



January 2008

country summary

Singapore

Singapore remains an authoritarian state with strict curbs on freedom of expression, assembly, and association. All political activities are tightly controlled.

Singapore also retains and continues to apply criminal and internal security laws that allow for prolonged detention of suspects without trial. Each year, several thousands of people, including illegal immigrants and other people convicted of crimes, are beaten—caned—as part of their punishment. Despite recent reforms, authorities also fail to guarantee basic rights for the roughly 160,000 migrant domestic workers in the country.

Freedom of Expression and Assembly

The People's Action Party (PAP) has been Singapore's governing party since 1959 and holds 82 of 84 seats in the legislature. Its political dominance is built on laws strictly limiting opportunities for opposition political activity and a draconian defamation law wielded as a political weapon. Opposition figures too often face a choice between speaking out and bankruptcy—and sometimes prison.

Opposition rallies and protests are largely prohibited by laws requiring that public assemblies of five or more persons have police permission, and by the Public Entertainment and Meetings Act, which requires a permit for almost all forms of public address and entertainment.

Both restrictions have been used repeatedly to prevent the opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), headed by Dr. Chee Soon Juan, and other opposition parties from informing citizens of their political message and criticizing government policies. On October 8, 2007, for example, four members of the SDP protesting Singapore's links with Burma were arrested for "illegal assembly" under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance Act). In August 2007 the opposition Worker's

Party was refused permission to celebrate its 50th anniversary in November with a bicycle party in a public park. Political parties are banned from sponsoring outdoor events to avoid any possibility of a public disturbance.

The government ruthlessly pursues politically motivated defamation cases to deprive political opponents of basic rights to liberty and freedom of movement. On September 7, 2007, Chee was sentenced to a three-week jail term for refusing to pay a fine of US\$2,621, levied for his attempt to leave the country without permission in April 2006. He had needed clearance to leave as he had been declared bankrupt in February 2006 after he defaulted on \$316,455 due in defamation damages to Lee Kuan Yew and ex-prime minister Goh Chok Tong. Other charges against Chee have included speaking in public without a permit. Between November and December 2006, he served a five-week sentence in lieu of a \$3,268 fine.

On October 17, 2007 the *Financial Times* apologized publicly to Lee Kuan Yew; his son, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong; and the latter's wife, Ho Ching, for suggesting in an article entitled, "Sovereign funds try to put on an acceptable face," that "nepotistic motives" were involved in the appointments of Lee Hsien Loong and Ho Ching. The paper admitted that the allegations were "false and without foundation," and that damages and costs would be paid "by way of compensation." It is unclear whether the *Financial Times* settled because they believed the article was in error or because they did not want to be banned from distribution in Singapore, as has happened with the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER).

The Singapore government restricted FEER's circulation in 1987 under a 1986 law that gave the government the right to limit sales if it deemed a publication had interfered in local politics. The full ban came in September 2006 along with a defamation suit instituted by Lee and his son over an article critiquing the way the government responded to a scandal at a charitable organization. The article went on to suggest that Singapore's government was less than "squeaky clean" and used defamation charges to hide "real misdeeds."

Free expression is further compromised by government monitoring of the internet and censorship of all media outlets. Movies, music, and video games are also

censored. Political websites must register with the Media Development Authority. Singapore's Films Act prohibits the showing of films on issues of public controversy or that in any other way are "directed towards a political end in Singapore." In April 2007, the government banned the film "Zahari's 17 years," the story of an imprisoned journalist.

Due Process

Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA), Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions Act) (CLA), Misuse of Drugs Act, and Undesirable Publications Act permit detention and arrest of suspects without a warrant or judicial review. Both the ISA and the CLA also authorize preventive detention. The drug act permits the Central Narcotics Bureau chief to send suspected drug users for rehabilitation without recourse to trial. The ISA, used in the past to detain political opponents and critics, is now used against suspected Islamist militants, many of whom have been detained for long periods without trial. In September 2006 the government said that 34 suspected Muslim militants were being held on national security grounds.

Caning

Singapore's penal code mandates caning, combined with imprisonment, for some 30 offenses, both violent and nonviolent, and permits caning for a variety of others. In 2006, 5,984 people reportedly were sentenced to caning and in some 95 percent of the cases the sentence was carried out.

Death Penalty

Although death penalty statistics are secret, available information indicates that Singapore's per capita execution rate is one of the world's highest. Not only are death sentences mandatory for drug traffickers, but Singaporean law shifts the burden of proof to suspects to prove that they did not knowingly carry drugs or had no intention to traffic in drugs. On January 26, 2007, a Nigerian and a South African were hanged for smuggling, even though the judge concluded that in the case of the Nigerian there was "no direct evidence that he knew the capsules contained diamorphine." Singapore's Home Affairs Minister, referring to the law's deterrent effects, commented that "there is no room to go soft."

Migrant Domestic Workers

Approximately 160,000 migrant domestic workers—primarily from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka—are employed in Singapore. Many domestic workers report excessive work hours without regular rest breaks, restrictions on freedom of movement, unpaid wages, and in some cases, physical abuse.

The government has prosecuted some employers who physically abuse domestic workers and imposed penalties on labor recruitment agencies for unethical practices. Singapore's labor laws, however, still exclude domestic workers from key protections guaranteed to other workers, such as a weekly day off, limits on working hours, and caps on salary deductions. The government also has failed to regulate exploitative recruitment charges. Many domestic workers must work for months just to pay off recruitment debts, making it difficult for them to leave abusive employers.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights

In October 2007 Singapore's parliament rejected a proposal to repeal law 377A, which bans private and consensual sexual relations between men. Although prosecutions have been rare, those found in violation of law 377A can be jailed for up to two years on charges of "gross indecency."

Human Rights Defenders

State laws and political repression effectively prevent the establishment of human rights organizations and deter individuals from speaking out publicly against government policies.

The need for police permits prevents civil society groups from organizing outdoor events with ties to public issues. In October 2007, for example, police refused to grant permission for an outdoor "Peace Concert for Burma," forcing the concert indoors on grounds that an outdoor event had higher potential to "stir emotions and controversy."

Unless they are registered as political parties, associations may not engage in any activities the government deems political. Trade unions are under the same

restrictions and are banned from contributing to political parties or using their funds for political purposes. Most unions are affiliated with the umbrella National Trade Union Congress which does not allow union members supportive of opposition parties to hold office.

Burma

On September 27, 2007, Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs, George Yeo, the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), issued a statement expressing ASEAN's "revulsion" over the use of "violent force" to put down anti-government demonstrations in Burma. The statement called for a halt to the crackdown and the release of all political prisoners. ASEAN has since rejected interference in Burma's internal affairs and its members even refused to allow Ibrahim Gambari, UN special envoy to Burma, to address their meeting. At this writing, Singapore has yet to indicate its willingness to reexamine the human rights implications of its own economic ties to Burma, including in sectors that directly benefit the Burmese military. Singapore-registered companies are active in Burma's oil and natural gas industry, and the Burmese junta and its allies are believed to use Singapore for banking and other financial transactions.

Key International Actors

Singapore is a key member of the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism, along with the US, Malaysia, and others, and is an active participant in regional and sub-regional security issues. Singapore and the US maintain an active partnership as outlined in the 2005 "Strategic Framework Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Singapore for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defense and Security." Singapore is also an important financial and banking center for southeast Asia.

Singapore has not ratified important international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention Against Torture.