

SINGAPORE 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and laws and policies provide for religious freedom, subject to restrictions relating to public order, public health, and morality. 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 continued to ban Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church. Jehovah's Witnesses who refused military service remained subject to imprisonment as there is no alternative to armed service for conscientious objectors.

There was some continued public debate, mainly on social media, but less prominent than in previous years, regarding the policy prohibiting the wearing of hijabs by certain public sector professionals and in some schools.

The U.S. embassy engaged actively with the government and religious groups to promote and support religious tolerance. The embassy also funded a forum to promote spreading messages of tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.7 million (July 2015 estimate). The local government estimates 3.9 million of this total are citizens or permanent residents, of which 83 percent state a religious affiliation. Approximately 33.3 percent of citizens and permanent residents are Buddhist, 14.7 percent Muslim (predominantly Sunni), 18.3 percent Christian, 10.9 percent Taoist, and 5.1 percent Hindu. Groups together constituting less than 1 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 74.2 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, 13.3 percent ethnic Malay, 9.2 percent ethnic Indian, and 3.3 percent other, including Eurasians. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim. Among ethnic Indians, 59 percent are Hindu, 22 percent are Muslim, and 13 percent are Christian. The ethnic Chinese population includes Buddhists (43 percent), Taoists (14.4 percent), and Christians (20.1 percent).

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states 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.

The law requires all associations of 10 or more persons, including religious groups, to register with the government. Registration confers legal identity, which allows property ownership, the ability to hold public meetings, and the ability to conduct financial transactions. Registered religious groups can apply to establish and maintain charitable and humanitarian institutions, which enable them to solicit and receive funding and tax benefits. 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 Presidential Council for Religious Harmony 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. The law requires that two-thirds of members be representatives of the major religions in the country, which are considered to be Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism/Taoism.

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. Restraining orders are discretionary, depending on the situation, and prevent a person in a position of authority within a religious group from making or participating in additional statements, which can result in criminal action. 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

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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. In addition, under the Penal Code, “wounding the religious or racial feelings of any person” or knowingly promoting “disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious or racial groups” can result in detention and or imprisonment.

The constitution states Malays are “the indigenous people of Singapore” and requires the government to protect and promote their interests, including religious interests. The law allows the Muslim community to have personal status issues 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 such as alimony and child support, 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 an 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 nominated every two years by the president of the country. 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 after soliciting the views of existing wives and reviewing the husband’s financial capability. Additionally, under the law, 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 law does not recognize a right to conscientious objection. Men are required to undertake 24 months of uniformed national service upon reaching age 18, with no alternative provided to armed service.

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 such as civics and moral education in lieu of religious instruction. Religious instruction is allowed in private schools not aided by the government. At the primary level, the law allows seven designated private schools (six madrassahs and one Seventh-day Adventist school) to educate primary-age students, provided these schools continue to meet or exceed public school performance benchmarks in annual national exams. The

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law empowers the Ministry for Education to regulate schools, including prohibiting students from wearing anything not forming part of an official school uniform. The law prohibits the wearing of headscarves in public schools. International, other private, and government-aided religious schools are not subject to the same restrictions. For example, in madrassahs, headscarves are part of the uniform. Headscarves are not banned at institutions of higher learning.

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 Social and Family Development (previously Ministry of Community Development, Youth, and Sports) and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) establish the guidelines on land development and use of space for religious activities. The URA regulates all land usage and decides 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 Social and Family Development 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 equally to all religious groups.

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 (\$1,412) and jailed for up to 12 months for a first conviction.

Government Practices

The Jehovah's Witnesses official website reported 19 Jehovah's Witnesses were detained in the armed forces detention facility for refusing to complete national service on religious grounds as of year's end. Conscientious objectors were generally court martialled and sentenced to detention, typically for 12-36 months, in military detention barracks. Although they remained technically liable for national service, servicemen who had refused to serve on religious grounds were generally not called up for reservist duties. They did not, however, receive any form of legal documentation that officially discharged them from reservist duties.

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The government maintained its decades-long ban of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church. The government banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 1972 on the grounds the church was prejudicial to public welfare and order because it objected to national military service, reciting the national pledge, or singing national anthems. It banned the Unification Church in 1982 on grounds it was a "cult" that could have detrimental effects on society. All written materials published by the International Bible Students Association and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, publishing arms of the Jehovah's Witnesses, remained banned by the government.

The government appointed key officeholders in the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, the Hindu Endowments Board, and the Sikh Advisory Board, statutory boards established to manage various aspects of these faith communities, ranging from managing properties and endowments to safeguarding customs and the general welfare of the community.

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, it continued to discourage its practice as it deemed it might offend other religious groups and upset the balance of intergroup relations.

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 uniformed military officers and at some schools. In January 2014 the prime minister stated that many statutory boards would allow Muslim staff to wear the hijab and the government would continue to evolve its stance "gradually and carefully." The government did not comment publicly on the policy during the year. Some in the Muslim community continued to petition for a change in the government policy.

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 Culture, Community and Youth, the IRCCs conducted local interreligious dialogues, counseling and trust-building workshops, community celebrations, and similar activities. In July they sponsored an "Inter-Racial Inter-Religious Harmony Nite" presided by the

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president, where more than 2000 individuals, including grassroots leaders, gathered to celebrate what organizers termed the country's 50 years of harmony and tolerance.

Government officials regularly cited religious harmony as an important policy goal. In an October speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated that "one of our most remarkable achievements over these last 50 years has been our racial and religious harmony." He stated citizens must work hard to maintain this harmony and added that "race and religion are in some ways, more complicated and more difficult now." The government continued to enforce the maintenance of ethnic ratios in public housing and prevent the emergence of religious enclaves in concentrated geographic areas.

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. All schools celebrated the annual racial harmony day in July, 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 government trained community leaders involved in the CEP in emergency preparedness and techniques for promoting religious harmony. Through the year, the CEP continued to conduct outreach activities to strengthen intercommunal and interreligious bonds.

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

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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 on Singapore religious customs and practices.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom with government representatives on several occasions, particularly in the context of religious holidays, interfaith dialogues, and official visitors from Washington.

The embassy funded the nongovernmental organization Critical Xchange to host the Positive Messaging Muslim Youth Forum in April. The forum trained 12 young leaders to disseminate messages about religious tolerance throughout ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). The U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities provided opening remarks for the conference via Skype from Washington, D.C.

At the embassy's June iftar, then-Second Minister for Foreign Affairs Masagos Zulkifl discussed the need to continue to foster tolerance and religious harmony in the country. Other attendees included senior representatives from Malay-Muslim organizations, government officials, diplomats from Muslim-majority countries, and participants from U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs.

Embassy and visiting U.S. officials met with leaders from various religious communities to discuss promoting interfaith activities.