

Country Updates on Human Rights and Democracy 2019

Singapore

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Singapore remains committed to a national model that emphasises a strong government, peaceful coexistence between social groups and economic growth. While this model has delivered on all three aspects, questions remain as to the limits it imposes on fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, freedom of the media, and the right to political participation. Singaporean opposition parties state that they are limited in their ability to contest elections, while civil society actors argue that strong defamation legislation and the legal right of the government to correct false information are part of a toolbox used to censor independent media. The death penalty also remains in use in Singapore and its use remains largely uncontested, in the absence of public debate. Male homosexuality remains criminalised. The EU engages constructively with Singapore on the above issues in order to cooperate towards guaranteeing the human rights of each person.

2. EU action – key focus areas: EU actions focused on cooperation with Singaporean counterparts to advance the implementation of human rights commitments, and to support the ratification of core international human rights agreements to which Singapore is not yet a party. EU actions also aimed at raising awareness about the founding values of the Union, including freedom of expression, freedom of the media and political participation, and to facilitate discussion about and increase understanding of these values in Singapore. Moreover, the EU continuously advocated for a moratorium on the death penalty in statements issued in relation to executions.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU maintained a role as a key convenor for discussions on human rights in Singapore. The EU organised the annual human rights day seminar on 12 December, together with Singapore's Representative to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The theme of the seminar in 2019 was the strengthening of social cohesion in the context of counterterrorism and the countering of violent extremism. Another avenue of engagement was a regular dialogue with Singaporean authorities on the implementation of the 'Trade and sustainable development' (TSD) chapter of the newly launched EU-Singapore Free Trade agreement.

4. EU financial engagement: Financing civil society organisations by foreign entities remained prohibited in Singapore. The EU delegation's activities consisted of monitoring and reporting, coordinating closely with Member States, as well as organising meetings with prominent members of Singapore's civil society and supporting the discussion on human rights in Singapore through advocacy efforts.

5. Multilateral context: 2019 saw the review of Singapore's progress in implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The observations by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted a series of positive developments, while also expressing concern on a number of aspects. The next major multilateral development on human rights will be the country's Universal Periodic Review during 2020.