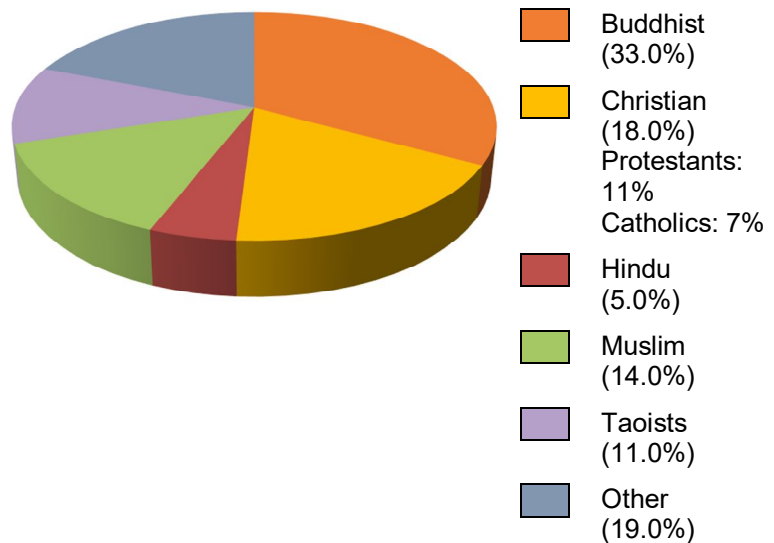


SINGAPORE



Area:	Population:	Political system:	Major Language(s):
660 km ²	5.5 million	Democracy	English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil

Legal Framework on Freedom of Religion and Actual Application

On 23rd March 2015, the Singapore authorities announced the death of Lee Kuan Yew and declared a period of seven days' mourning in the city-state, to honour the memory and the achievements of the man who was the first Prime Minister of Singapore (1959-1990).¹ It was an exceptional move, reflecting the stature of the man who will go down in history as the founder and the unchallenged master of a unique economic success story and a unique social model.

Father Joseph de Dinechin, a young French missionary in Singapore, stated: "Lee Kuan Yew succeeded... in creating a country that is a model of peaceful coexistence among the religions, and of genuine religious freedom. After the racial riots of 1969, racial and religious harmony was the leitmotiv of his policy for the building up of the nation."²

Speaking about religious freedom in Singapore, Father de Dinechin, a member of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP), said: "Lee Kuan Yew, though himself officially of no religion, was a pragmatist who understood that the religious aspiration was an integral part of the human make-up and that religion represented a positive contribution to society. Hence, the various different religions were given complete freedom to develop, provided they did not oppose the common good of society." This same concept of inter-religious and inter-racial harmony was applied notably in the social housing policy, exemplified by the creation of the Housing and Development Board (HDB),³ a massive state-sponsored social housing programme, designed to encourage social and religious integration. Father de Dinechin explained: "Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Taoists and Buddhists co-exist in genuine friendship. In Singapore the government is an active participant in the inter-religious dialogue, which it encourages and coordinates."

Situated at the heart of a mainly Malay and majority Muslim region, the city-state of Singapore was only viable if it created its own national identity. This, at least, was the view of the founders of Singapore, notably Lee Kuan Yew himself. He wanted to create a future that was not Western, but Asiatic. Placing his faith initially in traditional Confucianism, his view was that all religions should be

at the service of a common good, defined in terms of economic development and increased living standards.

During the 1980s, the political outlook that flowed from this thinking clashed with the birth of an emergent civil society. But the then government responded with repression, introducing the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (March 1992). The act's aim was to enable government to restrict the freedom of expression of religions leaders and faithful – especially concerning criticism of the authorities. Admittedly, during the course of the 1990s, with the development of an educated middle class, the new generation of government leaders began to acknowledge the need for the system to show a little more flexibility. That said, it was still not permitted for civil society to develop independently. The term “civic society” was introduced around this time, implying a sense of a national and cultural identity to indicate the type of social fabric the government was trying to create in Singapore.

During the last half-century of remarkable economic development, the population of Singapore has not however remained quite as passive as the lack of debate on the future of the city state might suggest. According to the government bureau of statistics,⁴ the balance between the “races” – to use the terminology employed locally – was regarded as more or less fixed: the Chinese represented a little over 75 percent of the population, the Malays a little less than 15 percent, the Indians a little over eight percent and the “others” the remaining two percent. Religious adherence was assumed to correspond to ethnic identity: thus, the Chinese were assumed to be Buddhists or Taoists, the Malays Muslims, the Indians Hindus and the “others” Christians.

However the actual figures of religious adherence shows that the stability so much desired by the authorities does not exist. In 1950, two percent of Singaporeans were Christians – Catholics and Protestants combined – but today they make up around 18 percent (seven percent Catholics and 11 percent Protestants). In his 2009 work, *Démocratie, modernité et christianisme en Asie*, Father Guillaume Arotçarena MEP showed that those who could be seen as upper middle class have “moved” to Christianity, a religion which is seen as modern.⁵ In parallel with this, a Western-type of agnosticism and reformed Buddhism have likewise gained ground because, as rising middle classes, they have the capacity to integrate practices and values regarded as Western.

In this context, many Singaporeans disagree with the authorities' efforts to control civil society. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act therefore represses initiatives deemed likely to sow religious discord – a praise-worthy concern in a profoundly multi-cultural and multi-religious society.⁶ However, the difficulty arises when the authorities attempt to use this law to stifle all political expression they deem deviant.

Incidents

An illustration of this situation is seen in the case of the 16-year-old blogger Amos Yee, who in spring 2015 was found guilty of having “offended the religious sentiments” of Singaporeans,⁷ or more precisely of the Christians of Singapore. He was sentenced to 53 days in detention.⁸ His alleged offence was that on 27th March 2015, four days after the death of Lee Kuan Yew, Amos Yee posted a home-made eight-minute video on YouTube,⁹ entitled “Lee Kuan Yew is finally dead!”. In the video Yee delivers a tirade in English, attacking the former patriarch of Singapore and denouncing the authoritarianism and the assault on liberties which, in his view, characterise this city-state. The high school student denounces a system in which “money and status signify happiness” and which, despite being “one of the richest countries” in the world, is also “one of the most depressed”. With real passion and a language that is sometimes crude, he denounces Lee Kuan Yew as “a horrible person” and defies his son, the current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, to take him to court. The video is thus, generally speaking, a criticism of the methods of government prevailing in Singapore, and the attack on Christianity appears more or less incidental. Raised in the Catholic faith but now atheist, Amos Yee says the following words: “I'm going to compare (Lee Kuan Yew) to someone who has not yet been mentioned so far: Jesus.” Describing

both as “power hungry and malicious”, he claims that “they deceive others by pretending that they are gentle and filled with compassion.”

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

The leaders of the Christian communities have not made any comment on the affair, but various petitions by Singaporean Christians have circulated on the internet, maintaining they have not been “offended” by Amos Yee, and saying they forgive him.¹⁰ Other local commentators have claimed that the whole affair illustrates almost like a caricature, what Singaporeans call the “nanny state”¹¹ – a state in which nothing is forbidden, yet permission is required for everything, and where the state is always looking over your shoulder in case you do something silly.

¹ Straits Times : “Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister, dies aged 91”, 23 March 2015
(<http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mr-lee-kuan-yew-singapores-first-prime-minister-dies-aged-91>)

² Fides : “Témoignage d'un missionnaire sur la figure de Lee Kwan Yew”, 24 March 2015
(<http://www.news.va/fr/news/asiesingapour-temoignage-dun-missionnaire-sur-la-f>)

³ <http://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/homepage>

⁴ <http://www.singstat.gov.sg>

⁵ Eglises d'Asie : “Les évolutions du paysage religieux face à la modernité”, 1 March 2008
(<http://eglasiemeepasie.org/asi-du-sud-est/singapour/2008-03-01-supplement-eda-2-2008-les-evolutions-du-paysage-religieux-face-a-la-modernite>)

⁶ Channel NewsAsia : “Singapore's religious harmony a legacy to be treasured: PM Lee”, 12 May 2015
(<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-s-religious/1842076.html>)

⁷ Channel NewsAsia : “Blogger Amos Yee pleads not guilty to both charges”, 7 May 2015
(<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/blogger-amos-yee-pleads/1830694.html>)

⁸ New York Times : “Singapore Frees Amos Yee, 16, Blogger Who Criticized Lee Kuan Yew”, 6 July 2015
(http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/07/world/asia/singapore-amos-yee-lee-kuan-yew.html?_r=0)

⁹ YouTube : “Amos Yee - Lee Kuan Yew Is Finally Dead!”, 27 March 2015
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TZPdM3xn24>)

¹⁰ Singapore Christian : “Why I, As a Christian, Am at Peace and Not Offended By People Like Amos Yee”, 5 November 2015
(<http://singaporechristian.com/2015/05/11/why-i-as-a-christian-am-not-offended-by-people-like-amos-yee/>)

¹¹ Global Post : “Singapore's new generation wants a kinder, chiller country”, 12 August 2015
(<http://www.globalpost.com/article/6628985/2015/08/10/after-50-years-singapore-finally-seems-ready-outgrow-nanny-state>)