

Singapore

Country:

Singapore

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Partly Free

Political Rights:

4

Civil Liberties:

4

Aggregate Score:

51

Freedom Rating:

4.0

Overview:

General elections held in September 2015 were fully contested, with opposition parties putting forward candidates for all available parliamentary seats for the first time since Singapore's independence. Social media were an important part of the campaign, but television and other traditional media, which are mostly aligned with the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), remained more important in shaping voters' views. Aided by this and other advantages, the PAP won a significant victory, capturing 93 percent of the seats and 70 percent of the popular vote.

Also during the year, the authorities stepped up efforts to suppress critical voices online. Bloggers and website editors faced charges including sedition, defamation, and "wounding religious feelings."

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 19 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 4 / 12

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. The prime minister and cabinet are appointed by the president. The first contested presidential election since 1993 was held in 2011, with all candidates running as independents, in accordance with the constitution. Former deputy prime minister Tony Tan, the PAP-backed candidate, won the race with 35.2 percent of the vote, narrowly defeating three opponents.

The unicameral Parliament elected in 2015 includes 13 members from single-member constituencies and 76 members from Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), a mechanism

intended to foster ethnic minority representation. The top-polling party in each GRC wins all of its three to six seats, which has historically bolstered the majority of the dominant PAP. In recent years, critics—including civil society organizations—have questioned whether the GRC system is really achieving its ostensible aim of ensuring representation for minorities. As many as 9 additional, nonpartisan members can be appointed to Parliament by the president, and another 9 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.

Elections are free from irregularities and vote rigging, but the country lacks an independent election authority, and the PAP dominates the political process in practice. It uses legal harassment to deter opposition leaders from seeking office, as well as the redrawing of district boundaries to minimize support for the opposition; the new electoral districts for 2015 were announced just seven weeks before the elections.

As with the most recent elections in 2011, the 2015 campaign featured vigorous, coordinated efforts by opposition parties. In this case, the opposition put forward candidates for all 89 directly elected seats, a first since independence. The largest opposition group, the Workers' Party (WP), ultimately retained the six directly elected seats it had won in 2011, but lost a seat it won in a 2013 by-election. Three compensatory seats were awarded to the opposition to achieve the minimum of nine. The PAP, whose candidates vastly outspent their rivals, took the remaining 83 elected seats, managing to win a higher percentage of the popular vote than in 2011.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 8 / 16

Although opposition parties had been gaining ground until the 2015 elections, their campaigns and activities are constrained by a ban on political films and television programs, the threat of defamation suits, strict regulations on political associations, and the PAP's influence on the media and the courts. In 2015, the registration of a new party—the People's Power Party—was accepted by the authorities. In addition to the WP, other officially recognized parties include the Singapore People's Party (SPP), the Singaporeans First, the Singapore Democratic Party, the National Solidarity Party, the Reform Party, and the Singapore Democratic Alliance.

The PAP has governed without interruption since the British colony of Singapore obtained home rule in 1959, entered the Malaysian Federation in 1963, and gained full independence in 1965. Moreover, the country has had only three prime ministers: Lee Kuan Yew from 1959 to 1990, Goh Chok Tong from 1990 to 2004, and Lee's son Lee Hsien Loong from 2004 to the present. The elder Lee remained influential as "senior minister" during Goh's rule and as "minister mentor" from 2004 to 2011; he was also active as a parliamentarian in 2014 before his death in 2015.

Electoral rules, as well as regulations aimed at preventing ethnic or religious conflict, make it difficult for parties based on ethnic or religious interests to garner support.

C. Functioning of Government: 7 / 12

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.

Singapore has been lauded for its lack of corruption. The country was ranked 8 out of 168 countries and territories assessed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index. However, transparency and accountability remain concerns. Ministers in the government can serve in several capacities simultaneously. Legislators are allowed to and often do serve on the boards of private companies, including as chairpersons, which creates conflicts of interest. Singapore was the fifth-worst-ranked country in the *Economist's* 2014 "crony-capitalism index," which aims to measure the degree to which accumulation of private wealth depends on political connections.

Civil Liberties: 32 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 9 / 16

The government maintains that racial sensitivities and the threat of terrorism justify draconian restrictions on freedoms of speech, but such rules have been used to silence criticism of the authorities. 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 Sedition Act, in effect since the colonial period, outlaws seditious speech, the distribution of seditious materials, and acts with "seditious tendency." Popular videos, music, and books that reference sex, violence, or drugs are also subject to censorship. Foreign broadcasters and periodicals can be restricted for engaging in domestic politics, and all foreign publications must appoint legal representatives and provide significant financial deposits.

The internet is widely accessible, but authorities monitor online material and block some content through directives to licensed service providers. Singaporeans' increasing use of social media has sparked interest in social activism and opposition parties, contributing to opposition electoral gains. The Media Development Authority requires news websites to apply for individual licenses that are subject to annual renewal, post a financial bond with the regulator, and respond to removal orders within 24 hours. Major websites are prohibited from "advocating homosexuality or lesbianism."

Bloggers increasingly risk civil suits or criminal charges in connection with their work. Among other cases during 2015, prominent blogger Roy Ngerng Yi Ling was ordered to pay S\$150,000 (US\$111,000) in defamation damages to Prime Minister Lee, as well as at least S\$29,000 in legal fees, after alleging corruption in the management of Singapore's retirement savings plan in 2014. Another well-known blogger, Alex Au, was fined S\$8,000 (US\$5,800) for contempt of court in connection with 2013 posts that questioned the judiciary's handling of cases challenging Singapore's law against sex between men. Blogger Amos Yee, 16, was sentenced in July to four weeks in jail for uploading an allegedly obscene image and making remarks deemed insulting to religion in a video he posted. He was released, having spent more than 50 days in jail before sentencing, but was then ordered to undergo weeks of mental health testing. Two editors of the website The Real Singapore (TRS) were charged with sedition in April over articles that allegedly promoted interethnic hostility; the website was shut down, and the two defendants, Australian national Ai Takagi and her Singaporean husband, Yang Kaiheng, were awaiting trial at year's end.

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. The government forbids the wearing of headscarves (*tudong* in Malay) by women who hold public-sector jobs that require a uniform, though the right of Muslim women to wear headscarves in the workplace more broadly remained a subject of public debate in 2015.

All public universities and political research institutions have direct government links that enable at least some political influence. Academics engage in political debate, but their publications rarely deviate from the government line on matters related to Singapore.

Although private discussion is generally open and free, residents' speech is sometimes impeded—including online—due to the legal restrictions on topics such as race and religion.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12

Public assemblies, including events involving just one person, must be approved by police. Permits are not needed for indoor gatherings as long as topics of discussion do not relate to race or religion or involve a foreign speaker.

The Societies Act restricts freedom of association by requiring most organizations of more than 10 people to register with the government, and the government enjoys full discretion to register or dissolve such groups. Only registered parties and associations may engage in organized political activity, and political speeches are tightly regulated.

Unions are granted broad 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. 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. Workers in essential services are required to give 14 days' notice to an employer before striking.

F. Rule of Law: 7 / 16

The government's overwhelming success in court cases raises questions about judicial independence, particularly because lawsuits against government opponents often drive them into bankruptcy. Defendants in criminal cases enjoy most due process rights. Prisons generally meet international standards.

The Internal Security Act (ISA) and Criminal Law Act (CLA) allow warrantless searches and arrests to preserve national security, order, and the public interest. The ISA, previously aimed at communist threats, is now used against suspected Islamist terrorists. Suspects can be detained without charge or trial for an unlimited number of two-year periods. Over the past two years, Singapore has actively detained individuals accused of planning to travel abroad to join the Islamic State (IS) militant group. A 1989 constitutional amendment prohibits judicial review of the substantive grounds for detention under the ISA and of the constitutionality of the law itself. The CLA is mainly used to detain organized crime suspects; it allows preventive detention for an extendable one-year period.

The Misuse of Drugs Act empowers authorities to commit suspected drug users, without trial, to rehabilitation centers for up to three years. The death penalty applies to drug trafficking as well as murder, although judges may use discretion to impose lighter sentences under some circumstances. The penal code mandates caning, in addition to imprisonment, for about 30 offenses, but the punishment is applied inconsistently. Singapore's highest court, the Court of Appeal, upheld the constitutionality of caning in a March 2015 ruling.

There is no racial discrimination under the law, although ethnic Malays reportedly face de facto discrimination in both private- and public-sector employment. The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and

transgender) community in Singapore faces significant legal obstacles. Section 377A of 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 Court of Appeal upheld its constitutionality in 2014. The Pink Dot parade, held annually in support of equal rights for LGBT people since 2009, reportedly drew a record-high attendance of some 28,000 in 2015.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 12 / 16

Citizens enjoy freedom of movement, though opposition politicians have been denied the right to travel in the past. The government occasionally enforces its policy of ethnic balance in public housing, in which most Singaporeans live.

Women enjoy the same legal rights as men on most issues, and many are well-educated professionals. There are no explicit constitutional guarantees of equal rights for women. Women do not have legal protections against spousal rape except under special circumstances. No laws protect against discrimination on the basis of gender in employment, and few women hold top positions in government or the private sector. A total of 21 women won directly elected seats in the 2015 parliamentary elections.

Singapore's more than 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. A 2006 standard contract for foreign household workers addresses the problem of food deprivation and entitles replaced workers to seek other employment in Singapore, but it fails to provide other basic protections and benefits, such as vacation days. A 2013 law requires that new contracts grant household workers one day off per week but allows employers to offer compensation in place of the day off if the worker agrees.

Foreign workers are also vulnerable to exploitation and debt bondage in the sex trade or industries including construction and manufacturing. Withholding of pay and passport confiscation are common methods of coercion. A new law that took effect in March 2015 bans all forms of human trafficking, but the authorities had yet to establish a record of convictions during the year.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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