

Singapore

Singapore is a city-state of 5.7 million inhabitants.[ref]<https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/population>[/ref] Known for its rich cultural diversity, the island nation is considered to be among the most religiously diverse nation in the world.[ref]<https://www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity/>[/ref]

Singapore became an independent and sovereign state in 1965, after leaving the Federation of Malaysia, of which it had been a member for 2 years before its departure.[ref]<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/dc1efe7a-8159-40b2-9244-cdb078755013#27>[/ref] Prior to that, Singapore was a trading post of the British Empire for over a 100 years. Today, Singapore is a parliamentary constitutional republic, known for the conservatism of its leaders and its strict social controls. The country has been governed by the People’s Action Party since independence in 1965.

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<u>Preferential treatment is given to a religion or religion in general</u>	<u>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</u>	<u>Some religious courts rule in civil or family matters on a coercive or discriminatory basis</u>	<u>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is somewhat restricted</u>
<u>Official symbolic deference to religion</u>			<u>Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious</u> <u>Concerns that secular or religious authorities interfere in specifically religious freedoms</u>

Legend

Constitution and government

The Constitution includes provisions for freedom of speech, assembly and association. Freedom of religion is protected: “Every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and to propagate it.”[ref]<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963>[/ref] (Art. 15, Constitution) Parliament can restrict these freedoms in the event of concerns about national security, public order or morality.

While there is no state religion, the constitution also does not explicitly express the doctrine of secularism. The Constitution claims to adopt an “accommodative secularism” approach. The government has been known to the ban activities of some religious groups, whose beliefs have been deemed as having the potential to threaten public order.[ref]<https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/01/18/Singapore-3-religious-groups-banned/1762821941200/>[/ref]

Despite the constitutional claim to provisions for freedom of association and assemblies, associations with 10 or more persons, including religious groups, are required to register with the Ministry of

Home Affairs, under the Registry of

Societies.[ref]https://www.ifaq.gov.sg/mha/apps/fcd_faqmain.aspx?qst=hRhkP9BzcBImsx2TBssMsxu7lqt6UJK70a1wAEVmyew5CDFpjTO1wQskwGvpowYiTLD930%2BRUQ0ErEdNp0%2FXwAXQItVMS%2BuBkSqvoelWSOrhRC3to2kczFzQ%2BmhsTnYHUmRtP1Ge5pV6zSU4h4EVw%3D%3D#FAQ_4457[/ref] A restraining order can be issued against any person in a position of authority within a religious group or institution if the Minister of Home Affairs 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 practising religion under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act.[ref]<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/MRHA1990>[/ref]

According to New Humanist, the non-religious do not have specific protection:

“Neither is there any legal bar against offending those who are not religious or are sceptical of religious claims, or indeed against proselytising or imposing one’s religious views on the non-religious. Non-believers seem to be fair game for religious proselytisation, as well as ridicule and abuse.”[ref]newhumanist.org.uk/articles/4104/secularism-in-singapore[/ref]

Judicial independence in Singapore is protected by the Constitution, however, the government’s overwhelming success in court cases raises questions about judicial independence, particularly because lawsuits against voices of dissent, opposition politicians and parties often drive them into bankruptcy. It is unclear whether the government pressures judges or simply appoints those who share its conservative philosophy.[ref]206.155.102.64/country,,,SGP,,53b2b8aa8.0.htm[/ref]

Education and children’s rights

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.[ref]206.155.102.64/country,,,SGP,,53d9071714.0.html[/ref]

Family, community and society

Belief demographics

The census of 2015 recorded 18.5% of Singapore residents as non-religious.[ref]https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/visualising_data/infographics/ghs/highlights-of-ghs2015.pdf[/ref] The organization “Humanist Society (Singapore)” (a member organization of Humanists International) is well established.

“Over the years, the government and sociologists have noticed a slow, subtle rise in the level of irreligiosity among Singaporeans, but they did not take much notice of it. Academic literature and government speeches suggest a deeper concern over inter-religious relations, the danger of extremism and State-religion relations.”[ref]humanist.org.sg/about/our-history/[/ref]

Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism are Singapore’s principal religions. Singapore is the most religiously diverse country in the world, according to a study by the Pew Research Center.[ref]pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity/[/ref]

Family law

Under the Administration of Muslim Law Act, Muslims have the option to have their family affairs governed by Islamic law, “as varied where applicable by Malay custom.” Under the law, a sharia (Islamic law) court has non-exclusive jurisdiction over the marital affairs of Muslims, including maintenance payments, disposition of property upon divorce, and custody of minor children.

LGBTI Rights

A Singapore Supreme Court ruling on 30 March 2020 dismissed appeals to overturn a law that criminalises same-sex relations between consenting adult men, upholding the colonial-era anti-gay laws, a major setback for equal rights in Singapore.[ref]<https://www.supremecourt.gov.sg/news/case-summaries/ong-ming-johnson-v-attorney-general-and-other-matters-2020-sghc-63/>[ref]

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Singapore’s media environment is highly controlled. Self-censorship among journalists is common, there are curbs on online content, and private ownership of satellite dishes is not allowed. The government may prohibit the importation of undesirable publications.

In October 2019, the government implemented the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA),[ref]<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/POFMA2019?TransactionDate=20191001235959/>[ref] a law claiming to combat online misinformation that threaten public interests. The law prohibits - both within Singapore and abroad - from knowingly using the internet to communicate to individuals in Singapore any “false statement” that is likely to influence elections, diminish confidence in the government, “incite feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will”, or be “prejudicial to” Singapore’s security or foreign relations, public health, public safety, public tranquility or public finances. Under POFMA, information that is identified as “false” must be corrected following official advice. The law has been criticised for its many vague and overly broad provisions that could be used to restrict a wide range of speech protected by international human rights law.[ref]<https://www.article19.org/resources/singapore-new-law-on-online-falsehoods-a-grave-threat-to-freedom-of-expression/>[ref]

The government maintains that racial sensitivities and the threat of Islamist terrorism justify draconian restrictions on freedoms of speech, but such rules have been used to silence criticism of the authorities.

Public assemblies and processions, including religious ones, are regulated by the Public Order Act. The legislation stipulates that prior to any assemblies and processions in public places, comprising two or more persons or where members of the public are invited, organisers are required to apply for a permit, giving notice about the intended event. The Act is enforced by the Singapore Police Force and failure to comply may result in criminal charges.[ref]<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/POA2009/>[ref]