



January 2011

country summary

Singapore

In January 2010 Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that “updating” the political system to “ensure a more diverse set of voices in Parliament” was a top priority but did not commit to far-reaching changes. Current Singaporean laws and policies on freedom of expression, assembly, and association sharply limit peaceful criticism of the government and have been used repeatedly to stymie the development of opposition political parties and dissenting voices. Of particular concern is the 2009 Public Order Act, which requires a permit for any “cause-related activity,” defined as a show of support for or against a position, person, group, or government, even if only one person takes part.

The ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) has been in power since 1959, occupies 82 of the 84 parliamentary seats that have full voting rights, controls all mainstream media outlets, and presides over a government with extensive powers to regulate citizen’s lives.

Freedoms of Assembly, Expression, and Association

Singapore’s constitution guarantees rights to free expression, peaceful assembly, and association, but also permits restrictions in the name of security, the protection of public order, morality, parliamentary privilege, and racial and religious harmony. The restrictions are interpreted broadly.

Censorship extends to broadcast and electronic media, films, videos, music, sound recordings, and computer games. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act requires yearly registration and permits authorities to limit circulation of foreign papers which “engage in the domestic politics of Singapore.”

The Films Act, which since revisions in March 2009 allows some room for political themes and online election advertising, still restricts political speech. Films and video must still be submitted to censors, “partisan... references” on any political matter are still off-limits, and the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts may still ban any film deemed to run contrary to public interest. In July 2010 the Media Development Authority ordered a Martyn See video, “Ex-political prisoner speaks out in Singapore,” removed from Youtube and from See’s blog.

In November 2010 British author and journalist Alan Shadrake was found guilty on charges of “scandalizing the judiciary” and sentenced to six weeks in jail in addition to a fine and court costs. He claimed in his book, *Once a Jolly Hangman: Singapore Justice in the Dock*, that Singapore’s mandatory death penalty for murder, treason, and some 20 drug trafficking-related offenses is not being applied as equitably as the government contends. Shadrake’s book concludes that the judicial process is subject to political and economic pressures, including from the ruling party, and biased against the “weak,” “poor,” or “less-educated.” During the trial, the prosecution warned media outlets that publicizing Shadrake’s allegations could lead to charges against them.

Government authorities continue to closely regulate public meetings, demonstrations, and processions. In May 2010 Vincent Cheng, held under the Internal Security Act in 1987 as the alleged leader of a Marxist conspiracy, agreed for the first time to speak publicly about his treatment in detention at a seminar, *Singapore’s History: Who Writes the Script*, organized by students from the History Society of the National University of Singapore. The National Library Board, the venue’s sponsor, however, rescinded the invitation and the event went ahead without Cheng’s participation.

A lower court’s 2009 acquittal of three leaders and two supporters of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) charged with conducting a procession without a permit became in 2010 yet another setback for free assembly when a high court reversed the decision on appeal. Siok Chin Chee, a member of the central committee of the SDP, was sentenced to five short jail terms in 2010 for distributing political flyers without a permit.

The liberalization of regulations governing Singapore’s “Speakers’ Corner” in Hong Lim Park in 2008 has had little impact. Although processions and demonstrations are permitted and a police permit is no longer required, the park site is ringed with five CCTVs and speakers must register online and show their IDs before they begin. Speaking at the Corner provides no protection from application of sedition and criminal defamation laws.

The Societies Act requires any organization with more than 10 members to register. However, registration may be denied on grounds that an organization’s “purposes [are] prejudicial to public peace, welfare or good order” or that registration would be “contrary to the national interest.”

Criminal Justice System

Singapore's Internal Security Act and Criminal Law (Temporary Provision Act and Undesirable Publications Act) both permit arrest and detention without warrant or judicial review. The Misuse of Drugs Act permits confinement of suspected drug users in "rehabilitation" centers for up to three years without trial. Second-time offenders face prison terms and may be caned.

Singapore continues to implement its mandatory death sentences for some 20 drug-related offenses, which has been repeatedly criticized by United Nations human rights bodies and experts. In August a court postponed the scheduled execution of Malaysian Yong Vui Kong, 22 years old, accused of transporting 47 grams of heroin into Singapore in 2007, following international attention to the case.

Judicial caning, an inherently cruel punishment, is a mandatory additional punishment for medically fit males between 16 and 50 years old who have been sentenced to prison for a range of crimes including drug trafficking, rape, and immigration offenses. In addition, a sentencing official may at his discretion order caning in cases involving some 30 other violent and non-violent crimes. The maximum number of strokes at any one time is 24.

The US State Department reported that "through November [2009] 4,228 convicted persons were sentenced to caning, and 99.8 percent of caning sentences were carried out." The case of Oliver Fricker, a Swiss national, drew international attention in June 2010 when he was sentenced to five months in jail and three strokes of the cane for breaking into a subway system depot and spray painting one of its cars. On appeal, Fricker's sentence was increased by two months.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In violation of international standards, Penal Code section 377A criminalizes sexual acts between consenting adult men. In September a defendant brought a constitutional challenge to the law on grounds that it is discriminatory.

On May 15, 2010, the second annual Pink Dot festival, bringing together over 4,000 LGBT individuals and their families and friends, took place at the government-established Speaker's Corner in Hong Lim Park.

Migrant Domestic Workers and Trafficking

Singapore continues to make improvements in working conditions for some 196,000 foreign domestic workers through vigorous prosecution of employers and recruiters who physically abuse workers or fail to pay wages. However, it refuses to include domestic workers under the Employment Act or to regulate recruitment fees, which can run to 40 percent of the total salary a worker will earn during a two-year contract. Instead, it preserves a sponsorship system that ties a domestic worker to a specific employer who, in turn, retains the right to cancel the migrant worker's contract, making her subject to immediate deportation. Unscrupulous employers often use the threat of contract cancellation to intimidate workers to accept unlawful work conditions, restrict their movements, and prevent them from filing complaints.

A government-mandated standard contract for migrant workers does not address issues such as long work hours and poor living conditions. Instead of guaranteeing one day off per month and a set number of rest hours a day, it makes such breaks a matter of negotiation between employer and employee. It also fails to provide protections against denial of annual or medical leave, requires immediate deportation of pregnant workers, and stipulates that no foreign domestic workers may marry a Singaporean.

Human Rights Defenders

To actively defend human rights in Singapore is to risk being repeatedly fined, jailed, bankrupted, and forbidden from travel outside the country without government approval. Although the number of human rights defenders has increased, the community remains small.

Key International Actors

In March 2010 confirmation hearings before the US Senate, US Ambassador-designate Daniel Adelman said he would "use public diplomacy to work for greater press freedom, greater freedom of assembly and ultimately more political space for opposition parties" in Singapore. Following his confirmation, Adelman backtracked, stating that democracy and press freedom "are for Singaporeans to decide for themselves."

Singapore continues to play an important role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), driving forward its economic integration agenda and pressing for full implementation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Agreement. As an important financial center for Southeast Asia, Singapore continues to face criticism for reportedly hosting bank accounts containing ill-gotten gains of corrupt leaders and their associates, including billions of dollars of Burma's state gas revenues hidden from national accounts.