

Singapore



Stable / Unchanged ▬

Religion	Population	Area
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Chinese Folk Religionists : 38.6% ○ Christians : 19.5% ○ Muslims : 15.1% ○ Buddhists : 14.9% ○ Hindus : 5.2% ○ Agnostics : 4.6% ○ New Religionists : 1.5% ○ Others : 0.6% 	5.697.000	719 Km ²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Singaporeans continue to enjoy a high degree of religious freedom. 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".^[1] 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 is the maintenance of religious harmony throughout the country. Included in the country's fundamental law through a constitutional amendment, religious harmony has been implemented mainly 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.

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^[2] 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.

Despite the status of religious freedom within the legal and political framework, the aspirations of some Singaporeans come 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.^[3] However, problems arise when the authorities use this law to stifle any political expression they deem deviant.

The groups that Singaporean authorities have especially targeted for surveillance include Jehovah’s Witnesses. Present in Singapore since the 1940s, registered legally as a religious community in 1962, their legal recognition was cancelled in 1972 as a result of their refusal to serve in the military (established in Singapore 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 perform military service (at the time of writing 16 Jehovah’s Witnesses are in jail for refusing to serve). Jehovah’s Witnesses, who refuse to do their national service, are sentenced to two years in prison, then to two more if they still refuse. After that, they are released since the government deems the time spent in prison as equivalent to the period of national service.^[4] The authorities are aware of the severity of this approach, but do not want to open the door to requests of exemption.

On 13th September 2017, Halimah Yacob became the first woman president of the young Republic of Singapore. Aged 63, a mother of five, and speaker of Parliament since 2013,^[5] Halimah Yacob was the only candidate who met the eligibility criteria, and was therefore elected President of the Republic. The office of the president is essentially ceremonial since real power is vested in the office of the prime minister.

Although the personal qualities of the new president have not been questioned, her appointment has revived some debates in Singapore, namely the place the variety of ethnic and religious communities occupy in society. “...If our leaders really believe in diversity, why are we not advocating hav[ing] a Prime Minister from a minority race?” asked Jeraldine Tan, a young blogger.^[6] Underlying her question is Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s succession after he announced his retirement. Indications suggest Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam is the best placed Singaporean politician to succeed him, but he is Indian. Indeed, in an interview with the *BBC* ^[7] in March 2017, Lee Hsien Loong explained: “I think that ethnic considerations are never absent when voters vote [. . .]. In Singapore, it is much better than before, but race and religion count, and I think that makes it difficult if not impossible, and I hope that one day it will happen. If you ask whether it will happen tomorrow, I do not think so.”

| Incidents

Despite the privileged state of Islam in Singapore, Muslims are called to account should they incite hatred toward other faiths. A recent case centres on a Muslim cleric who, during a sermon in one of the city mosques, said: “God help us against Jews and Christians.” Posted on *Facebook* in February 2017, a video of the imam speaking went viral on social media. As a result, the government took him to court. Despite his apologies to Christian, Sikh, Taoist, Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders, the imam was fined SGD 4,000 (€ 2,700, US\$ 3,000) and was then deported to his native India.^[8]

Amos Yee, a teenager from a Catholic family, posted a video on YouTube criticising both Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s long-serving first Prime Minister, and Jesus Christ, and then another criticising Muslims. Jailed in 2015 for 53 days for “wounding the religious feelings of Christians and Muslims”, he asked – and obtained in March 2017 – political asylum in

the United States.^[9]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Although Singaporeans continue to enjoy a high degree of religious freedom, the state will have to take into consideration the aspirations of those who desire freedom with less supervision and monitoring by public authorities. This will certainly be one of the issues that will need to be tackled by the successor of current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, son of the country's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] This and following quotes are from Singapore's Constitution of 1963 with Amendments through 2010, [constitueproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Singapore_2010.pdf?lang=en), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Singapore_2010.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 12th April 2018).

[2] 'Penal Code', Singapore Statutes online, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PC1871?ViewType=Within&Phrase=hatred>, (accessed 16th April 2018).

[3] Sara Grosse, 'Singapore's religious harmony a legacy to be treasured: PM Lee', Channel NewsAsia, 12th May 2015, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-s-religious/1842076.html>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[4] Tina Mufford, 'A Right for all: Freedom of religion or belief in Asean', U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, September 2017, http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/A%20Right%20for%20All-FoRB%20in%20ASEAN%20web%20version_0.pdf, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[5] Richard C. Paddock, 'Singapore Has a New President, No Election Needed', New York Times, 12th September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/world/asia/singapore-president-yacob.html>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[6] Jeraldine Tan, 'Why are Singaporeans upset about the Presidential Election walkover', Jeraldine blog, 12th September 2017, <http://www.jeraldinephneah.com/presidential-election-walkover/>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[7] 'HARDtalk: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore', BBC, 3rd March 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04vf0tg>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[8] Toh Yong Chuan, 'Imam who made offensive remarks about Jews and Christians will be asked to leave Singapore', Straits Times, 3rd April 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/imam-who-made-offensive-remarks-against-christians-and-jews-charged-in-court>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[9] 'Amos Yee granted asylum in the US after Department of Homeland Security appeal dismissed', Channel NewsAsia, 27th September 2017, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/amos-yee-granted-asylum-in-the-us-after-department-of-homeland-9253728>, (accessed 21st February 2018).