

Debtors Act 1934

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DEBTORS ACT 1934

2020 REVISED EDITION

This revised edition incorporates all amendments up to and including 1 December 2021 and comes into operation on 31 December 2021

An Act relating to debtors and to provide penalties for fraudulent debtors.

[1 January 1935]

Short title

1. This Act is the Debtors Act 1934.

Interpretation

2. In this Act, unless there is anything repugnant in the context —

“court” means the General Division of the High Court or a judge when sitting in open court in all cases where proceedings are taken in the General Division of the High Court and means the District Court or a District Judge when sitting in open court, in all cases where proceedings are taken in a District Court;

“judge” means a judge sitting in chambers in all cases where proceedings are taken in the General Division of the High Court and means a District Judge sitting in chambers in all cases where proceedings are taken in a District Court;

“judgment” includes any order for the payment of money.

[\[40/2019\]](#)

PART 1

ARREST, EXAMINATION AND IMPRISONMENT OF

JUDGMENT DEBTORS

Arrest of judgment debtor

3. Where a judgment for the payment of money remains wholly or in part unsatisfied, whether or not an enforcement order has issued, the court or a judge may order the debtor to be arrested and brought before the court forthwith for examination as hereinafter provided, if it appears to the court or judge that there is probable reason for believing, having regard to his conduct, or the state of his affairs, or otherwise, that he is likely to leave Singapore with a view to avoiding payment of such money or to avoiding examination in respect of his affairs.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

Examination of debtor

4.—(1) The examination referred to in section 3 shall be an oral examination of the debtor before the court respecting his ability to pay or satisfy the judgment or so much thereof as remains due, and shall be conducted in the manner and subject to any rules for the time being prescribed for the examination of a debtor by way of discovery in aid of enforcement or under section 25.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

Adjournment of examination and security for further attendance

(2) If the examination is adjourned, the court may order the debtor to be committed to the civil prison until the adjourned hearing, or until such time as he furnishes security in an amount to be named in the order for his appearance at the adjourned hearing.

Interim order for protection of debtor's property

5. The court may, upon an examination under this Part, make any interim order which it may consider expedient for the protection of any property appearing likely to be available for the discharge of the judgment debt.

Powers of court on examination

6.—(1) On the conclusion of the examination, the court may commit the debtor to the civil prison for a term which may extend to 6 weeks or until earlier payment of the judgment debt, or may order that the judgment debt be paid by instalments of such amount and at such times as it thinks fit.

(2) Subject to any rules of court made under or having effect by virtue of the Supreme Court of Judicature Act 1969, an order for the payment of instalments under this section shall not be a bar to proceedings in enforcement unless and except to the

extent that the court so directs.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

Failure to comply with order for instalments

(3) If the debtor makes default in the payment of any instalment ordered to be paid under subsection (1), the judgment creditor may apply in such manner as may be prescribed by rules of court made under or having effect by virtue of the Supreme Court of Judicature Act 1969 for a notice in the prescribed form, to be issued from the court office, calling upon the debtor to attend before the court at a time named in the notice, and to show cause why he should not be committed to prison for such default and may cause such notice to be served personally upon him; and if on the day so named, or any subsequent day to which the matter may be adjourned, no sufficient cause is shown by the debtor, the court may commit him to the civil prison for a term which may extend to 6 weeks or until earlier payment of any instalment or instalments due.

(4) A debtor shall not be committed to prison under this section unless it appears that he has, since the date of the judgment or of the order directing payment by instalments, had sufficient means to pay the judgment or comply with the order, as the case may be.

Rules

7. Rules of court may be made under the Supreme Court of Judicature Act 1969 for the following purposes:

- (a) to require the deposit by the person at whose instance any order for arrest or imprisonment is issued, of a sum of money to provide for the expense of bringing the debtor before the court and the subsistence of the debtor while in prison;
- (b) to regulate any matter incidental to such deposit.

Arrest or commitment to be dependent on deposit of expenses

8.—(1) Where under any rules for the time being in force the judgment creditor is required to deposit money to provide for the expense of bringing the debtor before the court, the debtor shall not be arrested until such deposit has been made; and where the judgment creditor is required to deposit money to provide for the subsistence of the debtor while in prison, the committal order shall not be executed until such deposit has been made.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

(2) Where any further deposit is required during any period of imprisonment under this Part, the court or a judge may, if such deposit is not duly made, order that the debtor be discharged from prison.

Expenses to be judgment debt

9. Unless in any case the court otherwise orders, the costs and expenses of and incidental to the arrest and imprisonment of any judgment debtor under this Act shall be added to the judgment debt and be recoverable accordingly.

Commitment of defaulting trustee, etc.

10.—(1) Where the court is satisfied that there has been default by a trustee or person acting in a fiduciary capacity in payment into court of any sum in his possession or under his control, the court may commit such trustee or person to prison for a term which may extend to 6 months:

Provided that no such committal shall be ordered, if it appears to the court that the trustee or person aforesaid has acted innocently in the matter.

(2) Upon payment of the amount due the prisoner shall be immediately released.

Discharge or suspension of order

11. The court or a judge may discharge or vary any order made under this Part, or may suspend its operation.

Imprisonment not to operate as satisfaction

12. No imprisonment under this Act shall operate to satisfy or extinguish any debt, or deprive any person of any right to issue an enforcement order against the property of the debtor.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

PART 2

ARREST BEFORE JUDGMENT

Where defendant may be required to furnish security for appearance

13.—(1) If at any stage of any action, other than an action for the possession of immovable property, against a defendant who carries on business or ordinarily resides within the jurisdiction, the claimant satisfies the court or a judge by evidence upon oath that he has a good cause of action against the defendant, and that the defendant, with intent to prejudice the claimant, or to avoid any process of the court, or to obstruct or delay the enforcement of any judgment that may be made against him —

(a) has absconded or left Singapore;

- (b) is about to abscond or leave Singapore; or
- (c) has disposed of or removed from Singapore his property or any part thereof,

the court or judge may issue an order to arrest the defendant and bring him before the court or a judge to show cause why he should not furnish security for his appearance:

Provided that the defendant shall not be arrested if he pays to the officer entrusted with the enforcement of the order any sum specified in the order as sufficient to satisfy the claimant's claim. Such sum shall be held in deposit by the court until the action is disposed of or until further order.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

(2) Where the defendant fails to show such cause, the court or judge shall order him either to deposit in court money or other property sufficient to answer the claim against him or to furnish security for his appearance at any time when called upon while the action is pending and until satisfaction of any order that may be made against him in the action, or shall make such order as it thinks fit with regard to the sum which may have been paid by the defendant under the proviso to subsection (1).

(3) Every surety for the appearance of a defendant shall bind himself to pay, in default of such appearance, any sum of money which the defendant may be ordered to pay in the action.

Procedure on application by surety to be discharged

14.—(1) A surety for the appearance of a defendant may at any time apply to the court or a judge to be discharged from his obligation and on such application the court or judge shall summon the defendant to appear, or may issue an order for his arrest.

(2) On the appearance of a defendant pursuant to any such summons or order, the court or judge shall discharge the surety from his obligation and call upon the defendant to furnish fresh security.

Procedure where defendant fails to furnish security or find fresh security

15.—(1) Where the defendant fails to comply with any order under section 13 or 14, the court or a judge may order that he be detained in the civil prison until the decision of the action.

(2) No person shall be detained in prison under this section —

- (a) in any case for a period longer than 6 weeks; or
- (b) after he has complied with such order.

Application by defendant

16. A defendant may, at any time after his arrest, apply to the court or a judge to rescind or vary the order made thereunder, or discharge him from custody, and the court or judge may make such order as is just.

PART 3

ATTACHMENT OF PROPERTY BEFORE JUDGMENT

Seizure of property before judgment

17.—(1) If it is shown to the satisfaction of the court or a judge, at any time after the issue of an originating claim, by evidence on oath, that the claimant has a good cause of action against the defendant, and —

- (a) that the defendant is absent from Singapore and his place of abode cannot be discovered;
- (b) that service of an originating claim cannot without great delay or difficulty be effected; or
- (c) that the defendant, with intent to obstruct or delay the enforcement of any judgment which has been or may be made against him, has removed, or is about to remove, or has concealed, or is concealing, or making away with, or handing over to others, any of his movable or immovable property,

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

the court or judge may order that the property of the defendant, or any part thereof, be forthwith seized by the Sheriff of the Supreme Court as a pledge or surety to answer the just demand of the claimant, until the trial of the action and satisfaction of any judgment that may be made against the defendant; but such order shall not constitute the claimant a secured creditor if the defendant is adjudicated bankrupt.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

(2) Any property of the defendant, if in the custody of any officer in the service of the Government, or of any member of the Singapore Armed Forces or of any visiting forces lawfully present in Singapore, in his official capacity shall be seized under subsection (1) only with the consent in writing of the Attorney-General.

(3) If any immovable property is seized under this section, the Sheriff shall forthwith cause the order to be registered under the Registration of Deeds Act 1988, the Land Titles Act 1993 or the Land Titles (Strata) Act 1967.

(4) In a case where the land is subsequently seized under or pursuant to an

enforcement order in satisfaction of judgment in the action, the order of court registered pursuant to such seizure shall have priority as though it had been registered upon the date on which the order registered under this section was registered.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

Court may release property

18. The court or a judge may at any time, on reasonable cause being shown and upon such terms, if any, as to security or otherwise as seem just, release the property seized and order any movable property to be returned.

Order for sale of perishable goods

19. The court or a judge may, at any time pending the trial of the action, order the sale of any property seized under this Part which is of a perishable nature, or which for any other reason it is desirable to sell without delay, and direct the proceeds of such sale to be retained by the Sheriff or paid into court pending the trial of the action.

Property liable to being taken under or pursuant to enforcement order but subject to prior claims

20. Any property so seized, or the proceeds of sale thereof, shall be liable to being taken under or pursuant to an enforcement order in satisfaction of any judgment in the action against the defendant; but it shall be subject to the prior claims of any judgment creditor whose judgment was obtained within one year before the seizure thereof under this Part if the judgment creditor had obtained an enforcement order against the defendant's property before the making of any order under this Part.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

PART 4

DAMAGES FOR IMPROPER ARREST OR ATTACHMENT

Compensation for improper arrest or attachment

21.—(1) If at any subsequent stage of an action in which an order for arrest or attachment of property has been made under this Act it appears to the court that such arrest or attachment was applied for on insufficient grounds, or if the claimant's claim is dismissed and it appears to the court that there was no sufficient ground for instituting the action, the court may, on the application of the defendant, award against the claimant such amount, not exceeding \$500, as it thinks reasonable to compensate the defendant for any injury caused to him by the arrest or attachment.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

(2) An award under this section shall bar any action for damages, but nothing in this section shall preclude the defendant from maintaining an action for damages instead of applying for an award under subsection (1).

PART 5

APPLICATION TO DISTRICT COURTS

Part 1 applies to District Courts, except section 10

22. The provisions of Part 1, with the exception of section 10, shall apply to District Courts, with all necessary modifications, and the powers thereby conferred may be exercised by District Judges and the bailiffs of District Courts in accordance with any rules for the time being in force in the District Courts.

Parts 2, 3 and 4 to apply to District Courts

23.—(1) District Courts shall have the powers of ordering arrest and attachment before judgment given in Parts 2 and 3 with the same effects and consequences:

Provided that any attachment ordered shall extend only to property liable to be seized under a District Court enforcement order for seizure and sale of property.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

(2) The provisions of Part 4 apply to District Courts with all necessary modifications, and the powers thereby conferred may be exercised by District Courts.

Judgment debtor summons

24.—(1) Where a judgment or an order of a District Court is for the recovery or payment of money, whether by instalments or otherwise, the party entitled to enforce it (hereinafter called the judgment creditor) may, subject to such rules as may be prescribed, summon the judgment debtor or, if the judgment debtor is a corporation, an officer of that corporation, to be orally examined before that District Court respecting the judgment debtor's ability to pay or satisfy the judgment debt and for the discovery of property applicable to such payment and as to the disposal which the judgment debtor has made of such property.

Production of books and papers

(2) The judgment debtor or, where the judgment debtor is a corporation, the officer thereof, who has been summoned shall, when called upon, produce all books, papers or documents in his possession or power relating to such property.

Order to attend court

(3) The judgment creditor may issue an order to attend court against any person whom he considers likely to be able to supply information respecting the judgment debtor's ability to pay the judgment debt or respecting his property.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

Judgment debtor not appearing

(4) Whether the judgment debtor or, where the judgment debtor is a corporation, the officer thereof, appears or not, the judgment creditor and other witnesses may be examined on oath respecting the matters aforesaid.

(5) If the judgment debtor or, where the judgment debtor is a corporation, the officer thereof, having been duly served does not appear, the court may —

- (a) order him to be arrested and brought before the court to be examined; or
- (b) make an order against the judgment debtor in the absence of the judgment debtor.

[Act 25 of 2021 wef 01/04/2022]

Order

(6) Upon such examination or non-appearance referred to in subsection (5), the court may order the judgment debtor to pay the judgment debt either —

- (a) in one sum whether forthwith or within such period as the court may fix; or
- (b) by such instalments payable at such times as the court may fix.

Failure to comply with order and notice to show cause

(7) If the judgment debtor makes default in payment according to any such order, a notice in the prescribed form may be issued on the request of the judgment creditor, calling upon the judgment debtor to attend before the court at a time stated in the notice and show cause why he should not be committed to prison for such default.

Commitment to prison

(8) Such notice shall be personally served upon the judgment debtor, and if, on the day so named, or on any subsequent day to which the matter may be adjourned, no sufficient cause is shown by the judgment debtor, the court may commit him to the civil prison for a term which may extend to 6 weeks or until earlier payment of any instalment or instalments or other sum due.

(9) A debtor shall not be committed to prison under this section unless it appears that, since the date of the order directing payment, whether forthwith, or within a specified period or by instalments, he has had sufficient means to comply with the order.

Power to discharge, vary or suspend order

(10) A District Court may discharge or vary any order made under this section, or may suspend its operation.

Powers of Registrar of State Courts

(11) Subject to the Rules of Court and notwithstanding anything in section 2, the powers conferred by subsections (5) and (6) may be exercised by the Registrar of the State Courts sitting in open court.

Power of District Judge to order discharge of debtor

25.—(1) If at any time it appears to the satisfaction of a District Judge that any debtor arrested or confined in prison by order of the District Court is unable from any cause to pay any sum recovered against him (whether by way of satisfaction of a claim or counterclaim or by way of costs or otherwise), or any instalment thereof, and ought to be discharged, the District Judge may order his discharge upon such terms (including liability to rearrest if the terms are not complied with) as the District Judge thinks fit.

(2) Where an order of commitment issued by one District Court has been sent to another District Court for execution, the judge of that other court shall have the same power as the judge of the court in which the order of commitment was made of ordering the discharge of the debtor under this section.

PART 6

FRAUDULENT DEBTORS

Debts incurred by fraud

26. Where a debtor makes any composition or arrangement with his creditors, he shall remain liable for the unpaid balance of any debt which he incurred or increased by any fraud, or for which before the date of the arrangement or composition he obtained forbearance by any fraud, provided the defrauded creditor has not assented to the arrangement or composition otherwise than by proving his debt and accepting dividends.

Penalty for fraudulently obtaining credit, etc.

27. Any person shall in each of the following cases be guilty of an offence and be punished with imprisonment, which may extend to one year, or with fine or with both:

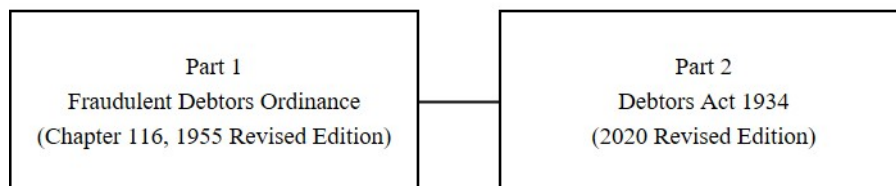
- (a) if in incurring any debt or liability he has obtained credit under false pretences or by means of any other fraud;
- (b) if he has, with intent to defraud his creditors or any of them, made or caused to be made any gift, delivery or transfer of or any charge on his property;
- (c) if he has, with intent to defraud his creditors or any of them, concealed or removed any part of his property since or within 2 months before the date of any unsatisfied judgment or order for payment of money obtained against him.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY

DEBTORS ACT 1934

This Legislative History is a service provided by the Law Revision Commission on a best-efforts basis. It is not part of the Act.

Pictorial Overview of Predecessor Acts



Legislative History Details

PART 1 FRAUDULENT DEBTORS ORDINANCE (CHAPTER 116, 1955 REVISED EDITION)

1. Ordinance 16 of 1923—Fraudulent Debtors Ordinance, 1923

Bill	: G.N. No. 776/1923
First Reading	: 28 May 1923
Second Reading	: 25 June 1923
Third Reading	: 3 September 1923
Commencement	: 26 September 1923

2. **1926 Revised Edition—Ordinance No. 198 (Fraudulent Debtors)**
Operation : 1 August 1926
3. **1936 Revised Edition—Fraudulent Debtors Ordinance (Chapter 26)**
Operation : 1 September 1936
4. **1955 Revised Edition—Fraudulent Debtors Ordinance (Chapter 116)**
Operation : 1 July 1956

PART 2
DEBTORS ACT 1934
(2020 REVISED EDITION)

5. **Ordinance 25 of 1934—Debtors Ordinance, 1934**
Bill : G.N. No. 79/1934
First Reading : 12 February 1934
Second Reading : 16 April 1934
Third Reading : 28 May 1934
Commencement : 1 January 1935
6. **1936 Revised Edition—Debtors Ordinance (Chapter 48)**
Operation : 1 September 1936
7. **Ordinance 31 of 1937—Debtors (Amendment) Ordinance, 1937**
Bill : G.N. No. 2066/1937
First Reading : 30 August 1937
Second Reading : 25 October 1937
Notice of Amendments : 25 October 1937
Third Reading : 25 October 1937
Commencement : 18 November 1937
8. **Ordinance 56 of 1940—Debtors (Amendment) Ordinance, 1940**
Bill : G.N. No. 3363/1940

First Reading	: 14 October 1940
Second and Third Readings	: 6 November 1940
Commencement	: 1 July 1941

9. 1955 Revised Edition—Debtors Ordinance (Chapter 13)

Operation	: 1 July 1956
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10. Ordinance 62 of 1959—State Advocate-General (Transfer of Powers) Ordinance, 1959
(Amendments made by section 5 read with the Schedule to the above Ordinance)

Bill	: 22/1959
First Reading	: 13 August 1959
Second and Third Readings	: 2 September 1959
Commencement	: 11 September 1959 (section 5 read with the Schedule)

11. L.N. 455/1964 (G.N. Sp. No. S 2/1965—Modification of Laws (Debtors) (Borneo States and Singapore) Order, 1964

Commencement	: 24 December 1964
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12. 1970 Revised Edition—Debtors Act (Chapter 19)

Operation	: 1 March 1971
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Note: This Revised Edition incorporated the Fraudulent Debtors Ordinance (Chapter 116, 1955 Revised Edition).

13. Act 34 of 1973—Statutes of the Republic of Singapore (Miscellaneous Amendments) (No. 3) Act, 1973

(Amendments made by section 2 read with item (c) of the Schedule to the above Act)

Bill	: 27/1973
First Reading	: 11 July 1973
Second and Third Readings	: 25 July 1973
Commencement	: 24 August 1973 (section 2 read with item (c) of the Schedule)

14. 1985 Revised Edition—Debtors Act (Chapter 73)

Operation	: 30 March 1987
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15. Act 5 of 2014—Subordinate Courts (Amendment) Act 2014

(Amendments made by section 11(9) read with item 9 of the Schedule to the above Act)

Bill	: 26/2013
First Reading	: 11 November 2013
Second and Third Readings	: 21 January 2014
Commencement	: 7 March 2014 (section 11(9) read with item 9 of the Schedule)

16. 2014 Revised Edition—Debtors Act (Chapter 73)

Operation	: 30 June 2014
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17. Act 40 of 2019—Supreme Court of Judicature (Amendment) Act 2019

(Amendments made by section 28(1) read with item 39 of the Schedule to the above Act)

Bill	: 32/2019
First Reading	: 7 October 2019
Second Reading	: 5 November 2019
Notice of Amendments	: 5 November 2019
Third Reading	: 5 November 2019
Commencement	: 2 January 2021 (section 28(1) read with item 39 of the Schedule)

18. 2020 Revised Edition—Debtors Act 1934

Operation	: 31 December 2021
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19. Act 25 of 2021—Courts (Civil and Criminal Justice) Reform Act 2021

Bill	: 18/2021
First Reading	: 26 July 2021
Second and Third Readings	: 14 September 2021
Commencement	: 1 April 2022

Abbreviations

(updated on 29 August 2022)

G.N.	Gazette Notification
G.N. Sp.	Gazette Notification (Special Supplement)
L.A.	Legislative Assembly
L.N.	Legal Notification (Federal/Malaysian)
M.	Malaya/Malaysia (including Federated Malay States, Malayan Union, Federation of Malaya and Federation of Malaysia)
Parl.	Parliament
S	Subsidiary Legislation
S.I.	Statutory Instrument (United Kingdom)
S (N.S.)	Subsidiary Legislation (New Series)
S.S.G.G.	Straits Settlements Government Gazette
S.S.G.G. (E)	Straits Settlements Government Gazette (Extraordinary)