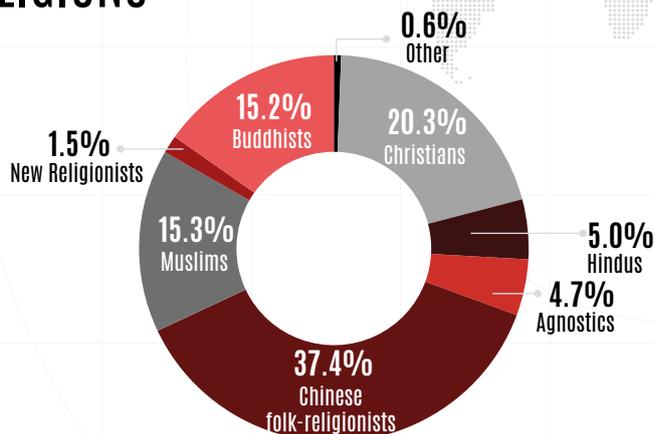




# SINGAPORE

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Singaporeans continue to enjoy a high degree of religious freedom, particularly within their own religious communities. Local law asserts this fundamental right and political institutions enforce it. Freedom of religion – understood as the freedom to profess, practise, and propagate religious beliefs – is fully protected as long as the activities that derive from it are not contrary to laws on public order, public health, or morality.

Singapore's 1963 Constitution established the principle of religious freedom. Article 15 defines it as the right of everyone "to profess and practise his religion and to propagate it."<sup>1</sup> Each "religious group" has the right "to manage its own religious affairs, to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with law."

Another key concept articulated in the constitution through amendment is the maintenance of religious harmony, although it has been implemented main-

ly through a law passed in 1990. This law authorises the Minister of the Interior to issue restraining orders against those within a religious group who incite hostility towards members of another religious group, or who promote political causes, carry out subversive activities, or encourage others to distance themselves from the government under the pretext of practising a religion. The restraining orders are discretionary. Refusing to submit to them can trigger legal action. Such orders must go before the chairman of the Council for Religious Harmony, a state body with the power to confirm, cancel or amend them. They have a theoretical duration of 90 days, although such orders can be extended at will by the council chairman.

The Penal Code<sup>2</sup> prohibits "wounding the religious or racial feelings of any person," as well as knowingly promoting "feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious or racial groups." The penalties include fines and detention.

Any religious group of more than 10 people must inform the government of its existence, especially if the group desires official legal status. Muslims constitute a special case; the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore

(Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, MUIS), established by the Ministry of Culture, administers all Islamic affairs in the city-state, including construction and management of mosques, halal certification, fatwas and pilgrimage to Mecca.

Religious instruction is prohibited in public schools, although it is allowed in government-subsidized religiously affiliated schools outside of regular curriculum time, and is allowed in private schools.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the constitutional provision of religious freedom, occasionally the principle and practice thereof butt up against the will of the authorities to maintain a high degree of control over civil society. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act of 1990 has been used against initiatives deemed likely to cause division and discord between religious communities, a laudable concern in a highly multicultural and multi-religious society.<sup>4</sup> However, problems arise when the authorities use this law to stifle any political expression they deem deviant. This act has also been used to limit speech that the state deems sensitive to another religious group. The state therefore assumes the authority to impose restrictions on expressions of religion that it deems inappropriate.

Singaporean authorities have especially kept a close eye on Jehovah's Witnesses. This group has been present in Singapore since the 1940s and registered since 1962, but their legal recognition was cancelled in 1972 as a result of their refusal to serve in the military (which was nationally mandated beginning in 1967). In 1996, however, a ruling restored Jehovah's Witnesses' right to profess, practise, and propagate their beliefs, but only as individuals. Since then, the government has not prevented private meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses but continues to ban all public meetings and to jail the group's members for refusing to fulfil their military service requirement. These "conscientious objectors" are initially sentenced to two years in prison, and then an additional two if they still refuse. They are released after this point since the duration of imprisonment has exceeded the required 24 months of national service.<sup>5</sup> The authorities are aware of the severity of this approach, but do not want to open the door to more exemption requests.

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

A report by the Pew Research Center published in November 2020 named in Singapore as country with "high religious restrictions" and therefore an "imperfect democracy" just as Malaysia and Indonesia, to be observed closely.<sup>6</sup>

Singapore is, however, a nation with numerous official structures seeking to establish interreligious understanding, including among others the Presidential Council for Minority Rights, the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), the Sikh Advisory Board, the Hindu Endowment Board, Common Senses for Common Spaces, Inter-racial and Inter-religious Confidence Circles, the Harmony Center, and the BRIDGE initiative (Broadening Religious/Racial Interaction through Dialogue and General Education). The government also assigns land for construction of temples and regulates the profile of the occupants of social housing in order to prevent ethnic or religious community concentrations.<sup>7</sup>

Singapore has not lifted the 1972 organizational ban on Jehovah's Witnesses or the 1982 ban on the Unification Church, which the government labelled a "cult." As of January 19, 2020, 15 Jehovah's Witnesses are still detained in the armed forces' detention facility for objecting to compulsory military service.<sup>8</sup>

In June 2019, Singapore hosted the International Conference on Cohesive Societies,<sup>9</sup> with over 1200 participants from all over the world and an enthusiastically lived youth session, coming to declare their commitment to positive interreligious relations.

In October 2019, Singapore's Parliament passed changes to the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act "to allow the authorities to move more swiftly against those who threaten the good relations among people of different religions."<sup>10</sup> The changes allow for higher maximum punishments and immediate restraining orders, and were deemed necessary in part due to the increasing amount globally of hate speech on social media.

A planned terrorist attack for 15th March 2021 was discovered timely by the Singaporean police. A young Indian man was planning to attack 2 mosques and murder civilians by machete, as he himself said was inspired by the New Zealand mosque attacks. Both Muslim and Christian leaders condemned the plans, and took the opportunity to denounce the high quantity of hate messages being spread in social media.<sup>11</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Although Singaporeans continue to enjoy a high degree of religious freedom within the private confines of one's religious sphere, the State has been increasing its role restricting the public manifestation of the right to freedom of religion. In the name of religious harmony and state security, the government keeps grabbing control of ethno-religious matters in the country. The prospects indicate that this trend will continue so, the future of freedom of religion in Singapore has slightly worsened during the period under review.

## SOURCES / ENDNOTES

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