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[Newsroom](#)

Menu

[Home](#) > ... > [Singapore](#)

[Business](#) 

[Employees](#)

[Job Seekers](#)

[Students](#)

[Travelers](#)

[Visas](#)

2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Singapore

OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM / MAY 12, 2021

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IN THIS SECTION

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 12 Jehovah's Witnesses in the armed forces' detention facility for refusing on religious grounds to complete mandatory national service. In December, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) detained a 16-year-old Christian male for planning to attack two mosques using a machete on the anniversary of the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand mosque shootings. According to the ministry, the individual had been self-radicalized through online material, including the Christchurch attacker's manifesto and ISIS videos of violence against Christians. The government stated the individual acted alone and did not try to influence or involve others in his attack

plans. In February, the MHA launched an investigation into a local, unregistered chapter of the South Korean Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony (Shincheonji Church), which resulted in the deportation of five South Koreans and the dissolution of affiliated organizations. In November, authorities arrested 21 individuals for resuming activities of the church “covertly.” In June, police detained a permanent resident for posting comments to Instagram about wanting to kill Muslims. In September, police issued a warning to Workers’ Party Member of Parliament Raeesah Khan for social media posts she made in 2018 and May 2020, before she was a candidate for parliament, accusing the government of discrimination against religious and racial minorities. Authorities investigated messages individuals posted to social media that were considered offensive to Muslims and Christians, for which the individuals later apologized. The government made multiple high-level affirmations of the importance of religious harmony and respect for religious differences. It actively reached out to religious communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and emphasized the role of faith leaders in promoting solidarity during the 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 and intrafaith understanding. In April, the then-Minister for Culture, Community, and Youth joined 100 members of the nongovernmental organization Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) to celebrate the annual IRO Day virtually and pledged to maintain interfaith solidarity amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Charge d’Affaires and other U.S. embassy officers promoted religious diversity and tolerance throughout the year. In November, the Charge d’Affaires met with Janil Puthucheary, Senior Minister of State for Communication and Information and Health and chairman of the community-level organization OnePeople.sg, to discuss religious harmony and diversity. Throughout the year, the embassy used its website and social media channels to highlight outreach and demonstrate respect for the country’s religious diversity. The Charge d’Affaires delivered video speeches and best wishes for Ramadan in May, Deepavali in November, and the Christmas and Hanukkah season in December. Embassy representatives engaged with a variety of groups, including the Singapore Muslim Women’s Association (PPIS), to support religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.8 million (midyear 2020 estimate). Of the four million individuals the local government counts as citizens or permanent residents, 81.5 percent stated a religious affiliation in the 2015 General Household Survey. According to the data, approximately 33.2 percent of the population of citizens and permanent residents are Buddhist, 18.8 percent Christian (including 6.7 percent Catholic), 14 percent Muslim (predominantly Sunni), 10 percent Taoist, 5 percent Hindu, and 18.5 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 Unification Church. Although estimates varied widely, the government estimates there are 2,500 members in the Jewish community.

According to a 2020 report by the Department of Statistics, 74.3 percent of the resident population is ethnic Chinese, 13.5 percent ethnic Malay, 9.0 percent ethnic Indian, and 3.2 percent other, including Eurasians. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim. According to a 2016 national survey, among ethnic Indians, 59.9 percent are Hindu, 21.3 percent Muslim, and 12.1 percent Christian. The ethnic Chinese population includes Buddhists (42.3 percent), Christians (20.9 percent), and Taoists (12.9 percent).

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 national 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 same. 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. 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" may result in detention or imprisonment. Imprisonment may last up to five years. Since passing the MRHA in 1990, the government has never invoked the law or issued an RO.

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 for 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 may be investigated by the government 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 SGD (\$3,800), 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 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 can 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 objectionable material, an individual may be liable upon conviction to a fine not exceeding 5,000 SGD (\$3,800), 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 the 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 not exceeding the maximum 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 centers of learning. Registration requires adherence to minimum standards and a code of ethics, as well as the fulfillment of certain training requirements.

The law allows the Muslim community, irrespective of 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 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 sharia court orders is a criminal offense punishable by imprisonment of up to six months, and an individual may file a complaint about 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 treated as orders made by a secular family court. Appeals within the sharia system go to an appeals board, which 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 that law has not been enforced 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.

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 of the same 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 include 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 discretion to grant a child dispensation from wearing the official uniform based on health but not religious requirements. 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 particular religious groups. The council also considers and reports on matters concerning any religious group 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 at year's end, 12 Jehovah's Witnesses were held in the armed forces' detention facility for refusing on religious grounds to complete national service.

In December, the MHA detained a 16-year-old male under the Internal Security Act for planning to attack two mosques using a machete on the anniversary of the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand mosque shootings. According to the ministry, the minor, identified as a Protestant Christian, had been self-radicalized through online material, including through the Christchurch attacker's manifesto and ISIS videos of violence against Christians. Reportedly, the suspect was writing a manifesto detailing his hatred of Islam, as well as a document drafted after the October 2020 church stabbings in Nice, France, calling on the French to "stand up" against Muslims. The government stated the individual acted alone and did not try to influence or involve others in his attack plans.

In February, the MHA announced it was investigating a local unregistered chapter of the South Korean Shincheonji Church under the authority of national security legislation that would ban the organization's activities in the country. The ministry then repatriated five South Korean nationals for holding key positions in the local chapter and dissolved the group's affiliated organizations. The ministry said the group had used deceptive recruitment methods and misled individuals. Because of the group's links to COVID-19 clusters in South Korea, the ministry said it would accelerate its investigations, given potential local health risks. In November, the ministry announced police arrested 21 members of the organization for being members of an "unlawful society" under the Societies Act and for resuming activities "covertly" despite warnings from the ministry to cease. The ministry said it "will not allow members of unlawful societies or persons associated with them to threaten Singapore's public safety, peace and good order."

In June, police arrested a 19-year-old permanent resident for inciting violence and posting comments with the deliberate intent to wound religious feelings. The man had posted comments on Instagram about wanting to kill Muslims. A police investigation was ongoing at year's end.

Media reported that on September 17, police issued a "stern warning" to Workers' Party Member of Parliament Raeesah Khan for promoting enmity between different groups on the grounds of religion or race. This came after a police report was filed against then-parliamentary candidate Khan during the general election campaign in July for social media posts she made in 2018 and 2020, before she was a candidate, accusing the government, law enforcement authorities, and courts of racial and religious discrimination against minorities, including Muslims. After the police reports were filed, Khan and the Workers' Party leadership gave a press conference on July 5 at which Khan apologized to any racial group or community hurt by her comments and said she did not mean to cause social division, but rather wanted to raise awareness about minority concerns. On September 17, Khan posted to Facebook that she had learned to be "more considerate" in framing difficult conversations and apologized once again.

Media reported that on March 18, a group calling itself the NUS Atheist Society posted to its Facebook page an image of the Bible and Quran with a caption reading, "For use during toilet paper shortages." Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam publicly criticized the post as "very offensive" to two religions and the police began an

investigation, which remained ongoing at year's end. On March 20, Shanmugam wrote on his Facebook page, "We [the government] take a serious view of these type of statements....We highlighted [for Facebook] how such offensive remarks have no place in multi-racial and multi-religious Singapore." Facebook blocked domestic access to the post, per the government's request. Media reported the Progress Singapore Party expelled Jan Chan, who was responsible for the Facebook page, from the party, saying the party "will not tolerate any of its members showing disrespect to any religion." In a separate post to its official Facebook page, the National University of Singapore (NUS) said it was not linked to the NUS Atheist Society or the group's Facebook page and said the page's contents "do not represent the views, opinions and position" of the university. Chan told media he did not have malicious intent and regretted making the posting.

In January, the MHA and MUIS investigated Abdul Halim Abdul Karim, a Muslim religious teacher, for posting offensive comments on Facebook. Abdul Halim called COVID-19 "Allah's retribution" against the Chinese for the oppression of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province, China. In a separate private post, Abdul Halim said Chinese did not wash properly after defecating and were less hygienic than Muslims. Minister Shanmugam called the posts "simply unacceptable," and MUIS said the posts "express...views that do not represent the Muslim community." Abdul Halim apologized for the posts, saying his meaning had been misunderstood and the government took no further action against him.

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

Although government policy prohibited the wearing of hijabs by certain public sector professionals, such as nurses and uniformed military officers, many statutory boards within government agencies continued to allow Muslim staff to wear the hijab and President Halimah Yacob also wore it. Some in the Muslim community continued to petition for a change in government policy and called the practice discriminatory.

The government continued to prohibit religious content from being broadcast on television "in order to maintain a secular public broadcast service."

The government denied the request of members of the Malay Muslim community that the communal call to prayer call and special sermon at the end of Ramadan be broadcast on television during COVID-19 restrictions. The communal call to prayer and Ramadan sermon continued to be broadcast on radio and available on the internet.

While there was no law prohibiting proselytization, the government continued to discourage its practice through the application of laws regarding public speech and assembly, based on what authorities said were concerns that proselytizing might offend other religious groups and upset the balance of intergroup relations.

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.

The MOE announced it was training more teachers to facilitate discussions on contemporary issues, including religion, and then-Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung encouraged principals to hold more in-depth conversations in schools on these topics.

President Halimah, Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong, 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.

Cabinet members repeatedly acknowledged that COVID-19 affected religious groups and emphasized the importance of religious harmony during the pandemic. PM Lee released a video as the country entered its COVID-19 lockdown on April 9, on the eve of Good Friday, in which he acknowledged sacrifices required to contain the pandemic. In the video, he said, "For Christians, it is a special time to reflect on the sacrifice of Christ. For Singaporeans, it is a time to acknowledge the sacrifices of our frontline workers since COVID-19 broke out in Singapore." PM Lee also posted a message to the Muslim

community on Facebook on April 23, at the beginning of Ramadan, and participated in a virtual breaking of the fast at the end of Ramadan. On May 23, PM Lee posted a video message telling Muslims, “This pandemic will eventually pass, but the spirit of Hari Raya [Eid al-Fitr] will endure.” In November, he wished Hindus a happy Diwali on his Facebook page and reminded people that the COVID-19 pandemic was not over. Ministers frequently gave speeches on strengthening religious pluralism and participated in virtual interfaith dialogues led by societal organizations.

The government issued strong condemnations and emphasized the importance of religious harmony in response to foreign incidents of terrorism, including terrorist attacks in France in October and in Austria in November. Following the attacks in France, Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli said in a speech, “Singapore is fortunate that its religious teachers guide Muslims here to understand the true principles of Islam in the way they practice the religion.”

During her opening speech to the new parliament in September, President Halimah said multiracialism and diversity would remain core elements of society. Halimah said, “Younger Singaporeans prefer to talk about these issues more candidly and openly, which is a positive development. But the conversation needs to be conducted with restraint and mutual respect, because race, language, and religion will always be visceral subjects.”

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 similar activities.

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. In January, the MCCY launched a new

Crisis Preparedness for Religious Organizations (CPRO) program, also managed by the IRCCS, to help 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 formed 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 also consulted religious leaders and the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony when planning the introduction and relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions. It also worked 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.

In September, all 10 members of the PCRH were reappointed to a new, three-year term. Seven members represented the Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Sikh communities, and three members, including the chair, were laypersons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In July, employees at a local shopping center reportedly told a part-time employee to remove her hijab while working. After public pressure, the shopping center announced it would standardize its practice to allow all employees to wear religious headgear while working. The Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices, comprising the Ministry of Manpower, the National Trades Union Congress, and the Singapore National Employers Federation, investigated the case for possible workplace discrimination. Several Malay Muslim policymakers and political office holders criticized the shopping center for its behavior, and President Halimah said, "Discrimination of any

form and against anyone has no place at all in our society and, most certainly, not at the workplace.”

In February, approximately 11,500 Hindus took part in the live Thaipusam festival. Subsequently, due to COVID-19 safe-distancing measures, many interfaith activities and religious festivals were conducted virtually, but still proceeded. In September, the Muslim volunteer welfare organization Jamiyah Singapore held a webinar on the role of faith leaders in helping communities during the COVID-19 pandemic that included leaders from different religious groups inside and outside the country. President Halimah said at the event that faith can be a source of strength, solace, and solidarity during the pandemic.

In July, OnePeople.sg held its annual HarmonyWorks! conference virtually to engage different communities and youth. In June, IRO held a virtual interreligious prayer for the safe reopening of the country after a two-month partial COVID-19 lockdown that ended June 1.

In April, then-Minister for Culture, Community, and Youth Grace Fu joined 100 IRO members to celebrate the annual IRO Day virtually, and she pledged to maintain interreligious solidarity amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The IRO, which included leaders of the 10 major 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. IRO released a public statement in April urging citizens and residents to stay united, safeguard social cohesion, and remain connected with people from other faiths amid the pandemic.

Religious groups and civil society organizations continued to promote interfaith and intrafaith understanding. Ahead of Easter and Ramadan, Mufti Nazirudin Mohd Nasir and Bishop Terry Kee, president of the National Council of Churches of Singapore, 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. The interfaith organization Roses of Peace released a Facebook video in cooperation with the local community organization Interfaith Youth Circle to promote harmony amid the COVID-19 pandemic and cooperated with OnePeople.sg on a “Regardless of Race” webinar series. Interfaith Youth Circle organized virtual meetings throughout the year to provide support to vulnerable communities and to offer interfaith exchanges while in-person meetings were not possible. Throughout the year, the Harmony Center promoted religious diversity through its #knowyoursingapore series on Facebook, where it featured different religious sites in the country.

The SGUnited Buka Puasa initiative, coordinated by MUIS and involving mosques, Roses of Peace, the chamber of commerce, and other organizations, provided 20,000 meals daily to healthcare frontline workers and families in need throughout the month of Ramadan. In April, IRO donated 10,000 masks to the Migrant Workers’ Center to fight the COVID-19 outbreak among migrant workers.

Following terrorist attacks in France in October, Mufti Nazirudin Mohd Nasir wrote an open letter to leaders of the Christian community condemning the attacks and reinforcing the importance of interfaith harmony and shared values, saying, “We will continue to work tirelessly with the Christian community to affirm our commitment to the bonds of faith and friendship. We are confident that by strengthening the trust and confidence in each other, we will be able to prevent such incidents from ever taking place here.” Christian churches responded with individual letters to the mufti in which they said they appreciated the religious harmony and peace in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires and other the embassy officials promoted religious diversity and tolerance throughout the year. In November, the Charge d’Affaires met with Janil Puthucheary, Senior Minister of State for Communication and Information and Health and chairman of the community-level organization OnePeople.sg, to discuss religious harmony, diversity, and inclusion in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The embassy engaged with religious communities on multiple virtual events to promote religious freedom and tolerance. In June, embassy officials participated in a Hari Raya

Puasa event hosted by the country's main association for Muslim women, the Singapore Muslim Women's Association (PPIS), and they shared information about the embassy's cross-cultural programs to engage local Muslim communities.

Throughout the year, the embassy used its website and social media channels to promote religious diversity and interfaith dialogue. At the start of Ramadan, the Charge d'Affaires released a video wishing Muslims in the country, the United States, and around the world a blessed Ramadan and Selamat Berpuasa. In November, he released a video wishing Hindus and others a happy Deepavali. In December, the embassy released a video celebrating the Christmas and Hanukkah season. The embassy featured the November meeting between the Charge d'Affaires and Senior Minister Puthucheary in a posting on its Twitter account. The embassy also posted social media messages around International Religious Freedom Day. Throughout the month of Ramadan, the embassy published a series of "porridge stories" celebrating the local Islamic tradition of breaking the daily fast with porridge. The program featured individuals from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds sharing recipes and family stories about different types of porridge, demonstrating shared values and respect for Islamic traditions.

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