

# SINGAPORE

Singapore gained its independence in 1965, when it was distinguished from Malaysia as the British army withdrew troops from east of the Suez.<sup>1</sup> The resulting government, in contrast to that of Malaysia to the North and Indonesia to the South, ensured a strict separation from religion.<sup>2</sup>

Singapore is an island city-state nestled in the southern-most tip of the Malaysian peninsula. With roughly 5.7 million people, it is currently the third most densely populated country in the world behind Macau and Monaco and ahead of Hong Kong with 7,737 people per square kilometer.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the countries surrounding it, Singapore is an ethnically Chinese majority country; Mandarin is the most commonly spoken language (36.3%) with three other official languages, English (29.8%), Malay (11.9%), and Tamil (4.4%). The most professed religion in Singapore is Buddhism (33.9%), followed by Islam (14.3%), Taoism (11.3%), Catholicism (7.1%), other Christian denominations (11%), and Hinduism (5.2%). 16.4% of the population describes itself as having no religion.<sup>4</sup>

The withdrawal of British troops also had the effect of leaving Singapore with very little in the way of a military. A total of 1,000 soldiers remained. This was further exacerbated by a cultural taboo against the profession of 'soldier' which held less appeal in national surveys to that of 'thief.' As such, the Singapore government embarked on a policy of conscription, which was made particularly strict in order to combat this unwillingness to serve.<sup>5</sup>

The government of Singapore enforces compulsory military service and does not recognize the right of conscientious objection. Young men among Jehovah's Witnesses who object to military service are subjected to two consecutive prison terms for a total of thirty-nine months of imprisonment.

When a young man turns eighteen years of age, he is required to enter Singapore's military. If he refuses for reasons of conscience, he is detained for fifteen months in a military camp. At the expiration of his term, he is released and then immediately ordered to wear a military uniform and participate in military training. If he again declines to do so, he is subject to a second court martial with a term of twenty-four months.

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<sup>1</sup> Amnon Barzilai. 'A Deep, Dark, Secret Love Affair'. *Haaretz*.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Chia. 'Religion and Politics in Singapore: A Christian Reflection'. *Church & Society in Asia Today*.

<sup>3</sup> The World Bank. 'Population density (people per sq. km of land area)'.

<sup>4</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. 'World Factbook: Singapore'.

<sup>5</sup> Amnon Barzilai. 'A Deep, dark, Secret Love Affair'. *Haaretz*.

## **Jehovah's Witnesses in Prison**

In April 2016, fifteen conscientious objectors were listed as being in jail for refusing to partake in military service<sup>6</sup> but as of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2016, a number of them had been released and only 10 were still detained. The total number of Jehovah's Witnesses detained by the military has varied between roughly fifteen and twenty for the period between 2014 and 2016.<sup>7</sup>

Given the small geographical size of Singapore, all these detainees are held in the same military detention facility, the Armed Forces Detention Barracks. This includes both those serving their first detention terms and those in their second, longer term.<sup>8</sup>

The full list of documented cases of FoRB prisoners for each denomination is available on the USB key attached to this report and on our website: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>.

## **Laws Used to Criminalize Religious Activities**

### **Enlistment Act, 1970 (amended in 2001)<sup>9</sup>:**

(Article 10)

Duty to report for enlistment

- (1) Subject to the provisions of this Act, the proper authority may by notice require a person subject to this Act not below the age of 18 years to report for enlistment for national service.
- (2) A person required to report for enlistment for national service shall report to the proper authority on such date and at such time and place as may be specified in the notice and shall attend from day to day until duly enlisted.

(Article 12)

Liability to render full-time service

- (1) Every person subject to this Act who is fit for national service and enlisted on or after 1st January 1971 shall be liable to render full-time service for a period not exceeding 2 years [...]

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<sup>6</sup> 'Imprisoned for Their Faith'. See <https://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/singapore/jehovahs-witnesses-in-prison/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Parliament of Singapore. 'Enlistment Act, 1970'.

Military service is incompatible with the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses,<sup>10</sup> and Singapore refuses to introduce an alternative civilian service.<sup>11</sup> In this case, the concerns of national security are seen as outweighing the right of freedom of religion or belief.

## **National Standards for Detention Conditions**

### **Singapore Armed Forces Act, 1972<sup>12</sup>:**

(Article 122)

Sentence of detention or special detention in disciplinary barrack

- (1) A person sentenced to detention under this Act shall, unless otherwise provided for in regulations made under this Act, serve his sentence in detention barracks.

Singapore is not a signatory of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT),<sup>13</sup> and maintains articles in their Criminal Procedure Code that allows for sentences that include caning.

## **National and International Reports on Prison Conditions in Singapore**

The UN uses the definition of torture or inhuman treatment provided in the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, provided below.

### **Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment<sup>14</sup>:**

(Article 1)

1. For the purposes of this Convention, the term 'torture' means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering

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<sup>10</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses were deregistered in 1972. They are banned from printing or disseminating their ideas, though none are reported to have been detained for breach of this. Officially, this was undertaken to preserve the religious harmony of the country and to safeguard the social welfare of its people.

<sup>11</sup> War Resisters' International. 'Submission on Singapore: Universal Periodic Review, prepared June 2015'.

<sup>12</sup> Parliament of Singapore. 'Singapore Armed Forces Act, 1972'.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Treaty Collection. 'Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment'.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.

Under this definition, caning, since it seeks to punish by inflicting pain, is considered by the UN to constitute torture or inhuman treatment. The use of caning has been defended by the Singaporean Attorney General, who stated that its use was provided for under Singaporean law, and the application of the punishment had to meet medical prerequisites overseen by a medical professional.<sup>15</sup> None of this addresses the main concerns brought forth in the CAT definition.

Despite Singapore's lack of ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment,<sup>16</sup> there are no reports of torture or other forms of detention mistreatment beyond the use of caning. Individual accounts have pointed out often uncomfortable conditions due to the heat and humidity in Singapore, but the provision of medical professionals prevents this from negatively affecting inmates.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusions

Since the country's independence, Singapore has struggled to assemble a military because of a cultural aversion to the career soldier. The country began with an army of only 1,000 soldiers and was then forced to create mandatory conscription laws to provide for its security needs. Many young Jehovah's Witnesses who reject military service on conscientious grounds have been imprisoned for up to thirty-nine months.

The United Nations has long appealed to member States to 'recognize that conscientious objection to military service should be considered a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.' Although Singapore has been a member State since 1965, it has expressed its disagreement with the United Nations on this issue. In a letter dated April 24, 2002, addressed to the UN Commission on Human Rights, a Singaporean government official stated that 'where individual beliefs or actions run counter [to the right of national defense], the right of a state to preserve national security must prevail.' In no uncertain terms, the official wrote, 'We do not recognize the universal applicability of conscientious objection to military service.'

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<sup>15</sup> The Jakarta Post. 'Singapore rejects criticism that caning is 'torture''.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Treaty Collection. 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights'.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin Looi. 'My experience in the SAF Detention Barracks'.