

52nd session of the Universal Periodic Review**Singapore****Pre-session statement delivered by Ahmed Adam****On behalf of the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)**

This statement is based on a joint submission by FORUM-ASIA and CIVICUS submitted for the UPR of Singapore. This submission is based on consultation with partners on the ground and publicly available data.

This statement today will focus on the situation of rights related to civic space in the country, in particular, rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression as well as space for human rights defenders.

Freedom of Association

Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees the right to form associations, however, significant legal barriers to freedom of association remain. The 1966 Societies Act gives the Registrar broad discretionary powers. Under Article 4, registration can be denied on vague grounds such as being “contrary to the national interest” or “undesirable.” Article 24 allows deregistration of organisations considered prejudicial to public order, and Article 15 provides criminal penalties — including fines of up to S\$5,000 or three years’ imprisonment — for involvement with an “unlawful society.”

During Singapore’s third Universal Periodic Review, the government supported a recommendation to remove obstacles to the registration of LGBTI organisations. Despite the 2022 repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code, it remains unclear whether barriers to LGBTQI+ group registration have been lifted. More recently, in 2023 and 2024, several civil society groups were targeted under the Prevention of Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), including designation under Section 32, as well the 2021 Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA), creating further constraints on civil society.

Trade unions face similar restrictions under the 1940 Trade Unions Act, which mandates registration and allows refusal on broad grounds, including Article 14(f), while government employees require presidential approval to join unions under Article 28(3).

We urge states to recommend Singapore to amend the Societies Act to remove undue discretion and mandatory registration requirements, ensure compliance with international human rights standards, and to reform the Trade Unions Act to guarantee the independent functioning of trade unions.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

During Singapore's third UPR, the government received three recommendations on freedom of peaceful assembly. Although it supported aligning its laws with international standards, it has not implemented the recommendations.

Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees the right to assemble peacefully. However, the Public Order Act, or POA, imposes strict limitations. Under Article 7, a police permit is required for virtually any assembly, including one-person protests. The only exception is Speakers' Corner. The Commissioner of Police may refuse permits on broad grounds, including public nuisance or potential hostility between groups. Violations can result in fines of up to S\$20,000 or one year's imprisonment. The law also restricts assemblies involving foreigners under Article 7(2)(h).

In recent years, the POA has been used to target activists and protesters. In 2024 and 2025, activists expressing solidarity with Palestine were charged, homes were raided, and memorial installations investigated. In May 2025, an activist was charged for holding a one-person protest in a prohibited area. Migrant workers protesting unpaid wages have also faced investigation.

We recommend Singapore to amend the Public Order Act to comply with international human rights standards, replace the permit system with a simple notification regime, remove discriminatory restrictions on non-citizens participating in protests, and drop charges against those prosecuted for peaceful assembly.

Freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information

During the third UPR cycle, Singapore received 14 recommendations on freedom of expression and media freedom. Implementation of the three accepted recommendations has been minimal.

Despite the constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression under Article 14, this right is heavily restricted in practice. Media ownership is closely linked to the government, and Singapore ranks 123rd out of 180 countries on the 2025 World Press Freedom Index.

Broad laws grant authorities extensive control over media and online speech. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, Broadcasting Act and Undesirable Publications Act allow sanctions against content deemed contrary to public interest. The Prevention of Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), under Articles 11 and 32, enables ministers to order corrections, remove content, or designate platforms as Declared Online Locations. It has been used against media outlets, opposition figures, and activists. Violations can carry penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment and fines of up to S\$1 million.

Other restrictive laws include the 2021 Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA), the Online Safety Act, the Online Criminal Harms Act 2023, and the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act passed in February 2025. Authorities have also used Penal Code section 298 to prosecute online speech.

We urge States to recommend Singapore to align all legislation with international human rights standards including amending or repealing POFMA, FICA, the Maintenance of Racial

Harmony Act and other restrictive laws; to review media laws to ensure compliance with international standards; to guarantee that journalists can work without fear of reprisal; to lift censorship; and to adopt a comprehensive framework to protect media freedom and access to information in broad and transparent consultations with media organisations and journalists.

Harassment and arrests against civil society activists, human rights defenders and journalists

During Singapore's previous UPR, the government was recommended to ensure full respect for freedom of expression and association and to enhance protection for civil society activists, journalists and human rights defenders. The recommendation was only noted and has not been implemented.

Human rights defenders, activists, lawyers and journalists — particularly those advocating against the death penalty — continue to face harassment and criminalisation.

Recent cases are concerning. Activists and human rights defenders were fined under the Public Order Act for a one-person protest and others have faced repeated police investigations under the Public Order Act and the Administration of Justice (Protection) Act 2016, a broadly worded contempt law and POA section 15(2)(a).

Late human rights lawyer M Ravi was suspended for five years under section 83(1)(b) of the Legal Profession Act and imprisoned for contempt of court. Journalists and media organisations have faced repeated charges under POFMA and in some cases media organisations have been designated under POFMA.

We recommend Singapore to repeal or amend the Public Order Act and the Administration of Justice Act, to end legal and judicial harassment of human rights defenders, to drop charges related to the exercise of fundamental freedoms, and to create a safe and an enabling environment for human rights defenders in law and in practice by ensuring domestic legislation align fully with international human rights standards.

Conclusion

Finally, in relation to the general human rights situation in the country, we believe it is essential that Singapore ratifies the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights including its optional protocols without reservations, and that it establishes a national human rights institution that is fully compliant with the Paris Principles.