

# **SINGAPORE 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and some laws and policies protect religious freedom, and the government generally respected religious freedom in practice. However, the government restricted speech or actions it perceived as threats to racial or religious harmony. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. officials discussed religious freedom with the government and promoted religious freedom by engaging with religious groups throughout the year. Senior embassy officers hosted and attended events that supported religious tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to the Department of Statistics, the population is 5.31 million. This includes 3.29 million citizens, 0.53 million permanent residents, and 1.48 million non-residents. Eighty-three percent of citizens and permanent residents profess a religious belief. Approximately 33 percent of the population is Buddhist, 15 percent Muslim, 18 percent Christian, 11 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 or members of the Unification Church, the two religious groups the government has banned.

According to June 2012 Department of Statistics data, 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.

The Societies Act 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 Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, passed in 1990, establishes 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 are required to be representatives of the major religions in the country. The 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 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 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 act prohibits judicial review of restraining orders issued under its authority.

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 court has nonexclusive jurisdiction over the marital affairs of Muslims, including maintenance payments, disposition of

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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 nominated every two years by the president. The ruling of the Appeal Board is final and may not be appealed to any other court. The Administration of Muslim Law Act allows Muslim men to practice polygamy, but the Registry of Muslim Marriages may refuse requests to take additional wives in accordance with Islamic law, after soliciting the views of existing wives and reviewing the husband's financial capability.

The constitution states that 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 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 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 Compulsory Education Act 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.

As part of the Ministry of Education's National Education Program, the official primary and secondary public school curricula encourage religious harmony and tolerance. In July all schools celebrate racial harmony day, which promotes understanding and acceptance of all religions and races within the country.

The Presidential Council for Minority Rights examines all legislation to ensure it does not disadvantage particular racial or religious groups. The council also considers and reports on matters concerning any racial or religious group that are referred to it by parliament or the government.

The Ministry of Community Development, Youth, and Sports and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) regulates all land usage in Singapore and decides where organizations can be located throughout the country. URA guidelines regulate the use of commercial space for religious activities and religious groups, and apply to all religious groups. Enacted in July 2010, the guidelines state that no

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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 groups are limited to using 10,000 square meters (108,000 square feet) of commercial space.

June revisions to the guidelines also allow industrial areas zoned as "Business 1" (B1) to have a religious space that is non exclusive. Religious use of these industrial spaces must be limited to certain days in a week and occupy only part of the industrial premises. Religious activities should not cause disturbances such as noise, traffic, or parking problems to the public. Spaces within B1 industrial developments that can be used for non-exclusive and limited religious activities include auditoriums and conference rooms. Industrial space cannot be owned or specifically leased to a religious group; there can be no religious signage on the exterior or interior of the building. Religious groups must seek approval from URA before using industrial spaces. Land usage for building a religious institution is determined under the Master Plan, a planning regulation reviewed every five years to determine what types of buildings can be allocated in each area. 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 Youth and Sports and the Urban Redevelopment Authority determine whether a religious institution meets the requirements as a place of worship.

The government considers religious, social, and racial harmony to be an important policy goal and consequently does not allow enclaves of religious groups to exist in concentrated geographic areas.

The government may prohibit the importation of publications under the Undesirable Publications Act. A person in possession of a prohibited publication can be fined up to S\$2,000 (\$1,500 U.S.) and jailed up to 12 months for a first conviction.

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; however, the government imposed restrictions that affected several religious groups. The government played an active but limited role in religious affairs, including efforts to promote religious

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harmony and tolerance. For example, the government sought to ensure that citizens, most of whom lived in government-built housing, had access to religious institutions traditionally associated with their ethnic groups by helping such institutions find space in these housing complexes.

Under the Administration of Muslim Law Act, the government received 33 applications for polygamous marriages during the year, of which eight were approved. The remainder were rejected, withdrawn, or remained pending. 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.

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; the government continued to consider both groups unlawful societies.

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 does not formally prohibit proselytism, in practice it discouraged activities that 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 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. There were no government seizures of publications by any of these groups during the year.

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 racial and religious group leaders a forum for promoting 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.

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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 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 racial and religious harmony. The CEP also 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**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The nongovernmental Inter-Religious Organization (IRO), which traced its origins to 1949, 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.” The IRO also organized an interfaith prayer service after the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. embassy discussed religious freedom with the government. The ambassador hosted the embassy’s largest-ever annual iftar; participants included senior representatives from MUIS, government officials, diplomats from other countries, and individuals who participated in embassy-sponsored exchange programs. The ambassador also hosted a Hanukkah gathering for the Jewish community. The deputy chief of mission spoke at the launch of a book summarizing a Muslim group’s travel to the United States on an exchange program dealing with religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy officials met with visiting U.S. officials and various leaders in the Muslim community to discuss promoting interfaith activities within the country. The ambassador and a large contingent of embassy staff attended the IRO’s interfaith prayer service after the shootings in

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Newtown, Connecticut. Embassy officers attended official Hanukkah candle lighting festivities and an interfaith Christmas program at a local cathedral.