

SINGAPORE 2021 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 to ban Jehovah's Witnesses and the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church). It restricted speech or actions it perceived as detrimental to "religious harmony." The government held 17 Jehovah's Witnesses in the armed forces' detention facility for refusing to complete mandatory national service on religious grounds, compared with 12 the previous year. In February, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) detained a 20-year-old Muslim man for planning to attack a synagogue using a knife. According to the MHA, the individual self-radicalized through online material. The government and religious groups condemned the planned attack. Throughout the year, police investigated several social media messages and online incidents directed at specific ethnic and religious groups. In November, the government's media and telecommunications regulator, Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), banned a book on political cartoons and censorship by academic Cherian George and cartoonist Sonny Liew on the grounds of containing religious images and references considered offensive, affecting Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. The government made multiple high-level affirmations of the importance of religious harmony and respect for religious differences. It emphasized the role faith leaders played in promoting solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Government organizations initiated interfaith programs and funded community-led interfaith initiatives to promote religious tolerance and build interfaith understanding.

Multiple religious groups held virtual interfaith events and celebrations during the year. Religious groups and civil society organizations continued to promote interfaith understanding. When the government tightened COVID-19 restrictions in May, six faith-based organizations released a joint statement pledging to maintain interfaith solidarity and urging a united stand amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In August, the Deputy Prime Minister joined members of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) to celebrate the annual IRO Day virtually.

The Charge d'Affaires and other U.S. embassy officers promoted religious diversity and tolerance throughout the year. The Charge d'Affaires and President Halimah Yacob emphasized the importance of religious diversity and tolerance and commended these goals in remarks they delivered at an event organized by the

interfaith organization Roses of Peace in February. At the event, Roses of Peace also launched a program supported by the U.S. embassy that trained “ambassadors” to promote interfaith dialogue and religious harmony. During Ramadan in April, the Charge d’Affaires met with Muslim and interfaith community leaders at a mosque to exchange views on interfaith relations and the impact of COVID-19 on religious communities in the country. The Charge d’Affaires delivered best wishes for Ramadan in April and Deepavali in November via video and with written messages on social media, and the Ambassador sent holiday greetings in December.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.9 million (midyear 2021). According to the Singapore government, the citizen population decreased by 0.7 percent, the permanent resident population by 6.2 percent, and the nonpermanent resident population by 10.7 percent since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic to a total population of 5.45 million by June 2021. According to 2020 census data, of the four million citizens and permanent residents, 31.1 percent of the population of citizens and permanent residents are Buddhist, 18.9 percent Christian, 15.6 percent Muslim (predominantly Sunni), 8.8 percent Taoist, 5 percent Hindu, and 20 percent identify as having no religion. Groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jains, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church). Although estimates varied widely, the government estimates there are 2,500 members in the Jewish community.

According to the 2020 Census, 74.3 percent of the resident population is ethnic Chinese, 13.5 percent ethnic Malay, 9 percent ethnic Indian, and 3.2 percent other, including Eurasians. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim. Among ethnic Indians, 57.3 percent are Hindu, 23.4 percent Muslim, and 12.6 percent Christian. The ethnic Chinese population includes Buddhists (40.4 percent), Christians (21.6 percent), Taoists (11.6 percent), and 25.7 percent with no religion.

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 the basis of religion in the administration of any law or in the appointment to, or employment in, any office under a public authority. It states every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs, and it does not prohibit restrictions on employment by a religious institution. The constitution states no person shall be required to receive instruction or take part in any ceremony or act of worship other than his or her own.

The government maintains a decades-long ban on Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church. The government banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 1972 on the grounds the religion was prejudicial to public welfare and order because it objected to military service, reciting the national pledge, or singing the national anthem. A 1996 decision by the Singapore Appeals Court upheld the ban and stated that individuals (including members of the Jehovah's Witnesses) have the right to profess, practice, and propagate their own beliefs, but may not act as members of an unlawful society or attend meetings of such banned groups. In practice, 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 or import their literature. The government banned the Unification Church in 1982 on the grounds it was a "cult" that could have detrimental effects on society.

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) authorizes the Minister for Home Affairs to issue a "restraining order" (RO) against a person in a position of authority within a religious group if the Minister ascertains the person is causing feelings of enmity or hostility between different religious groups, promoting political causes, carrying out subversive activities, or encouraging disaffection against the government under the guise of practicing religion. An RO places various restrictions on public activities in which a religious authority can participate. Under the MRHA, the Minister must provide individuals or religious groups 14 days to make written representations before an RO may be issued against them, and the Minister must also consult and take into consideration the views of the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony (PCRH) as to whether an RO should be issued. The PCRH consists of 10 members, seven of whom represent the Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, Sikh, and Taoist community, and three members, including the chair, who do not represent any religious group. 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," including through social media comments, may result in detention or up to five years

imprisonment. Since enacting the MRHA in 1990, the government has never invoked the law or issued an RO.

In October, the government repealed the 1938 Sedition Act which criminalized conduct with seditious tendencies and allowed courts to suspend the publication and circulation of newspapers and publications containing seditious content as new laws would incorporate the offenses. The government amended the Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code to include offenses related to social cohesion previously in the concurrently-repealed Sedition Act that were not covered by other laws. Under the amendments, a person is subject to arrest and prosecution for offenses such as deliberate wounding of any person's racial or religious feelings, promoting disharmony between different racial or religious groups, as well as making, publishing, or circulating material with the intent to incite any group of persons to commit an offense against another group of persons.

The PCRH reports on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony and considers cases referred to it by the MHA or by parliament. The President appoints the council's members on the advice of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights. The law requires that two-thirds of PCRH members be representatives of the major religions in the country.

The constitution states Malays are "the indigenous people of Singapore," and it requires the government to protect and promote their interests, including religious interests. The Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), established under the Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth (MCCY), administers affairs for all Muslims in the country such as the construction and management of mosques, halal certification, fatwa issuances, preparation of Friday sermons, and Hajj arrangements. The MUIS includes representatives from the Sunni majority and Muslim minority groups, including Shia. Use of MUIS sermons is not compulsory, but imams who use their own content are responsible for it and the government may investigate them if there are complaints.

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

The law requires all associations of 10 or more persons, including religious groups, to register with the government. Registration confers legal identity, which allows

registered groups to own property, hold public meetings, and conduct financial transactions. Registered religious groups may apply to establish and maintain charitable and humanitarian institutions, which enables them to solicit and receive funding and tax benefits, such as income tax exemptions. 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 group may be punished with a fine of up to 5,000 Singapore dollars (SGD) (\$3,700), imprisonment of up to three years, or both.

Prisoners, including those in solitary confinement, are allowed access to chaplains of registered religious groups. Members of unregistered or banned religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, the Unification Church, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Christian Conference of Asia, and Shincheonji Church, do not have this right.

Citizens require a permit to speak at indoor gatherings open to the public that are outside of the hearing or view of nonparticipants if the topic refers to race or religion. Indoor, private events are not subject to the same restrictions. Organizers of private events, however, must prevent inadvertent access by uninvited guests or they may be cited for noncompliance with the rules regarding public gatherings.

By law, a publication is considered objectionable if it describes, depicts, expresses, or deals with, among other things, 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 among racial or religious groups. The government may prohibit the importation of publications, including religious publications, under the law. For offenses involving the publication of material deemed objectionable, an individual may be liable upon conviction to a fine not exceeding 5,000 SGD (\$3,700), imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months, or both. A person in possession of a prohibited publication may be fined up to 2,000 SGD (\$1,500) and imprisoned 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 National Development and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) establish 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 and the URA determine whether a religious institution meets the requirements as a place of worship, such as being located in an allotted zone or staying within the maximum allowed plot ratio and building height. URA guidelines regulate the use of commercially and industrially zoned space for religious activities and religious groups; they 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 exclusively leased to religious organizations or limited to religious use and must also be available to rent out for 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.

Registration with the MUIS is compulsory for all Muslim religious teachers and Islamic centers of learning. Registration requires adherence to minimum standards and a code of ethics, as well as the fulfilment of certain training requirements.

The law allows members of the Muslim community, irrespective of their 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 is used, but there are legal provisions for use of “other accepted schools of Muslim law as may be appropriate.” Under the law, a sharia court has exclusive jurisdiction over marriage issues where both parties are or were married as Muslims, including divorce, nullification, or judicial separation. The sharia court has concurrent jurisdiction with the family court and family division of the high court over disputes related to custody of minors and disposition of property upon divorce. The President of the country appoints the president of the sharia court. A breach of a sharia court order is a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment of up to six months, and an individual may file a complaint alleging a breach in the family justice courts. The sharia court does not have jurisdiction over personal protection orders or applications for maintenance payments, as these are orders issued by a secular family court. Appeals within the sharia system go to an appeals board also in the sharia system that is composed of three members selected by the president of the MUIS from a panel of at least seven Muslims nominated every three years by the President of the country. The ruling of the appeals 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, reviewing the husband's financial capability, and evaluating his ability to treat the wives and families fairly and equitably. By law, the President of the country appoints a "male Muslim of good character and suitable attainments" as the Registrar of Muslim Marriages.

Under the law, certain criminal offenses apply only to those who profess Islam. This includes publicly teaching or expounding any doctrine relating to Islam in a manner contrary to Islamic law, which carries a maximum fine of 2,000 SGD (\$1,500), maximum imprisonment of 12 months, or both. It is also a criminal offense for Muslims to cohabit outside of marriage, but the government has not enforced that law in decades.

Under the law, Muslim couples in which one or both parties are under the age of 21 must complete a marriage preparation program and obtain parental or guardian consent before applying for marriage. Each party to the marriage must be at least 18 years of age.

According to legal experts in inheritance, Islamic law governs Muslims in the context of inheritance issues by default, but under certain circumstances, civil law takes precedence when invoked. Islamic law may result in a man receiving twice the share of a woman's inheritance of the same family relational level. A man may also incur financial responsibilities for his female next of kin, although this provision is not codified in the country's law.

The government does not permit religious instruction in public schools, although it is allowed in the country's 57 government-subsidized religiously affiliated schools (mostly Christian but including three Buddhist schools). Religious instruction in these schools is provided outside of regular curriculum time and must not involve proselytization; students have the right to opt out and be given alternatives, such as civics and moral education, in lieu of religious instruction. Religious instruction is allowed in private schools not subsidized by the government. At the primary level, however, the law allows only seven designated private schools (six Sunni madrassahs and one Seventh-day Adventist school) to provide religious education to citizen students; these schools must also continue to meet or exceed public school performance benchmarks in annual national exams. Other Muslim minority groups may operate part-time schools. Public schools finish early on Fridays, which enables Muslim students to attend Friday prayers, or administrators allow Muslim students to leave early to attend prayers. Secondary school students learn

about the diversity of the country's religious practices as a component of their character and citizenship education.

The law empowers the Ministry of Education (MOE) to regulate primary and secondary schools. MOE rules prohibit students (but not teachers) in public schools from wearing anything not forming part of an official school uniform, including hijabs or headscarves. Schools have the discretion to exempt a child from wearing the official uniform based on health but not on religious grounds. International and other private schools are not subject to the same restrictions. For example, in madrassahs, which are all under the purview of the MUIS, headscarves are part of the uniform. Headscarves are not banned at institutions of higher learning.

The law does not recognize a right to conscientious objection to military service, including for religious reasons. Male citizens or second-generation permanent residents are required to complete 24 months of uniformed national service upon reaching age 18, with no alternative provided to national service. Conscientious objectors are generally court-martialed and sentenced to detention, typically for 12 to 39 months. Although they remain technically liable for national service, men who refuse to serve on religious grounds are generally not called up for reservist duties. They do not, however, receive any form of legal documentation that officially discharges them from reservist duties.

The Presidential Council for Minority Rights, an advisory body that is part of the legislative process, examines all legislation to ensure it does not disadvantage specific religious groups. The council also considers and reports on matters concerning any religious group that the parliament or the government refers to it.

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

Government Practices

The official website of Jehovah's Witnesses reported that as of December, 17 Jehovah's Witnesses were held in the armed forces' detention facility for refusing on religious grounds to complete national service compared with 12 the previous year.

Throughout the year, the government detained several individuals under internal security legislation for planning religiously linked terrorist activities. In January,

the MHA announced its Internal Security Department had detained a 16-year-old Protestant Christian male in December 2020 for planning to attack Muslims at two mosques using a machete on the anniversary of the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand mosque shootings. According to the ministry, the minor had self-radicalized through online material that included the Christchurch attacker's manifesto and ISIS videos of violence against Christians. This was the first time that right-wing extremism has been cited by authorities as a terrorist motive in the country. In February, the MHA's Internal Security Department detained a 20-year-old Muslim man for planning to kill Jews at a synagogue with a knife. According to the MHA, the individual self-radicalized through online material and was allegedly motivated by the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the first time this has been cited by authorities as a terrorist motive in the country.

Government officials strongly condemned both of these planned attacks and asked people to build trust and confidence across the country's multireligious society and support each other, regardless of different faiths and beliefs. Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam held joint meetings with representatives of the Christian and Muslim communities, as well as with Muslims and Jews at the mosque and synagogue that were the targets of the planned attacks. In response to questions, Shanmugam told parliament that the government's policies were secular and that the cabinet, civil servants, and public service in general would not make policy decisions that favored any religious group. He cited secularism, fairness, and neutrality as the "golden threads" of the country's policymaking. In response to the arrests and a heightened regional terror alert, places of worship increased security during major religious commemorations such as Easter and Ramadan.

In April, the MHA's Internal Security Department detained a Muslim woman, a former Islamic religious teacher, saying she intended to travel to Syria to take up armed violence with ISIS. The woman had been under an Internal Security Act restriction order since August 2020 but the government said she did not respond to "religious counseling and rehabilitation" and continued communicating online with overseas ISIS supporters.

The government prosecuted a number of incidents and comments on social media throughout the year that were directed against racial and religious groups. In July, the MHA reported that in 2020, police investigated 60 reports of social media posts that were racially and religiously discriminating and offensive (a single combined criminal offense). The 60 reported cases were twice the number reported in 2019 and the highest in five years.

In January, MUIS disclosed that it filed a police report on an unregistered Islamic religious school in 2019 and police were investigating the head of the school for providing religious classes without being registered with MUIS.

In May, police started an investigation into an online poll on the social media platform MeWe that ranked female Islamic religious teachers according to their sexual attractiveness. IMDA asked MeWe to remove the poll as the published content was prohibited under the law. President Halimah, MUIS, the country's mufti, and several members of parliament condemned the poll. MUIS filed a police report that led to the investigation, and it provided support and counseling to those affected. It called the poll a "disgrace to the Muslim community." President Halimah said she was "deeply perturbed" by the poll and demanded that MUIS and the police punish those found guilty. Mufti Nazirudin Mohd Nasir suggested the Muslim community needed to be reeducated on unacceptable behaviors and the Asatizah Recognition Board, which accredits Islamic scholars and teachers, announced that if Islamic studies graduates were behind the poll, they would not be allowed to teach Islam.

In June, police started an investigation against Dr. Kho Kwang Po for allegedly making comments online against Islam and Muslims. In social media posts between 2014 and April 2021, Koh stated, among other things, that Islam was a violent religion.

In June, police started an investigation into the case of a woman who was seen hitting a gong repeatedly in a video while her Indian neighbor conducted a Hindu prayer ritual at the entrance of his home. Police later issued the woman a 12-month conditional warning that forbade her from committing a similar offense. President Halimah condemned the incidents in a social media post as "agonizing" and "hurtful" and said he wondered if these cases were "one-off incidents or reflective of a larger problem."

On November 1, authorities charged rapper Subhas Nair with four counts of attempting to promote feelings of ill will between different religious and ethnic groups after he violated a 24-month conditional warning that prohibited him from making such comments. The police had issued the conditional warning to Nair in August 2019 regarding an allegedly "racially charged rap video" he and his sister Preeti Nair produced and released in response to a racially insensitive advertisement. Subhas Nair "breached the conditions of this warning by allegedly committing offenses on July 25, 2020, October 15, 2020, and March 11, 2021" and faced charges for these offenses, according to police. In the three incidents, police

said Nair promoted feelings of ill will by saying authorities would treat Malay Muslims and Indians differently, compared to Chinese and Christians. If convicted, Nair could receive a prison sentence of up to three years and/or a fine.

In November, IMDA banned the book *Red Lines: Political Cartoons and the Struggle Against Censorship* by Hong Kong-based Singaporean academic Cherian George and Singaporean cartoonist Sonny Liew. The IMDA said the book contained images offensive and denigrating to religions, including Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. Among such images were the 2006 *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons of Prophet Muhammed. MUIS voiced support for the decision and stated the images were not acceptable in a multireligious society like Singapore. The authority said it had banned six other publications in the past five years for denigrating various religious communities.

In November, the police issued a 12-month conditional warning to the man who owned the Facebook page “NUS Atheist Society” for wounding religious feelings. In March 2020, the Facebook page posted an image of the Bible and the Quran with a caption reading, “For use during toilet paper shortages.”

In December, authorities charged a 21-year-old permanent resident for wounding religious feelings and making insulting comments. The man was arrested in June 2020 for posting comments on Instagram about wanting to kill Muslims.

At year’s end, the MHA continued an investigation begun in February 2020 of a local unregistered chapter of the South Korean Shincheonji Church under the authority of national security legislation that could ban the organization’s activities in the country. The ministry said the group had used deceptive recruitment methods and misled individuals. In November 2020, the ministry announced police arrested 21 members of the organization under the Societies Act for being members of an “unlawful society” and for resuming activities “covertly,” despite warnings from the ministry to cease.

The government assisted religious groups in locating spaces for religious observance in government-built housing, where most citizens live. The government continued to enforce the maintenance of ethnic ratios in public housing to prevent the emergence of ethnic and religious enclaves in concentrated geographic areas.

In March, Home Affairs and Law Minister Shanmugam first mentioned during a closed-door dialogue, but later disclosed publicly, that the government was likely

to change its headscarf policy to allow nurses to wear a hijab or *tudung* at work. Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong later announced during his August National Day Rally the government would implement the change from November 1. PM Lee stated that the adjustment showed that policies on race and religion must remain up to date and change over time as values and beliefs evolved with every new generation. However, in order to reflect an impartial and secular status, female staff in the armed forces, law enforcement, and other uniformed services were still not allowed to wear the hijab or tudung. PM Lee also thanked Muslim leaders for explaining to the community the government's approach on such sensitive issues stating that the leaders' engagement aided the government in managing an issue important to Muslims, and that it supported the government's ability to maintain a shared common space and work toward an outcome that would strengthen the country's racial and religious harmony. Representatives from the Muslim community said they welcomed the shift in policy. It would "ease the dilemma faced by many Muslim women," said President Halimah. MUIS CEO Esa Masood said the change demonstrated the government understood and was responsive to the needs and aspirations of the Muslim community, which in return would be "deeply appreciative."

The government continued to prohibit religious content from being broadcast on television "in order to maintain a secular public broadcast service." The communal call to prayer and Ramadan sermons continued to be broadcast on radio and to be available on the internet.

While there is no law prohibiting proselytization, the government continued to limit its practice through the application of laws regarding public speech, assembly, and broadcasting; authorities cited concerns that proselytizing might offend other religious groups and upset intergroup relations.

In 2019, parliament amended the MRHA, although the revised law was not in effect as of the end of 2021. The amendment would expand the Minister for Home Affairs' authority to issue an RO, but an accused could submit a letter to the PCRH to explain his or her perspective before the President confirmed, cancelled, or varied the RO. The accused would further be allowed to voluntarily reconcile with the insulted religious group to avoid criminal prosecution if the accused violated the RO. Under the amended law, the MRHA, rather than the penal code, would govern offenses related to religious matters, adding extraterritorial coverage and making offenses more serious than the offense of insulting or ridiculing a religion. It would double the maximum penalties for religiously aggravated offenses under the penal code. The amended MRHA would require that key leadership roles in

religious organizations be filled by citizens or permanent residents and that they disclose foreign donations of 10,000 SGD (\$7,400) or more and declare any affiliation to foreign groups that are in a position to exert influence.

As part of the MOE's National Education Program, the official primary and secondary public school curricula encouraged religious harmony and tolerance. Secondary school students visited diverse religious sites, including Buddhist and Hindu temples, mosques, churches, and synagogues. All schools celebrated the annual Racial Harmony Day in July, which was intended to promote understanding and acceptance of all races and religions within the country. On that day, children wore traditional clothing and celebrated the country's racial and religious diversity. Students were also encouraged to recite a "Declaration of Religious Harmony," which repeatedly affirmed the importance of religious harmony for the country. PM Lee said racist incidents during the year had put a spotlight on racial harmony and on the discrimination various racial and religious groups encountered in the country. Lee acknowledged that while the public debates had sometimes been uncomfortable, they were helpful, as advancing racial harmony was an ongoing process.

President Halimah, PM Lee, and government ministers regularly stressed the government's commitment to the country as a multiracial and multireligious society and cited religious harmony as an important policy goal. PM Lee used his annual National Day Rally in August to address directly the status of race and religion while delivering the country's most important annual policy speech. He remarked that COVID-19 had put more stress on these relations and had resulted in several incidents and insensitive comments in public and online.

Cabinet members repeatedly acknowledged that COVID-19 affected religious groups and emphasized the importance of religious harmony during the pandemic in statements delivered on major religious commemorations such as Easter, Ramadan, Vesak Day, and Diwali. On April 16, PM Lee participated in a virtual iftar with 110 religious community leaders. Lee thanked Muslim and other faith leaders for what he stated was guiding their communities towards safer ways of practicing their religions as the country imposed strict restrictions on places of worship during the pandemic.

Ministers frequently gave speeches on strengthening religious pluralism and participated in virtual interfaith dialogues led by societal organizations.

Under the auspices of the MCCY, local government and government-affiliated organizations advocated for interreligious understanding and support for followers of other religions.

Interfaith activities occurred in each of the country's five mayoral districts through programs such as Common Sense for Common Spaces, while 89 Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs) continued to operate in each of the country's 27 electoral constituencies. The IRCCs conducted a variety of local interreligious dialogues, counseling, and trust-building workshops, community celebrations, and religious awareness campaigns on social media. During the year, IRCCs supported interreligious dialogues by civil society groups such as hash.peace, Interfaith Youth Circle, and the Institute of Chinese Buddhism. IRCCs discussed different religious groups through its cultural dictionary series on Facebook, in which it introduced key concepts of different faiths.

The government continued to work with religious groups through the Community Engagement Program, which trained community leaders in emergency preparedness and techniques for promoting religious harmony. Through the Crisis Preparedness for Religious Organizations (CPRO) program, as managed by the IRCCs, MCCY helped to prepare religious organizations for terror threats and other crises by improving their ability to protect their premises and congregants, prepare emergency plans, and help the larger community during a crisis. The CPRO continued to form a key component of the government's COVID-19 pandemic response and its coordination with religious groups, providing guidelines on allowed religious activities during the pandemic. The MCCY consulted religious leaders and the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony when planning the introduction and relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions. The steering committee, which included representatives from all major religious groups in the country, also issued statements urging Singaporeans to stay united amid COVID-19, and hosted meetings to strengthen ties among members. The MCCY also continued to work through the BRIDGE initiative (Broadening Religious/Racial Interaction through Dialogue and General Education), which provided financial support for community-based initiatives that fostered understanding of different religious practices and beliefs.

The MUIS continued to operate the Harmony Center, which was established to promote greater interfaith understanding. The Harmony Center housed artifacts and information about Islam and nine other major religious groups in the country. It also organized interfaith programs, including dialogues with leaders from different religious groups.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Institute of Policy Studies released three reports during the year on the country's data for the World Values Survey, for which it interviewed 2,000 persons between November 2019 and March 2020. Approximately two-thirds of respondents considered religion important, a drop from 76 percent in the 2002 and 2012 editions of the survey. While 80.1 percent believed in God, 18.2 percent said God was not important in their lives. Only 2 percent of respondents said they did not want to live next to people of a different race, religion, or language. However, respondents were split on whether they trusted people of another religion, with those trusting other religions decreasing from 58.9 percent in 2012 to 50.2 percent in the 2021 survey. Christians, Muslims, and Hindus were the only groups in which more than 50 percent trusted other religions.

In a September study by the Institute of Policy Studies on national identity and pride, the country's "religious diversity and freedom" was one of the strongest sources of national pride with 74.3 percent of respondents saying they were proud or very proud of it.

Following the detentions of several individuals by the government because of religiously motivated terror plots, numerous bodies such as the interfaith IRO, MUIS, the Religious Rehabilitation Group, the Hindu Endowments Board, Hindu Advisory Board, Sikh Advisory Board, the National Council of Churches, Singapore Buddhist Federation, and the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association released statements expressing concern about the plots and assured their commitment to continue building strong ties and trust among religious communities in the country. Following the detention of the 16-year-old Christian for his planned attack on the two mosques, Mufti Nazirudin reminded Muslims of the need for mutual understanding and asked them in his Friday prayer to respond with kindness. The National Council of Churches sent an assurance to the Muslim community that this was a single individual and met with Mufti Nazirudin at one of the two mosques targeted in the planned attack to discuss the incident. After the detention of the 20-year-old Muslim for his planned attack on the synagogue was announced, Jewish and Muslim leaders reaffirmed their good relationship during a joint visit to the synagogue. Mufti Nazirudin said, "Peace and harmony was a blessing and gift" that should never be taken for granted nor compromised. Leaders of the affected religions also exchanged letters in which they reinforced that these were individual cases that would not negatively impact their interfaith relations.

Religious groups and civil society organizations continued to promote both interfaith and intrafaith understanding. Ahead of their respective festive holidays, leaders of the different religious groups commonly exchanged letters conveying the well wishes of their communities to the other community as they celebrated these holidays. Throughout the year, the Center for Interfaith Understanding, chaired by a Muslim and a Taoist, hosted a range of webinars, including on such subjects as Christian-Muslim relations and interfaith dialogue. Shia and Sunni Muslims continued to cooperate and to share Sunni mosques.

In February, OnePeople.sg hosted a three-day virtual Model United Nations with 200 youths to improve their understanding on issues of race and to take a stand against prejudice. Religious leaders from the IRO participated and led a dialogue on “Hosting better interfaith conversations.”

The IRO, which included leaders of the 10 largest religious groups in the country, had the stated objective of inculcating a spirit of friendship among various religious groups by conducting interreligious prayer services, seminars, and public talks throughout the year. In May, the IRO urged Singaporeans to support each other regardless of race, religion, language, and nationality, and to uphold values of peace and respect among different racial groups and religions. The call came amid an increase in reports on racially and religiously motivated incidents.

In response to tightened COVID-19 restrictions in May, leaders of six faith-based organizations – Jamiyah Singapore, the Buddhist Lodge, the Taoist Federation, the Hindu Endowments Board, the Hindu Advisory Board, and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese – released a joint statement urging Singaporeans to stand united and strengthen solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic. The statement reminded followers that “our common threat and enemy is the virus, not the people or countries or their religions.”

In June, MUIS, the National Council of Churches, the Taoist Federation, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore, and the Hindu Endowments Board participated in a pilot project in which tech companies Facebook, Google, Twitter, and TikTok taught them how to use social media and the digital sphere to educate people on issues of race and religion to counter the threat of online radicalization.

In June, the NGO Humanity Matters organized an interfaith dialogue with speakers representing Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Taoism following several racially and religiously motivated incidents. The discussion highlighted the need for

interactions between different faiths and that the faith of one individual should not take precedence over others.

Following the killing of a 13-year-old student at a high school in July and a COVID-19 wave in the same month, IRO leaders in July met and recited an interfaith prayer. Second Minister for Education Maliki Osman called it a “reflection of our strength as a society, spiritually coming together.”

During the annual IRO Day in August, Deputy PM Heng Swee Keat said that religion was a force for good but that it had also been “cynically exploited for secular motivations.” He said the country was not immune to such fault lines, as it was the world’s most religiously diverse country, according to the Pew Research Center. Heng praised the IRO for strengthening relationships between religious communities whenever there was a religiously-linked negative incident against a community.

In August, OnePeople.sg and IRCCs discussed the role of mosques in Islam and in promoting interfaith engagement in the country through the Harmony Center during a virtual dialogue.

The interfaith organization Roses of Peace continued to cooperate with OnePeople.sg on a “Regardless of Race” webinar series. The Interfaith Youth Circle organized virtual interfaith conversations each month to offer interfaith exchanges when in-person meetings were not possible. Throughout the year, the local interfaith organization Being Community also promoted awareness of religious diversity and discrimination through its #LikeThatThenHow series, in which individuals shared personal experiences. The Harmony Center continued to promote religious diversity through different social media campaigns on Facebook and TikTok.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials promoted religious diversity and tolerance at a variety of events and engagements throughout the year.

On February 21, the Charge d’Affaires and President Halimah delivered opening remarks at an event organized by the interfaith organization Roses of Peace. In his speech, the Charge d’Affaires highlighted the U.S. commitment to religious diversity and inclusion by promoting interfaith dialogue. During the event, Roses of Peace launched its “ambassador” program for which it had received a grant from

the embassy in 2020. The program, which appointed 21 new “ambassadors,” a core group of youth leaders, promoted interfaith dialogue and religious harmony. The event received wide media and online coverage and included a panel discussion featuring senior leaders of the three Abrahamic faiths. Roses of Peace highlighted the role of the embassy on social media and thanked the embassy for its “constant support in building a world that is peaceful and cohesive.”

In November, an embassy representative participated on the judges panel at a Roses of Peace Ambassador Program event, the Peaceathon, with Fulbright alumnus, former alumni mentor, and member of parliament Eric Chua as the guest of honor. The embassy representative and Chua also exchanged views on religious diversity and tolerance, and how both countries manage interfaith relations.

In April, the Charge d’Affaires met with Muslim and interfaith community leaders at the Ba’alwie Mosque to exchange views on interfaith relations and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious communities in the country. Imam Habib Hassan, a member of the IRO and well-known figure in the country’s interfaith efforts, hosted the visit. The visit concluded with guests packaging dates for distribution during Ramadan.

For Eid al-Fitr in May, volunteers from the embassy joined local charity Rahmatan Lil Alamin Foundation (Blessings for All) and interfaith volunteers to distribute dinner and gift bags featuring American snacks donated by the embassy community. An embassy representative spoke at the event and emphasized the importance of religious diversity and the need for greater understanding. The Malay-language news outlet *Berita Harian* reported on the initiative.

In May, the embassy welcomed the Harmony Center’s Head, Ustazah Liyana Rosli, for an engagement session on “The Ramadan experience in Singapore.” She spoke about the essence and significance of Ramadan to Muslims and observing it in the country to members of the embassy. During the meeting, a senior embassy official delivered remarks highlighting the importance of commemorating religious activities together and of religious diversity in the United States.

Throughout the year, the embassy used its website and social media channels to promote religious diversity and interfaith dialogue. During Ramadan, the Charge d’Affaires released a video wishing Muslims a blessed Ramadan. In November, the Charge d’Affaires wished the Hindu community a happy Deepavali. In December, the Ambassador sent holiday greetings for the Christmas and Hanukkah season.