

Document #2052861

Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2021 - Singapore

PARTLY FREE

48

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 19 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 29 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

50 / 100 Partly Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Singapore's parliamentary political system has been dominated by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and the family of current prime minister Lee Hsien Loong since 1959. The electoral and legal framework that the PAP has constructed allows for some political pluralism, but it constrains the growth of opposition parties and limits freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

Key Developments in 2020

- The COVID-19 pandemic was most acute from March to August, with a lockdown imposed from early April to the beginning of June. Migrant workers were disproportionately affected by both the virus and the related movement restrictions. As of late December, there had been a total of nearly 59,000 cases and 29 deaths.
- In the July parliamentary elections, the ruling PAP won 83 of 93 seats, the same number as in 2015 despite the addition of four new seats to the legislature. The party garnered 61 percent of the popular vote, down from nearly 70 percent in 2015.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The government is led by a prime minister and cabinet formed by the party that controls the legislature. The current prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, has been in power since 2004 and secured a new mandate after the July 2020 parliamentary elections. While polling-day procedures are generally free of irregularities, numerous structural factors impede the development of viable electoral competition.

The president, whose role is largely ceremonial, is elected by popular vote for six-year terms, and a special committee is empowered to vet candidates. Under 2016 constitutional amendments on eligibility, none of Singapore's three main ethnic groupings (Chinese, Malays, and Indians or others) may be excluded from the presidency for more than five consecutive terms, and presidential candidates from the private sector, as opposed to senior officials with at least three years of service, must have experience leading a company with at least S\$500 million (US\$360 million) in shareholder equity. Only one candidate—Halimah Yacob, backed by the PAP—was declared eligible for the 2017 presidential election, making her the winner by default.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 2 / 4

Following a March 2020 recommendation by the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee, the number of directly elected seats in the unicameral Parliament was increased from 89 to 93. The Parliament elected in July 2020 consequently included 14 members from single-member constituencies and 79 members from Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs). The top-polling party in each GRC wins all of its four to five seats, which has historically bolstered the majority of the dominant PAP. As many as nine additional, nonpartisan members can be appointed to

Parliament by the president, and a maximum of another 12 can come from a national compensatory list meant to ensure a minimum of opposition representation. Members serve five-year terms, with the exception of appointed members, who serve for two and a half years.

In the 2020 elections, the PAP secured about 61 percent of the popular vote and 83 of the 93 elected seats. The largest opposition group, the Workers’ Party (WP), retained the six elected seats it had won in 2015 and gained an additional four, for a total of 10. Two compensatory seats were awarded to the opposition to achieve the minimum of 12.

Elections are largely free of fraud and other such irregularities, but they are unfair due to the advantages enjoyed by the incumbent party, including a progovernment media sector, the GRC system, high financial barriers to electoral candidacy, and legal restrictions on free speech.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 1 / 4

Singapore lacks an independent election commission; the country’s Elections Department is a government body attached to the Prime Minister’s Office. The secretary to the prime minister is the head of the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee, which is responsible for reviewing and redrawing the boundaries for electoral constituencies. The prime minister appointed the committee’s members in August 2019 in preparation for the 2020 elections. In the past, the PAP-controlled boundaries process has ensured an advantage for the party. The new electoral districts for 2020 were announced in mid-March, four months before the elections, the date of which was announced in June. The electoral framework suffers from a number of other features—including the GRC system and the onerous eligibility rules for presidential candidates—that favor the PAP-dominated political establishment.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 2 / 4

Singapore has a multiparty political system, and a total of 11 parties contested the parliamentary elections in July 2020. However, a variety of factors have helped to ensure the PAP’s dominant position, including an electoral framework that favors the incumbents, restrictions on political films and television programs, the threat of defamation suits, the PAP’s vastly superior financial resources, and its influence over the mass media and the courts.

In the midst of the campaign period for the 2020 elections, the police in July investigated a WP candidate for supposedly racially antagonistic posts she made on social media in 2018 and 2020. She received a “stern warning” from the police in September. The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA)—which allows any government minister to order correction notices or restrict access to content they deem false or contrary to the public interest—was repeatedly invoked to require corrections regarding comments by opposition candidates in 2020, including during the campaign period. Separately, the Elections Department banned large public rallies during the campaign period, citing the COVID-19 pandemic.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 2 / 4

The PAP has governed without interruption since 1959, though the opposition has made some progress in mounting stronger election campaigns over the last decade. Opposition factions collectively put forward candidates for all directly elected Parliament seats in 2020, having done so for the first time in 2015, and ultimately gained four seats.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people’s political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 2 / 4

The corporatist structure of the economy creates dense ties between business and political elites that have been criticized as oligarchic in nature. These networks contribute to the PAP’s political dominance.

Many senior government officials formerly served as military officers, and the military has a close relationship with the PAP, but it does not directly engage in politics.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 2 / 4

Ethnic Chinese Singaporeans make up a majority of the population. Members of minority groups, including Malays and people of Indian descent, have full voting rights, but critics—including academics and civil society organizations—have questioned whether the GRC system really achieves its stated aim of ensuring representation for minority populations. Separately, the rules for presidential candidacy have been criticized for excluding non-Malays from the 2017 election. Malays are generally underrepresented in leadership positions.

Women remain underrepresented in senior government and political positions, though women candidates won 27 of the 93 directly elected Parliament seats in 2020, up from 21 out of 89 in 2015, and the president who took office in 2017 is a woman. The cabinet as of 2020 included three women as full ministers. LGBT+ interest groups operate and are generally tolerated, but they do not have vocal representation in Parliament; open LGBT+ identity can be a barrier to election in practice, in part because sex between men remains a criminal offense.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 2 / 4

Elected officials determine the policies of the government, but the PAP's political and institutional dominance ensures its victory at the polls, and the party leadership maintains discipline among its members. The constitution stipulates that lawmakers lose their seats if they resign or are expelled from the party for which they stood in elections. This inhibits Parliament's ability to serve as an effective check on the executive.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 3 / 4

Singapore has been lauded for its lack of bribery and corruption. However, its corporatist economic structure entails close collaboration between the public and private sectors that may produce conflicts of interest. Lawmakers often serve on the boards of private companies, for example. The current prime minister's wife is the chief executive of Temasek Holdings, a government-linked corporation and sovereign wealth fund; the relationship has drawn accusations of nepotism and cronyism.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2 / 4

The government provides limited transparency on its operations. The Singapore Public Sector Outcomes Review is published every two years and includes metrics on the functioning of the bureaucracy; regular audits of public-sector financial processes are also made accessible to the public. However, other data, including key information on the status of the national reserves, are not made publicly available, and there is no freedom of information law giving citizens the right to obtain government records.

There is a lack of transparency surrounding the activities and salary of the prime minister's wife as the chief executive of Temasek Holdings.

In a move to increase transparency on monetary policy, the Monetary Authority of Singapore released statistics on its foreign exchange intervention operations on a six-month aggregated basis beginning in April 2020.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4

All domestic newspapers, radio stations, and television channels are owned by companies linked to the government. Editorials and news coverage generally support state policies, and self-censorship is common, though newspapers occasionally publish critical content. The government uses racial or religious tensions and the threat of terrorism to justify restrictions on freedom of speech. Media outlets, bloggers, and public figures have been subjected to harsh civil and criminal penalties for speech deemed to be seditious, defamatory, or injurious to religious sensitivities. Major online news sites must obtain licenses and respond to regulators' requests to remove prohibited content. However, foreign media and a growing array of online domestic outlets—including news sites and blogs—are widely consumed and offer alternative views, frequently publishing articles that are critical of the government or supportive of independent activism. In September 2020, the Elections Department filed a police report for "illegal conduct of election activity" against New Naratif, an independent online media outlet that was accused of publishing five paid advertisements on Facebook in July without written authorization from a candidate or the candidate's agent during the election campaign. Also during the year, including the preelection period, government officials repeatedly invoked POFMA to order the publication of correction notices, in some cases targeting online media outlets.

Among other ongoing legal cases against the media, in October 2020 the prime minister went to court in a defamation suit against a prominent blogger who had shared an article online in 2018 that alleged the prime minister's involvement in a Malaysian corruption scandal. The trial was ongoing at year's end.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 3 / 4

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion as long as its practice does not violate any other regulations, and most groups worship freely. However, religious actions perceived as threats to racial or religious harmony are not tolerated, and the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church are banned. Religious groups are required to register with the government under the 1966 Societies Act.

Muslim religious teachers must be certified by the Asatizah Recognition Board, a body of religious scholars under the purview of the state's Islamic Religious Council of Singapore. The system is seen as an effort to ensure that only state-approved forms of Islam are taught.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 1 / 4

Public schools include a national education component that has been criticized for presenting a history of Singapore that focuses excessively on the role of the PAP. All public universities and political research institutions have direct government links that enable political influence and interference in hiring and firing; recent faculty turnover at two major universities has increased concerns about political pressure. Self-censorship on Singapore-related topics is common among academics, who can face legal and career consequences for critical speech.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of 2 / surveillance or retribution? 4

While there is some space for personal expression and private discussion, legal restrictions on topics that involve race and religion constrain dialogue. The threat of defamation suits and related charges are also deterrents to free speech, including on social media. In 2019, a judge overseeing a criminal defamation case against the editor of and a contributor to *The Online Citizen* rejected the defendants' argument that the charges were unlawful because the article in question had alleged corruption in the cabinet without identifying any specific person. The ruling effectively allowed defamation charges for criticism of the government in general.

POFMA, which went into effect in October 2019, provides for criminal penalties including fines and up to a year in prison for failure to comply with removal or correction orders. A year after its effective date, POFMA had been invoked some 70 times, including against opposition figures, activists, and social media users.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

Public assemblies are subject to extensive restrictions. Police permits are required for assemblies that occur outdoors; limited restrictions apply to indoor gatherings. Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park is the designated site for open assembly, though events there can likewise be restricted if they are deemed disruptive. Non-Singaporeans are generally prohibited from participating in or attending public assemblies that are considered political or sensitive. A 2017 amendment to the Public Order Act increased the authorities' discretion to ban public meetings and barred foreign nationals from organizing, funding, or even observing gatherings that could be used for a political purpose.

The Public Order and Safety (Special Powers) Act of 2018 granted the home affairs minister and police enhanced authority in the context of a "serious incident," which was vaguely defined to include scenarios ranging from terrorist attacks to peaceful protests. Officials would be permitted to potentially use lethal force and to halt newsgathering and online communications in the affected area. The special powers could even be invoked in advance of a likely or threatened incident.

Authorities in recent years have increasingly punished activists for holding unauthorized events, including even the smallest possible "assemblies." Activist Jolovan Wham was fined in 2019 for "organizing an assembly without a permit," having organized a conference in 2016 that featured a speech via video link by a prodemocracy leader from Hong Kong. Wham's appeal in the matter was dismissed in August 2020, and he elected to spend 10 days in jail rather than pay a fine of S\$2,000 (US\$1,400), though he paid a separate S\$1,200 (US\$860) fine for refusing to sign a police statement. In November, Wham was charged with staging an illegal protest for holding a sign with a smiley face near a police station in March, in support of two young activists being investigated by the authorities. The two activists had separately posed for photographs in public that month while holding protest signs about climate change.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because authorities in recent years have stepped up arrests and prosecutions of activists for holding events without permits, including those who engage in solitary protests.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human 1 / rights- and governance-related work? 4

The Societies Act requires most organizations of more than 10 people to register with the government; the government enjoys full discretion to register or dissolve such groups. Only registered parties and associations may participate in organized political activity. Despite these restrictions, a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) engage in human rights and governance-related work, advocating policy improvements and addressing the interests of constituencies including migrant workers and women. Prominent activists are subject to police questioning, criminal charges, civil lawsuits, and other forms of harassment in reprisal for their work.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

Unions are granted some rights under the Trade Unions Act, though restrictions include a ban on government employees joining unions. Union members are prohibited from voting on collective agreements negotiated by union representatives and employers. Strikes must be approved by a majority of members, as opposed to the internationally

accepted standard of at least 50 percent of the members who vote. Workers in essential services are required to give 14 days' notice to an employer before striking. In practice, many restrictions are not applied. Nearly all unions are affiliated with the National Trade Union Congress, which is openly allied with the PAP.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

The country's top judges are appointed by the president on the advice of the prime minister. The government's consistent success in court cases that have direct implications for its agenda has cast serious doubt on judicial independence. The problem is particularly evident in defamation cases and lawsuits against government opponents. While judgments against the government are rare, the judiciary is perceived to act more professionally and impartially in business-related cases, which has helped to make the country an attractive venue for investment and commerce.

In September 2020, in a sign of judicial impartiality, the High Court overturned the 2019 conviction of an Indonesian maid, finding her not guilty of stealing from her employer, a powerful executive at a state-owned company. Nevertheless, the courts continued to side with the government and its allies in politically fraught cases during the year.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 2 / 4

Defendants in criminal cases enjoy most due process rights; political interference does not occur in a large majority of cases. However, the colonial-era Internal Security Act (ISA) allows warrantless searches and arrests to preserve national security. ISA detainees can be held without charge or trial for two-year periods that can be renewed indefinitely. In recent years it has primarily been used against suspected Islamist militants. The Criminal Law Act, which is mainly used against suspected members of organized crime groups, similarly allows warrantless arrest and preventive detention for renewable one-year periods. The Misuse of Drugs Act empowers authorities to commit suspected drug users, without trial, to rehabilitation centers for up to three years.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4

Singaporeans are largely protected against the illegitimate use of force and are not directly exposed to war or insurgencies. Prisons generally meet international standards. However, the penal code mandates corporal punishment in the form of caning, in addition to imprisonment, for about 30 offenses, and it can also be used as a disciplinary measure in prisons. Singapore continues to impose the death penalty for crimes including drug trafficking. Thirteen people were executed during 2018, and four were executed during 2019, according to the Singapore Prison Service. Executions were halted in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but authorities in September began scheduling them again.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

The law forbids ethnic discrimination, though members of minority groups may face discrimination in private- or public-sector employment in some instances. Women enjoy the same legal rights as men on most issues, and many are well-educated professionals, but there is no legal ban on gender-based discrimination in employment.

The LGBT+ community faces significant legal obstacles. The penal code criminalizes consensual sex between adult men, setting a penalty of up to two years in prison. The law is not actively enforced, but the courts have upheld its constitutionality in recent years. The Pink Dot parade, held annually in support of equal rights for LGBT+ people since 2009, drew another large turnout in 2019, despite the legal ban on foreign funding and participation. The 2020 parade, scheduled for June, was canceled as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, 2 / employment, or education? 4

Citizens enjoy freedom of movement and the ability to change their place of employment. Policies aimed at fostering ethnic balance in subsidized public housing, in which a majority of Singaporeans live, entail some restrictions on place of residence, but these do not apply to open-market housing.

There are practical limits on freedom of movement for foreign migrant workers. In April 2020, due to a surge in cases of COVID-19 among migrant workers, the government imposed a lockdown on worker dormitories, restricting the movement of hundreds of thousands of people and forcing them to stay in overcrowded, dangerous conditions. Limits on the dormitory residents' movements remained in place for months after broader national lockdown measures had been eased. Nearly half of the foreign workers in the country ultimately tested positive for the virus during the year, accounting for well over 90 percent of Singapore's cases.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to special restrictions on the movement and housing of migrant

workers that disproportionately exposed them to the risk of contracting COVID-19.

ecoi.net summary:

62.0-4 pts
Annual Report on political rights and

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 3 / 4

Country:

Individuals face no extensive restrictions on property ownership, though public housing units are technically issued on 99-year leases rather than owned outright. While the state is heavily involved in the economy through its investment funds and other assets, private business activity is generally facilitated by a supportive legal framework.

Source:

63.0-4 pts
Freedom House

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/singapore/freedom-world/2021>

Men and women generally have equal rights on personal status matters such as marriage and divorce, though same-sex marriage and civil unions are not recognized. Social pressures deter some interreligious marriages and exert influence on personal appearance. The government has generally barred Muslim women from wearing headscarves in public-sector jobs that require a uniform, but the issue remains a subject of public debate, and President Yacob

Document type:

Periodical Report

herself wears a headscarf. Spousal immunity from rape charges was eliminated through a penal code amendment adopted by Parliament in 2019.

Language:

64.0-4 pts
English

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 3 / 4

Published:

3 March 2021

Singapore's inhabitants generally benefit from considerable economic opportunity, but some types of workers face disadvantages. The country's roughly 200,000 household workers are excluded from the Employment Act and are regularly exploited. Several high-profile trials of employers in recent years have drawn public attention to the physical abuse of such workers. Laws and regulations governing their working conditions have modestly improved formal protections over the past decade, but the guarantees remain inadequate. In 2018, the Ministry of Manpower issued a new work-permit condition that banned employers from holding the paid wages and other money of foreign household workers for safekeeping. Existing laws such as the Foreign Worker Dormitories Act of 2015 are intended to ensure the food and shelter needs of foreign workers. However, illegal practices such as passport confiscation by employers remain common methods of coercion, and foreign workers are vulnerable to exploitation and debt bondage in the sex trade or industries including construction and manufacturing.

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