

SINGAPORE 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution, laws, and policies provide for religious freedom, subject to restrictions relating to public order, public health, and morality. The government continued efforts to promote religious harmony and tolerance. The government continued to ban Jehovah's Witnesses and the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church). The government also restricted speech or actions it perceived as detrimental to religious harmony. In September a teenage blogger was sentenced to six weeks in jail for "wounding religious feelings" of Muslims and Christians after he posted online a photograph and two videos authorities said criticized Christianity and Islam. Jehovah's Witness male citizens who refused national service remained subject to imprisonment as there are no exceptions to national service, including for conscientious objectors. Jehovah's Witnesses reported 13 conscientious objectors remained detained during the year. In June the minister of home affairs said that burning the Quran or any other holy book would be treated with zero tolerance in the country.

In February the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices, made up of employer, union and government representatives, called for clear and nondiscriminatory policies regarding dress codes in the workplace in response to a job applicant who said she was told she could not wear a hijab at work.

The U.S. embassy engaged with the government and religious groups to promote and support religious tolerance. The U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities visited the country in May and met with government officials as well as religious leaders from Muslim and other religious communities to discuss potential initiatives promoting religious freedom in the country. The embassy hosted a variety of events and programs to facilitate interfaith dialogue and to promote messages of tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.9 million (July 2016 estimate). The local government estimates 3.9 million of this total are citizens or permanent residents, of which 81.5 percent state a religious affiliation. Approximately 33.2 percent of the total population of citizens and permanent residents are Buddhist, 18.8 percent Christian, 14 percent Muslim (predominantly Sunni), 10 percent Taoist, and 5 percent Hindu. Groups together constituting less

than 1 percent of the population include Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jains, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Unification Church.

According to a 2015 national survey, 74.3 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, 13.3 percent ethnic Malay, 9.1 percent ethnic Indian, and 3.2 percent other, including Eurasians. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim. Among ethnic Indians, 59.9 percent are Hindu, 21.3 percent are Muslim, and 12.1 percent are Christian. The ethnic Chinese population includes Buddhists (42.3 percent), Christians (20.9 percent), and Taoists (12.9 percent).

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 his or her religious belief as long as such activities do not breach any other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality. The constitution also prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion in the administration of any law or in the appointment to or employment in any office under a public authority. It states that every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs and it does not prohibit restrictions in employment by a religious institution.

The government maintains a 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 service, reciting the national pledge, or singing the national anthem. A 1996 decision by the Singapore Appeals Court upheld the rights of individual members of the Jehovah's Witnesses to profess, practice, and propagate their religious belief. The government does not arrest Jehovah's Witnesses for attending or holding meetings in private homes; however, it does not allow them to hold public meetings or publish their literature, which is banned. The government banned the Unification Church in 1982 on grounds it was a "cult" that could have detrimental effects on society.

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 two-thirds of Council for Religious Harmony members be representatives of the major

religions in the country, which according to law are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

The law authorizes the minister of 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; failure to comply can result in criminal action. Any restraining order issued 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 such restraining orders. 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 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, such as income tax exemption. 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 unregistered society may be punished with a fine, imprisonment, or both.

The constitution states Malays are “the indigenous people of Singapore” and requires the government to protect and promote their interests, including religious interests. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) established under the Ministry for Culture, Community and Youth, administers affairs for all Muslims in the country such as the construction and management of mosques,

halal certification, fatwa issuances, and the Hajj, and includes representatives from Sunni as well as Muslim minority groups such as Shia. The law allows the Muslim community, irrespective of school of Islam or ethnicity, to have personal status issues governed by Islamic law, “as varied where applicable by Malay custom.” Ordinarily the Shafi’i school of law will be used but there are provisions for use of “other accepted schools of Muslim law as may be appropriate.” Under the law, a sharia court has nonexclusive jurisdiction over the affairs of marriages where both parties are, or were married as, Muslims, including maintenance payments such as alimony and child support, disposition of property upon divorce, custody of minor children, as well as inheritance. The law permits a person involved in a sharia court divorce case to apply for leave to begin civil proceedings concerning division of property or custody of 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 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 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. The constitution states that no person shall be required to receive instruction or take part in any ceremony or act of worship other than his or her own. Religious instruction is allowed in private schools not aided by the government. At the primary level, the law allows seven designated private schools (six Sunni 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. Other Muslim minority groups may operate part-time schools. The law empowers the Ministry of 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. All madrassahs are under the purview of the MUIS. As of the end of the year, registration of religious teachers with the MUIS was voluntary, although 80 percent were registered.

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 (\$1,384) and jailed for up to 12 months for a first conviction. 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.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development 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 may be located. Religious buildings are primarily classified as places of worship. A group seeking a new place of worship 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, such as being located in allotted zones and meeting the maximum plot ratio and story height. URA guidelines regulate the use of commercially and industrially zoned space for religious activities and religious groups, and apply equally to all religious groups. Commercial or industrial premises that host religious activities but are not zoned as places of worship must be approved by the URA. They may not be owned by or leased to religious organizations and must be available to rent out for other nonreligious events. They may not display signage, advertisements, or posters of the religious use; be furnished to resemble a worship hall; or display any religious symbols, icons, or religious paraphernalia when the premises are not in use by the religious organization. Use of the space for religious purposes must not cause parking, noise, or other problems.

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

The law does not recognize a right to conscientious objection. Male citizens or second generation permanent residents are required to undertake 24 months of uniformed national service upon reaching age 18, with no alternative provided to national service.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In September a court sentenced 17-year-old blogger and self-identified atheist Amos Yee to six weeks in jail after he pleaded guilty to six charges of “wounding religious feelings” of Muslims and Christians. Yee had reportedly posted online a photograph and two videos criticizing Christianity and Islam that authorities and the judge said were “offensive and insulting words and profane gestures to hurt the feelings of Christians and Muslims” and “generating social unrest” respectively. This was Yee’s second prison sentence in two years; he was sentenced to four weeks in 2015 for reportedly posting a video likening the late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to Jesus Christ, stating both were “power hungry and malicious.”

The Jehovah’s Witnesses official website reported 13 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 to 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.

Government officials regularly cited religious harmony as an important policy goal. In a May interview, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated religious harmony is a matter of constant effort, social policy, and integration and part of the country’s identity. During an iftar in June, Minister of Home Affairs K Shanmugam said that in other countries, freedom of speech allows one to burn the Quran or any other holy book and attack Muslims or members of other religious groups, whereas Singapore treats such acts with “zero tolerance” and perpetrators would “go to jail; no two ways about it.”

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. The government, however, reportedly banned foreign preachers who were deemed to be intolerant and promoted exclusivist practices and doctrines. While the government did not formally prohibit proselytism, it continued to discourage its practice in speeches and through the

application of laws regarding public speech and assembly as it deemed proselytizing might offend other religious groups and upset the balance of intergroup relations.

Although government policy prohibited the wearing of hijabs by certain public sector professionals, such as nurses and uniformed military officers and at some schools, many statutory boards within government agencies continued to allow Muslim staff to wear the hijab while the government continued 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 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. Students were encouraged to recite the “Declaration of Religious Harmony.”

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 appointed all members of the MUIS and the Hindu Endowments Board, and nominated four of the 11 members of the Sikh Advisory Board. These statutory boards managed various aspects of their faith communities, ranging from managing properties and endowments to safeguarding customs and the general welfare of the community.

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. Throughout the year, interfaith dialogues were held in different communities around the island.

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.

The Ministry of Home Affairs, encouraged by the NGO Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), opened an exhibit in September that featured four galleries aimed at sharing the importance of religious harmony in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In February in response to a job applicant who said she was told she could not wear a hijab in the workplace, the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices, a group comprised of employer representatives, union leaders, and government officials, called for employers to communicate their dress code policies clearly. The group said any such policies should be based on the nature of the work environment and should not be differentiated by an employee's race or religion. Women who wore the hijab posted about their personal experiences and frustrations with certain workplace hijab bans on Facebook, Instagram, and various blog sites.

The IRO, which includes leaders of the 10 religious groups with the most adherents in the country, sought to inculcate a spirit of friendship among the leaders and followers of various religious groups and promote mutual respect, assistance, and protection by conducting interreligious prayer services, seminars, and public talks throughout the year.

Critical Xchange (CRIX), a local Muslim NGO, partnered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to host a fundraising iftar for Syrian refugees in Jordan attended by representatives from the IRO, the MUIS, the Young Sikh Association, the Hindu Endowment Board, the Catholic Association and several smaller churches, and a variety of Muslim groups including the Dawoodi Bohras, Ismailis, Jafaris, Salafis, and Ahmadi Muslims.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

Embassy and visiting U.S. officials met with leaders from various religious communities to promote interfaith activities and discuss issues of common interest. The Ambassador visited the Badawi Mosque quarterly.

In May the U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities visited the country and met with government leaders, including the minister in charge of Muslim affairs, director of the internal security department, and the minister for environment and water resources. He also met with leaders from Muslim and other religious groups as well as Southeast Asian media outlets to discuss regional Muslim affairs and possible future initiatives to promote religious freedom in the country.

The embassy's June iftar was attended by the minister in charge of Muslim affairs, senior representatives from Malay Muslim organizations, representatives from ethnic and religious groups, government officials, diplomats from Muslim-majority countries, and participants from U.S. government-sponsored exchange programs.

In June the embassy assisted the Malay Youth Literary Association, a local NGO with roots in the Muslim community, launch a large initiative in which volunteers of all religions helped to send food provisions, such as rice, oil, Eid al-Fitr cookies, beverages, and canned food, to 350 elderly and low income families of all religions throughout the country during the month of Ramadan.

The embassy organized a youth interfaith workshop in collaboration with CRIX hosting 25 young faith leaders, which aimed to start a dialogue on social issues of common concern. The participants shared their experience of their own and other spiritual traditions and proposed ideas for interfaith projects they could undertake in the country.