. When a housing development is at or near the limit for a particular ethnic group, the policy sometimes compels owners to sell their apartments to persons of underrepresented groups. This limits the number of potential buyers and affects the price of the property.

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

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues 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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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)