

Singapore Restricts Foreigners

Shibani Mahtani and Gaurav Raghuvanshi

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Newly arrived domestic helpers from Indonesia wait for their transportation to a maid agency after going through medical check in Singapore in March.

Facing citizen discontent over the growing number of non-Singaporean residents, Singapore's government is raising the barriers that control the inflow of foreigners.

Starting Sept. 1, foreign workers seeking to sponsor their spouses and children to accompany them while they live and work in Singapore will need a minimum monthly income of 4,000 Singapore dollars (US\$3,150), up from the current S\$2,800, the Ministry of Manpower said in a statement. The average wage of Singapore

residents, including noncitizen permanent residents, is S\$3,249, according to government statistics.

Certain categories of foreign workers will also no longer be permitted to bring parents and in-laws into Singapore on long-term visit passes.

Singapore's government is trying to strike a delicate balance—keeping the city-state a top destination for foreign workers while also keeping anti-foreigner sentiments under control.

"Singapore remains a global talent capital," the ministry statement said. "We continue to welcome highly skilled foreign professionals." But, it went on, "the overall direction" is to "moderate the growth of Singapore's non-resident population," with the latest rules changes part of that.

Singapore's Parliament on Monday took up changes to its immigration law, the first major amendment since 2004. If passed—and the ruling party holds 81 of the 87 seats—it would make the marriage of convenience (entered into to obtain immigration privileges, including residency or long-term passes) a criminal offense. It would also subject permanent residents who get involved in activities "prejudicial to public order" to the loss of residency status or cancellation of entry permit. The Ministry of Home Affairs, which presented the amendment, said the changes are meant to "(keep) out undesirable persons, goods and conveyances."

In the past year, analysts and observers have said, discontent over foreigners has gotten more pronounced, amplified by the city-state's increasingly boisterous and bold blogosphere, a contrast to the controlled mainstream media. Putting the spotlight on the tensions have been incidents such as a deadly car crash in May caused by a Chinese national in a speeding Ferrari and an assault on a local taxi driver by three expatriates in 2010.

Discontent over higher living costs and a widening income gap, which many residents blame on the relatively open immigration policy, has undercut support for the ruling People's Action Party, which won last year's general election by the smallest margin ever. According to the Singapore-based Institute of Policy Studies, 52% of voters said immigration was an important issue to them in that election.

The government has long maintained that skilled foreign labor and "good quality" immigrants who are able to "integrate well into society" will continue to be welcomed, but has also taken precautionary measures to limit the reliance on foreigners. According to government statistics, Singapore citizens currently make up 63% of the population, down from 86% in 1980 and 91% in 1990.

"We have to reduce our dependence on foreign labor, and do much more to build an economy driven by higher skills, innovation and productivity," Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam told lawmakers in February.

Terence Chong, a researcher from the Singapore-based Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, said at a conference on immigration hosted by the IPS earlier this year that some Singaporeans view new citizens and permanent residents as seeking "to reap the benefits without any obligations."

The government has been chipping away at the benefits, including cutting health-care subsidy rates and raising the cost of attending government schools for permanent residents and foreign workers. It has also given Singapore citizens priority when it comes to getting increasingly competitive spaces in government primary schools.

That has left many permanent residents, some of whom have made Singapore their home for years, to complain—particularly considering they pay the same taxes as Singapore citizens and face the same national-service obligations, with males having to serve for two years once they turn 18.