



JANUARY 2009

COUNTRY SUMMARY

Singapore

Singapore remains an authoritarian state with strict curbs on freedom of expression, assembly, and association; denial of due process rights; draconian defamation laws; and tight controls on independent political activity. Since 1959 the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has won all elections.

Internal security and criminal laws permit prolonged detention of suspects without trial. Caning is obligatory for certain categories of crimes, as is the death penalty for others. Although reforms have improved employment conditions for some of the country's 180,000 migrant domestic workers, the government still fails to guarantee them basic rights.

Freedom of Expression and Assembly

Singapore's constitution guarantees freedom of assembly and expression, though parliament can and does limit both on security, public order, and morality grounds. Opposition politicians and their supporters are at constant risk of prison and substantial fines for simply expressing their views.

On October 13, 2008, Singapore's High Court ruled that opposition Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) Secretary General Dr. Chee Soon Juan and his sister, Chee Siok Chin, must pay Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and his son, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, US\$416,000 in damages for an article in the SDP's newsletter. The article had compared how the government is run to a scandal at a well-known charity. The ruling may bankrupt the SDP and permanently shut it down. Dr. Chee and Ms. Chee are already bankrupt because of previous defamation rulings against them.

In September 2008 the Lees also won a defamation suit against the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and its editor Hugo Restall for commentary on the same case. Damages had yet to be assessed at this writing. The government is also seeking

contempt proceedings against the publisher and two editors of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* for editorial comments related to the case.

In May Dr. Chee and a colleague were fined for speaking in public without a permit during the 2006 election campaign. They were charged with trying to sell copies of the SDP newsletter on a Singapore street.

Movies, music, and video games are routinely censored in Singapore. The Media Development Authority controls website licensing. In May 2008 the authority interrupted a private screening, sponsored by the SDP, of the video *One Nation Under Lee*.

The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act requires that locally published newspapers renew their licenses each year, and empowers authorities to limit the circulation of foreign publications deemed to “be engaging in the domestic politics of Singapore.”

How far Singapore’s leadership will loosen curbs on assembly and expression, as Prime Minister Loong suggested in August 2008, remains to be seen. The only step taken in 2008 was the government’s decision in September to rescind the need for police permission for gatherings and rallies of more than four people at a popular park site officially labeled the Speaker’s Corner. Race and religion still may not be publicly discussed, police may still intervene on public order grounds, and a permit is still required elsewhere in the city.

In March, on World Consumer Rights Day, police stopped a protest against rising prices outside Parliament House. The organizers, among them Dr. Chee, had been refused a permit; 18 protesters have since been charged with illegal assembly and procession. A day after the attempted rally, the non-political Consumer Association of Singapore was able to hold a public event without incident.

Due Process

Singapore’s Internal Security Act (ISA), Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act (CLA), Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA), and Undesirable Publications Act permit arrest and detention of suspects without a warrant or judicial review. Both the ISA and the CLA

also authorize preventive detention. The MDA permits the Central Narcotics Bureau chief to send suspected drug users for rehabilitation without recourse to trial.

The ISA is used against suspected Islamist militants, many of whom have been detained for long periods without trial. There is no right to challenge detention on substantive grounds. As of April 2008 some 30 suspected Muslim militants were being held, almost all members of Jemaah Islamiah. Another 25-30 former detainees live under restriction orders.

Caning

Singapore's penal code mandates caning combined with imprisonment for some 30 offenses, including drug and immigration felonies. It is discretionary for other offenses. Courts reportedly sentenced 6,404 men and boys to caning in 2007, some 95 percent of whose sentences were carried out.

Death Penalty

Although death penalty statistics are secret in Singapore, available information indicates that it has one of the world's highest per capita execution rates. In December 2007 Singapore joined with 53 other states in voting against a nonbinding UN General Assembly resolution calling for "a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty." Earlier, Singapore's home affairs minister, referring to the law's deterrent effects, commented that "there is no room to go soft."

Migrant Domestic Workers

Singapore's labor laws exclude some 180,000 migrant domestic workers from key protections guaranteed to other workers, such as a weekly day off, limits on working hours, annual leave, paid holidays, and caps on salary deductions. In May 2008 acting Minister for Manpower Gan Kim Yong said it was unnecessary to mandate a weekly rest day. He instead supported the current standard contract provision that provides for at least one day off a month or compensatory pay. However, many employers forbid domestic workers to take a rest day; their isolation and employers' power to have them deported at will make it difficult if not impossible for them to bargain effectively for their due.

The government has prosecuted some employers who physically abuse domestic workers and imposed penalties on labor recruitment agencies for unethical practices. However it has failed to regulate exploitative recruitment charges that can consume a third or more of workers' two-year wage total.

Privacy

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

In April 2008 the Media Development Authority fined a local television station for featuring a gay couple and their baby under regulations that prohibit promotion of gay lifestyles. It also fined a cable network for airing a commercial that showed two women kissing.

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.

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 members supportive of opposition parties to hold office.

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. It is also an important financial and banking center for Southeast Asia.

In February 2008 Singapore Foreign Minister George Yong-Boon Yeo, then chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), expressed ASEAN's concern about the conditions under which Burma's constitutional referendum took place. Since July 2008, after Singapore's term as chair of ASEAN ended, the government has shown more support for Burma's government, even refusing to renew residency permits for Burmese citizens who appear to have taken part in peaceful activities critical of Burmese government policies.