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Executive Summary

The constitution and some laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of religious freedom. The government restricted speech or actions that it deemed 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 discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Senior embassy officers attended several events during the year that promoted religious tolerance and racial harmony.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2010 census, 83 percent of citizens and permanent residents profess a religion. Approximately 33 percent of the population is Buddhist, 15 percent Muslim, 18 percent Christian, 11 percent Taoist, and 5 percent Hindu. Adherents of other religious groups, including small Sikh, Zoroastrian, Jain, and Jewish communities, make up less than 1 percent of the population. The remainder of the population, 17 percent, does not profess a religious belief. There are no current membership estimates for Jehovah's Witnesses or the Unification Church, the two religious groups that the government has banned.

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).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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The constitution and some laws protect religious freedom; however, other laws and policies restrict this right in some circumstances. The constitution states that every person has a constitutional right to profess, practice, or propagate religious belief as 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. Deregistration makes it impossible to maintain a legal identity as a religious group, with consequences related to owning property, conducting financial transactions, and holding public meetings. Anyone who acts as a member of, or attends a meeting of, an unlawful society may be punished with a fine, imprisonment, or both.

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.

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, 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 the Appeal Board, which is composed of three members of the Majlis Ulama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, MUIS), drawn by the president of the MUIS from a panel of seven nominated every two years by the president. The ruling of the Appeal Board is final and may not be appealed or called into question in any other court.

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act established the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. The 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.

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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 Presidential Council for Minority Rights examines all legislation to ensure 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.

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 2010, the guidelines state that 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.

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).

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the year.

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 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.

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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 the country's 57 government-aided, religious-affiliated schools; it is provided outside of curriculum time and students have a right to opt out and be given alternatives. Religious instruction is allowed in private schools, including madrassahs (Islamic schools) and Christian schools. During the year, 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.

The Administration of Muslim Law Act allows Muslim men to practice polygyny, 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. During the year, there were 36 applications for polygynous marriage, of which seven were approved. The rest were rejected, withdrawn, or remained pending at year's end. 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.

Missionaries, with the exception of members of Jehovah's Witnesses and representatives of the Unification Church, were 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 might 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 if 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 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 year's end, no restraining orders were issued under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act.

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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 the year.

In January five Falun Gong members were sentenced to pay fines after being convicted of committing or abetting vandalism by temporarily affixing posters to public property in December 2010. Four of the Falun Gong members subsequently were deported. 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.

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.

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 was 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

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outreach activities and engaged local celebrities, such as radio disk jockeys and television personalities, to reinforce messages of communal harmony.

The 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 Baha'i 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, hosted an annual interreligious and interracial dinner for more than 3,000 community leaders, and kept in print a reference booklet entitled "Religious Customs and Practices in Singapore."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy actively maintained contacts with the various religious communities, including the holding of an iftar (evening meal to break the fast during Ramadan) and a Hanukkah party at the ambassador's residence. Embassy officers participated in the annual Ramadan on Wheels charity event and at Christmas events organized by various churches.