



ADF INTERNATIONAL

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SINGAPORE

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Introduction

1. ADF International is a faith-based legal advocacy organization that protects fundamental freedoms and promotes the inherent dignity of all people.
2. This submission outlines concerns regarding Singapore's restrictions on freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. These concerns stem from specific legal frameworks, including the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, Societies Act, Penal Code, Undesirable Publications Act, and Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). In ADF International's analysis, several provisions within these laws are inconsistent with Singapore's human rights obligations.

(a) Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Expression

Background

3. As of 2024, Singapore's population stands at 6.04 million, including both residents and non-residents.¹ The city-state has a diverse ethnic composition: 75.6% Chinese, 15.1% Malay, 7.6% Indian, and 1.7% classified as 'Others'.²
4. The 2020 census reported wide religious diversity, with 31.1% of residents identifying as Buddhist, 8.8% Taoist, 18.9% Christian, 15.6% Muslim, 5.0% Hindu, 0.6% other religions, and 20% declaring no religious affiliation.³
5. Singapore's multicultural, multireligious, and multiethnic society is shaped by its colonial history and independence from in 1965.⁴ The country's economic and technological progress has been accompanied by efforts to foster social cohesion, although certain areas of civil and political rights continue to face limitations.⁵
6. During its last Universal Periodic Review, the government of Singapore did not accept 15 recommendations related to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.⁶ While recognizing that freedom of religion is constitutionally protected in Singapore, it clarified its position that '[freedom of religion] is not an absolute right under international law' and that, in the specific context of military service, it does not recognize the 'universal applicability of the right to conscientious objection'.⁷

¹ Singapore Department of Statistics, *Population in Brief 2024* (September 2024) 4 <https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/Population_in_Brief_2024.pdf>

² Ibid 24

³ Department of Statistics Singapore, *Census of Population 2020* (2020) 1 <<https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/cop2020/sr1/findings.pdf>>

⁴ 'History of the Straits Settlements & Singapore', *Encyclopedia Britannica* <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Straits-Settlements>> accessed 19 August 2025

⁵ Peter E. Austin, 'Asian Tiger 4: Singapore' (2025) *The 1960s Project: Remembering an Era of Achievement* <<https://www.the1960sproject.com/markets/asian-tiger-4-singapore-2/>>

⁶ 'Press Release: Government fails to accept key human rights recommendations during UN Review' (29 August 2021) *International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)* <<https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/singapore/government-fails-to-accept-key-human-rights-recommendations-during-un>>

⁷ 'Adoption of the Outcome of Singapore's Third Universal Periodic Review' (1 October 2021) *Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs* <<https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2021/10/20211001-UPR-adoption>>

Constitutional Framework

7. Article 12 of Singapore's Constitution affirms the principle of equality and equal protection before the law and prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, descent, or place of birth.⁸ At the same time, it allows for exceptions in matters concerning personal status, which can affect the consistent application of equality across different religious communities. An example of this is the Administration of Muslim Law (AMLA) 1966, which governs Muslim religious affairs in matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance.⁹
8. Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees the rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and association.¹⁰ These rights may be limited where Parliament deems it necessary or expedient for the protection of national security, public order, morality, or other specified interests. The restrictions are designed to protect the 'privileges of Parliament' or to provide against 'contempt of court, defamation or incitement to any offense'.¹¹
9. Article 15 protects every person's right to profess, practice, and propagate their religion.¹² It also enshrines the rights of religious groups to manage their own affairs, operate charitable institutions, and own property.¹³ Exceptions to freedom of religion are for those acts contrary to 'public order, public health or morality'.¹⁴
10. Article 152 provides that the government has a special responsibility to care for the interests of 'racial and religious minorities' in Singapore, particularly Malays.¹⁵
11. Finally, in Article 153, the Constitution requires the Legislature to make provision for regulating Muslim religious affairs and for constituting a Council to advise the President in matters relating to the Muslim religion.¹⁶

Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act 1990 (MRHA)

12. In addition to constitutional provisions, various statutory provisions affect freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression.
13. Among other provisions of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act 1990¹⁷, Article 17F makes it an offence to knowingly incite feelings of 'enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility, or contempt for or ridicule of' a group in Singapore that is distinguished by religion or religious belief or activity and that would threaten the 'public peace or public order'.¹⁸

⁸ Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (rev ed 30 July 2025) art 3

<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963?ViewType=Pdf&_id=20250307140803>, art 12

⁹ Administration of Muslim Law Act 1966 (2020 rev ed) <<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/act/amla1966>>

¹⁰ Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, art 14

¹¹ Ibid art 14(2)(a)

¹² Ibid art 15(1)

¹³ Ibid art 15(3)

¹⁴ Ibid art 15(4)

¹⁵ Ibid art 152(1)-(2)

¹⁶ Ibid art 153

¹⁷ Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act 1990 (rev ed 2020) <<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/act/MRHA1990>>

¹⁸ Ibid art 17F(3)

14. Likewise, a person commits an offense if they knowingly ‘insult the religion or religious belief or activity’ of another person in Singapore or ‘wounds the religious feelings of a person in Singapore...who holds a religious belief or view’.¹⁹
15. Although there are certain defenses (e.g., domestic or private communications)²⁰, a person who is found guilty under either provision will be liable on conviction to imprisonment for a term of up to five years, a fine, or both.²¹
16. Article 17G established that, in determining whether a person commits an offence under, inter alia, 17F, the person’s motive for engaging in the conduct is ‘irrelevant’, so long as the religion or religious belief or activity of the target group is a ‘substantial’ ground.²²

Societies Act 1966

17. Relatedly, the Societies Act sets out various requirements for the registration of associations. Among other grounds, societies can be denied registration if their purposes are ‘prejudicial to the public peace, welfare or good order in Singapore’, or ‘contrary to Singapore’s national security or interest’.²³ Authorities have various investigative and enforcement powers, as well as can impose penalties for non-compliance.²⁴
18. For example, unregistered religious groups can be legally dissolved, and their members can be subject to investigation, oversight, repatriation, or even arrest.²⁵

Penal Code

19. Section 298A of the Singapore Penal Code prohibits acts prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony. The law penalizes committing any act that someone knows is prejudicial to harmony between different racial groups and which is likely to disturb public tranquility.²⁶ Punishment includes imprisonment of up to three years, a fine, or both.

Undesirable Publications Act 1967 (UPA)

20. Article 4 of the Undesirable Publications Act 1967 defines as ‘objectionable’ any publication that ‘describes, depicts, expresses, or otherwise deals with’, inter alia, ‘matters of race or religion in such a manner that the availability of the publication is likely to cause feelings of enmity, hatred, ill will or hostility between different racial or religious groups’.²⁷

¹⁹ Ibid art 17F(4)

²⁰ Ibid art 17F(7)-(10)

²¹ Ibid art 17F(6)

²² Ibid art 17G(1) and (3)(a)

²³ Societies Act 1966 (rev ed 2020) s 4(2)(b) and (d) <<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/SA1966#pr4->>

²⁴ Ibid ss 16–17 (Penalties), s 20 (Punishment), s 24 (Ordering dissolution), ss 26–29A (Investigative Powers)

²⁵ Jonathan Chan, ‘Shincheonji and Religious Policy in Singapore’ (16 June 2022), *Harvard Kennedy School Singapore Policy Journal* <<https://studentreview.hks.harvard.edu/shincheonji-and-religious-policy-in-singapore/>

²⁶ Singapore Penal Code 1871 (rev ed 2020, as amended to 2 August 2025) chp 15, s 298A <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PC1871?ProvlDs=P415_298-#pr298A->

²⁷ Undesirable Publications Act 1967 (rev ed 2020) art 4(1)(b) <<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/UPA1967>>

21. Accordingly, the Government under the Act may prohibit the importation, sale, or circulation of all such publications. A person who 'imports, publishes, sells, offers for sale, supplies, offers to supply, exhibits, distributes or reproduces any prohibited publication' is liable on first conviction to a fine of up to \$10,000 SDG, to imprisonment for up to three years, or to both.²⁸
22. Similarly, a person who possesses a prohibited publication or an excerpt thereof is liable on conviction to a fine of up to \$2,000 SDG, imprisonment for a term of up to twelve months, or both.²⁹

Cases

23. Singapore is widely recognized as a prosperous and developed country, with high levels of interreligious tolerance on multiple measures.³⁰ These achievements can be attributed in part to the efforts of the state to balance public order concerns with the advancement of social harmony and intercommunal dialogue.³¹
24. At the same time, there are concerns that the legal framework designed to preserve harmony has, in certain instances, been applied in ways that may restrict the full enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression—particularly where expression involves dissenting, minority, or critical views.
25. While Singapore has made modest steps toward greater political openness, international civil society actors continue to raise concerns. Freedom House, for instance, currently rates Singapore as 'Partly Free' (48/100), citing constraints on civil liberties, including in the areas of speech, expression, and association.³²
26. Authorities have made use of existing constitutional and legal instruments to address content deemed false, misleading, or contrary to public interest. While addressing these phenomena is a legitimate goal, the expansive scope of these laws may contribute to self-censorship, especially on sensitive subjects such as religion and race.
27. On 20 December 2021, a 21-year-old man, Sun Sicong, was charged with wounding the religious feelings of Muslims online and causing alarm by remarking on a rape victim's story. The police said they took a serious view of 'acts that have the potential to damage racial and religious harmony' and that anyone who 'makes remarks or takes action that can cause ill will and hostility between races or religions will be dealt with firmly'.³³

²⁸ Ibid art 6(1)

²⁹ Ibid art 6(2)

³⁰ William Miner, 'In Singapore, religious diversity and tolerance go hand in hand' (6 October 2023) *Pew Research Center* <<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/06/in-singapore-religious-diversity-and-tolerance-go-hand-in-hand/>>

³¹ Eugene K B Tan, 'The Role of the State in Religious Freedom and Social Harmony in Singapore' (18 January 2022) *LSE Religion and Global Society* <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2022/01/the-role-of-the-state-in-religious-freedom-and-social-harmony-in-singapore/>>

³² 'Freedom in the World 2025: Singapore' *Freedom House* <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/singapore/freedom-world/2025>> accessed 30 July 2025

³³ Lydia Lam, 'Man charged with wounding religious feelings of Muslims in Instagram posts' (20 December 2021) *Channel News Asia* <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/man-charged-wounding-religious-feelings-muslims-instagram-posts-2390646>>

28. On 15 January 2022, the country's Minister for Communications & Information said that the government's decision to ban a book about political cartoons and censorship was based on the grounds that it offends religious feelings.³⁴ This was in response to an assessment made by the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) that even if publications are used for social commentary or to aid in the discussion of censorship, the authorities can still deem them 'unsuitable' for reproduction under the UPA.³⁵
29. On 19 January 2022, police alleged opposition politician Charles Yeo made insulting remarks towards Christianity and a public servant. He was, inter alia, charged with two counts of attempted offences of 'uttering words with deliberate intent to wound the religious feelings of any person' under Section 298 of the Penal Code.³⁶ The prosecution subsequently told Yeo that he should be 'mindful' of what he posted on social media, as he could find himself 'in trouble' if he posted content that was similar to what he was charged over.³⁷
30. On 25 February 2025, an 85-year-old man was charged for his alleged involvement in sharing an online post with deliberate intent to wound the religious feelings of Muslims and for re-posting screenshots from Facebook posts containing remarks deemed offensive towards Islam.³⁸
31. Lastly, Singapore continues not to recognize minority religious groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have been deregistered from the Societies Act since 12 January 1972.³⁹ In addition, as of 17 June 2025, there are a total of eight Jehovah's Witnesses who are in prison as conscientious objectors from the country's compulsory military service.⁴⁰

Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression Under International Law

32. Singapore's restrictions on freedom of religion or belief and opinion and expression are incompatible with its obligations under international human rights law under multiple treaties it is a party to, which contain provisions recognizing both rights.

³⁴ Sulaiman Daud, 'Red Lines book on political cartoons banned for including offensive religious content, not political content: Josephine Teo' (15 January 2022) *Mothership* <<https://mothership.sg/2022/01/josephine-teo-cherian-george-sonny-liew-red-lines/>>

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Public Affairs Department, 'Police Statement on Charles Yeo's Abscondment' (1 August 2022) *Singapore Police Force* <https://www.police.gov.sg/Media-Room/News/20220801_police_statement_on_charles_yeos_abscondment>

³⁷ Wan Ting Koh, 'Reform Party's Charles Yeo charged over remarks toward cop and Christians' (19 January 2022) *Yahoo News* <<https://sg.news.yahoo.com/reform-partys-charles-yeo-charged-remarks-cop-christians-062032631.html>>

³⁸ 'Man to be Charged for Offensive Remarks' (25 February 2025) *Singapore Police Force Public Affairs Department* <https://www.police.gov.sg/media-room/news/20250225_man_to_be_charged_for_offensive_remarks>

³⁹ 'Imprisoned for Their Faith – Singapore' *Jehovah's Witnesses* <<https://www.jw.org/en/news/region/singapore/jehovahs-witnesses-in-prison/>> accessed 1 August 2025

⁴⁰ Ibid

33. These include the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)⁴¹, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)⁴², and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).⁴³
34. Additionally, although Singapore is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)⁴⁴, the freedoms of religion and belief and of opinion and expression are widely accepted as fundamental human rights.
35. This is reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 18 of which recognizes the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to change one's belief and to manifest one's religion or belief in 'teaching, practice, worship and observance'.⁴⁵
36. Inseparably linked to Article 18 is Article 19, which enshrines the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes the freedom to 'hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers'.⁴⁶
37. Article 29 of the UDHR states that the exercise of rights and freedoms may only be subject to limitations solely for the purpose of 'securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others' and of meeting the 'just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society'.⁴⁷
38. Some legal commentators argue that the UDHR's provisions have attained the status of 'customary international law', confirmed by states in 'intergovernmental and diplomatic settings, in arguments submitted to judicial tribunals, by the actions of intergovernmental organizations, and in the writings of legal scholars'.⁴⁸
39. In addition, while not a binding international human rights treaty, the Rabat Plan of Action also sets a high threshold for defining restrictions on freedom of expression and incitement to hatred.⁴⁹

⁴¹ International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) (adopted 21 December 1965 by UN General Assembly resolution 2106 (XX)) arts 5(d)(vii) and (viii) <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-elimination-all-forms-racial>>

⁴² Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (adopted 20 November 1989 by General Assembly resolution 44/25) arts 13 and 14 <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>>

⁴³ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (adopted 12 December 2006 by General Assembly resolution 61/106) preamble (p) and art 21 <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>>

⁴⁴ International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171 (ICCPR) art 18(1) <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>>

⁴⁵ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948 by GA resolution 217 A) art 18 <<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>>

⁴⁶ Ibid art 19

⁴⁷ UDHR art 29.2

⁴⁸ Hurst Hannum, 'The UDHR in National and International Law' (Vol. 3 No. 2 2014) (*Harvard Health and Human Rights*) <<https://content.sph.harvard.edu/wwwhsph/sites/2469/2014/04/16-Hannum.pdf>>

⁴⁹ Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the expert workshops on the prohibition of incitement to national,

40. To assess the severity of incitement to hatred and violence, a six-part threshold test was proposed for expressions considered as criminal offenses: (1) the context of the statement, (2) the speaker's position or status, (3) whether there was intent to incite the audience against a target group, (4) the content and form of the statement, (5) the extent of its dissemination, and (6) the likelihood of harm, including imminence.⁵⁰
41. The Rabat Plan of Action also recommends that States ensure that the three-part test for legality, proportionality, and necessity for restrictions on freedom of expression also applies to cases of incitement to hatred.⁵¹ This means that restrictions must be provided by law, be narrowly defined to serve a legitimate interest, and be necessary in a democratic society to protect that interest.⁵²
42. Singapore's MHRA, Societies Act, and Penal Code provisions do not comply with the standards of legality, necessity, and proportionality because their provisions are vague, sweepingly encompass protected activity, or allow for arbitrary application by authorities.
43. Likewise, Singapore's censorship laws under the UPA and POFMA are incompatible with the substance of Article 19 of the UDHR. Far from promoting religious tolerance, the laws implicitly cast a 'chilling effect' on free expression, stifling legitimate manifestations of one's deeply held beliefs and undermining the potential of interfaith initiatives such as those promoted by Singapore's Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles.⁵³
44. The former Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, has noted that there is a 'positive interrelatedness' between the freedoms of religion or belief and of expression, and how the two rights 'mutually reinforce' each other in practice.⁵⁴ He specifically notes that prohibiting displays of lack of respect for a religion or other belief system laws may be counterproductive at the national level and may result in de facto censure of all interreligious dialogue and intrareligious dialogue, debate, and criticism, most of which could be constructive, healthy, and needed.⁵⁵
45. Finally, all UN Member States, including Singapore, have ratified the UN Charter, which, in Article 55(c), recognizes that the UN shall promote 'universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion'.⁵⁶
46. Accordingly, Singapore is under an obligation to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all people within its jurisdiction.

racial or religious hatred' U.N. Human Rights Council (A/HRC/22/17/Add.4)

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Rabat_draft_outcome.pdf>

⁵⁰ Ibid para 29

⁵¹ Ibid para 22

⁵² Ibid para 18

⁵³ Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle 'About IRCC' (2022) <https://www.ircc.sg/about-ircc>.

⁵⁴ Heiner Bielefeldt, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief' *U.N. Human Rights Council* (23 December 2015) (A/HRC/31/18) para 8 <<https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/31/18>>

⁵⁵ Ibid para 59

⁵⁶ U.N. Charter (signed 26 June 1945, effective 24 Oct. 1945) art 55(c) <<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>>

47. While it may recognize the existence and history of religious faiths within a community, the most effective tool to combat all forms of intolerance based on religion or belief and forge authentic harmony is the guarantee of the free, full, and effective enjoyment of the human rights and fundamental freedoms by all people.

(b) Recommendations

48. In light of the aforementioned, ADF International respectfully suggests the following recommendations be made to Singapore:

- a. Ensure that the right to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of opinion and expression are promoted and protected in accordance with international human rights law;
- b. Repeal or amend provisions of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, particularly Article 17F, concerning insult to religion, to bring it in line with international standards;
- c. Streamline, facilitate, and increase the transparency of the registration process for religious organizations, including by removing burdensome requirements for those religious minority groups not recognized under the Societies Act;
- d. Repeal or amend provisions of the Penal Code, particularly Section 298A, dealing with acts prejudicial to harmony to ensure they meet the requirements of legality, necessity, and proportionality;
- e. Repeal or amend provisions of the Undesirable Publications Act, particularly Article 4, concerning the wounding of religious feelings to eliminate ambiguity and discrimination in its implementation;
- f. Repeal or amend provisions of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, particularly Part 2, Art. 7(1)(v), dealing with incitement of feelings;
- g. Immediately release individuals imprisoned on the grounds of conscience, or for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief; and
- h. Guarantee the right of all religious minorities to freely worship in community with others, including by repealing the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses.



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