



Long Open to Immigration, Singapore Is Getting More Restrictive

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Editor's Note: This article is part of an ongoing series

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/series/26/immigration-and-integration-policy>) ON immigration and integration policy around the world.



A police officer watches over migrant workers as they wait for shuttle buses to take them back to their dormitories, Singapore, Feb. 9, 2014 (AP photo by Joseph Nair).

Between 300 and 400 people organized a rare public rally in Singapore last month to protest the government's immigration policies, which have historically been welcoming. But many Singaporeans blame immigrants, who make up 40 percent of the city-state's population (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-politics-immigration/singaporean-activist-leads-anti-immigration-rally-as-vote-looms-idUSKBN1XD0BX>), for driving down wages and raising the cost of living. In an email interview with WPR, Leong Chan Hoong, an associate professor at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, explains why immigration has become such a hot-button issue in recent years and how it might factor into the next general election, which could be held next year.

World Politics Review: Why has Singapore historically maintained an open immigration policy? What are the main challenges facing immigrants in Singapore?

Leong Chan Hoong: Since colonial times, Singapore has been a gateway to the Asia-Pacific region. As a small island city-state with no natural resources, it has always relied on its geographic location for trade and on its human capital for economic development. The latter plays an increasingly crucial role in shaping its high standard of living, and the knowledge and skills of its immigrants will be vital to securing Singapore's future. Immigration is also important to sustain Singapore's long-term economic performance, as it is a rapidly aging society with one of the lowest fertility rates in the world (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=SG>).

Like many cosmopolitan cities, Singapore faces economic, cultural and political challenges linked to immigration. Immigrants are seen by many Singaporeans as taking away jobs and other resources and eroding Singapore's cultural identity. There is also a common, and justified, perception that Singapore's political leadership shows favoritism toward immigrants at the expense of native-born Singaporeans, ostensibly to win electoral support

from immigrant communities. For whatever reason, many leaders have publicly adopted the position that native-born citizens are responsible (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-17061-001>) for ensuring that immigrants adapt smoothly to Singaporean society, rather than the onus being on immigrants themselves.

Most of Singapore's immigrants—many of whom hail from China, India, Malaysia and Indonesia—are better-educated than the native-born population (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/rapid-growth-singapores-immigrant-population-brings-policy-challenges>), and they often have different cultural values, social norms and etiquette. The main challenges facing immigrants in Singapore are thus related to public inclusion and integration. Many native-born Singaporeans believe there are clearly defined attributes that immigrants must have in order to be considered Singaporean. Some of the most contested include the ability to speak English, respect for Singapore's multireligious and multiracial society, and support for national policies that put collective interests ahead of the individual's, such as mandatory military service. Perceptions that immigrants are not doing their part to adapt on these measures can often lead to tensions with native-born Singaporeans (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0147176713000886?via%3Dihub>).

WPR: Why has immigration become such a hot-button political issue in recent years? Has the government introduced any new restrictions in response to rising anti-immigrant sentiment?

Leong: Immigration was a major consideration in the 2011 general election, partly because of high rates of immigration into Singapore in the five years leading up to the vote, which contributed to a 14 percent increase in the population during that time. This is a noticeable shift for a small city-state like Singapore, and it added to the unsubstantiated but widely held view that immigration depresses wages and raises the cost of living. Sentiment toward migration has improved since then, as the government has implemented a slew of policy changes—including a sharper legal distinction between citizens, permanent residents and migrant workers that made it harder for non-citizens to access public benefits.

Despite these adjustments, tensions over immigration have heightened in recent months. In October, a Singaporean man of Indian descent was caught on video verbally abusing a security guard (<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3035677/singapore-police-investigating-condo-owner-abusing>) at the condominium where he lived. The security guard had asked him to pay for condominium parking for his guests. Footage of the incident was shared widely in the media, sparking a heated public debate over immigration in Singapore.

In this case, the security guard was merely doing his job, implementing a regulation set forth by the condo management. The resident, who was a naturalized citizen, argued that he had the right to do as he sees fit because he paid over \$1 million for his home, and further insinuated that he was unlike the security guard or other Singaporeans who live in public housing. The case embodied many of the areas that trouble Singapore's immigration policies. The man's display of arrogant class superiority played into economic concerns over immigration. His treatment of the security guard was also seen as a failure to adapt to Singaporean culture, as he showed disrespect toward a person from a lower-income background. Finally, many high-profile political leaders were slow to speak out in the aftermath of the incident, which was seen as a signal of politicians' tacit tolerance of the privileged status of immigrants in Singaporean society.

WPR: How do you expect this issue to factor into the next general election?

Leong: Immigration will definitely be a factor. I believe a focal point of the campaign will be voters' judgment of the government's legacy on immigration and whether its policies are delivering for all Singaporeans.

Established opposition parties like the Worker's Party are likely to take a moderate approach to immigration, given that a substantial proportion of voters are also immigrants. The Workers' Party is known to adopt cautious and conservative views when it comes to controversial topics. It may ask for more safeguards in terms of employment protection, for example through a higher qualifying salary for employment visas and more thorough screening of applicants, but it is not likely to seek dramatic cutbacks on foreign labor and immigration. On the other hand, smaller opposition parties like the Singapore Democratic Party and newer, less established ones like People's Power Party and Singaporeans First are more likely to try to capitalize on anti-immigrant sentiments to garner political support.

The incumbent People's Action Party, which has dominated Singapore's politics since independence in 1965, is likely to make token changes to existing immigration policies to appease voters, probably by sharpening the differentiation between citizens and permanent residents when it comes to welfare benefits. This would be announced in next year's budget, just before the next election. Still, immigration will be the electoral wild card, so the People's Action Party will do all it can to ensure that this controversial issue will be dealt with decisively, and to draw voters' attention back to their positive track record in government.

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