

SINGAPORE 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and some laws and policies provide for religious freedom, subject to some restrictions. The government played an active but limited role in religious affairs, including efforts to promote religious harmony and tolerance. The government also restricted speech or actions it perceived as detrimental to religious harmony. The government imposed restrictions that affected several religious groups and continued to ban Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church.

There were no reports of significant societal action affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy engaged actively with the government and religious groups throughout the year to promote and support religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.6 million (July 2014 estimate). The Singaporean government estimates 3.8 million of this total are citizens or permanent residents. Eighty-three percent of citizens and permanent residents state a religious affiliation. Approximately 42.5 percent of citizens and permanent residents are Buddhist, 14.9 percent Muslim, 14.6 percent Christian, 8.5 percent Taoist, and 5 percent Hindu. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jains, and Jews. There are no membership estimates for Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church.

The U.S. government estimates 76.8 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, 13.9 percent ethnic Malay, 7.9 percent ethnic Indian, and 1.4 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 Buddhists (54 percent), Taoists (11 percent), and Christians (16.5 percent).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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

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other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality. There is no state religion.

The law requires all associations of 10 or more persons, including religious groups, to register with the government. Registered societies are 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. A person who acts as a member of or attends a meeting of an unlawful society may be punished with a fine, imprisonment, or both.

The law establishes the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, which reports on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony and considers cases referred by the minister for home affairs or by parliament. The president appoints the council's members on the advice of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights. Two-thirds of the members are required to be representatives of the major religions in the country.

The law 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 ascertains the person causes feelings of enmity or hostility between different religious groups, promotes political causes, carries out subversive activities, or excites disaffection against the government under the guise of practicing religion. Any restraining order must be referred to the Council for Religious Harmony, which recommends to the president that the order be confirmed, cancelled, or amended. Restraining orders lapse after 90 days, 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 law prohibits judicial review of restraining orders issued under its authority.

The law provides Muslims with the option to have their family affairs governed by Islamic law, "as varied where applicable by Malay custom." Under the law, a sharia 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 go to the Appeal Board, which is composed of three members of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), selected by the president of the MUIS from a panel of seven individuals

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nominated every two years by the President of Singapore. The ruling of the Appeal Board is final and may not be appealed to any other court. The law allows Muslim men to practice polygamy, but the Registry of Muslim Marriages may refuse requests to marry additional wives in accordance with Islamic law, after soliciting the views of existing wives and reviewing the husband's financial capability. Under the Muslim Law 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 constitution states that Malays are “the indigenous people of Singapore” and requires the government to protect and promote their interests, including religious interests.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools, although it is allowed in the country's 57 government-aided, religiously affiliated schools. Religious instruction in these schools is provided outside of regular curriculum time; students have a right to opt out and be given alternatives. Religious instruction is allowed in private schools not aided by the government, including madrassahs and Christian schools. At the primary level, the law allows seven designated private schools (six madrassahs and one Adventist school) to educate primary-age students, provided these schools continue to meet or exceed public school performance benchmarks in annual national exams.

The Presidential Council for Minority Rights (an advisory body that is part of the legislative process) examines all legislation to determine it does not disadvantage particular religious groups. The council also considers and reports on matters concerning any religious group that the parliament or the government refers to it.

The Ministry of Community Development, Youth, and Sports and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) regulate all land usage and decide where organizations can be located. Religious institutions are primarily classified as places of worship. A group seeking to build a new religious institution must apply to the URA for a permit. The Ministry of Community Development, Youth, and Sports and the URA determine whether a religious institution meets the requirements as a place of worship. URA guidelines regulate the use of commercially and industrially zoned space for religious activities and religious groups, and apply to all religious groups. .

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The government may prohibit the importation of publications, including religious publications, under the law. A person in possession of a prohibited publication can be fined up to 2,000 Singapore dollars (\$1,514) and jailed for up to 12 months for a first conviction.

Government Practices

The government maintained its decades-long ban of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church. The government played an active but limited role in religious affairs, including efforts to promote religious harmony and tolerance.

There was continued public debate mainly on social media regarding the policy prohibiting the wearing of hijabs by certain public sector professionals, such as nurses and front-line military officers and at some schools. In 2013 the minister of Muslim affairs, Malay-Muslim members of parliament, and some opposition parties expressed their concern with the policy.

Missionaries, with the exception of members of the Jehovah's Witnesses and representatives of the Unification Church, were permitted to work and to publish and distribute religious texts. While the government did not formally prohibit proselytism, in practice it discouraged activities it deemed might upset the balance of intergroup relations.

All written materials published by the International Bible Students Association and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, publishing arms of the Jehovah's Witnesses, remain banned by the government. There were no reports of government seizures of publications by any other groups.

The government supported the operation of an "interracial and religious confidence circle" (IRCC) in each of the country's 27 electoral constituencies. The IRCCs gave religious group leaders a forum for promoting 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.

Government officials regularly cited religious harmony as an important policy goal. Ethnic ratios had to be maintained in public housing and there were no enclaves of religious or ethnic groups in concentrated geographic areas.

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The government assisted religious groups in locating spaces for religious observance in government-built housing, where most citizens lived.

As part of the Ministry of Education's National Education Program, the official primary and secondary public school curricula encouraged religious harmony and tolerance. In July all schools celebrated racial harmony day, which promoted understanding and acceptance of all religions within the country. Children wore traditional clothing and celebrated the country's racial and religious diversity. Schools were encouraged to recite the "Declaration of Religious Harmony."

The government continued to engage religious groups through the community engagement program (CEP), created to foster social cohesion and 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 religious harmony. The CEP conducted youth outreach activities and engaged local celebrities, such as radio disk jockeys and television personalities, to reinforce messages of communal harmony.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The nongovernmental Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) brought together leaders of the 10 religious groups 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, 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 on several occasions, particularly in the context of religious holidays, interfaith dialogues, and official visitors from Washington.

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In July the Ambassador hosted an iftar for representatives from Malay-Muslim organizations, government officials, diplomats from Muslim majority countries, and participants from U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs. At the event, the Ambassador gave remarks promoting tolerance.

In October the U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities met with government officials, including Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs Ibrahim Yaacob, Muslim community leaders, and Muslim students. During his meetings he discussed issues including respect for Muslim autonomy, effective methods of dissuading violent extremism, and the need for continuing interfaith dialogue.

In November the Ambassador addressed the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and discussed U.S. government engagement with Muslim communities in the country and support for interfaith dialogues.

Embassy officials and visiting U.S. officials met with various leaders in religious communities to discuss promoting interfaith activities within the country.