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2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: China: Hong Kong

Executive Summary

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The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), as well as other laws and policies, states residents have freedom of conscience; freedom of religious belief; and freedom to preach, conduct, and participate in religious activities in public. The Bill of Rights Ordinance incorporates the religious freedom protections of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Falun Gong practitioners reported generally being able to operate openly, however, they reported harassment from groups they said were connected to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and difficulty renting venues for large events, including from the SAR government. Falun Gong practitioners held a rally in October to raise awareness of what they said was 19 years of CCP persecution of the Falun Gong in the Mainland.

Some Hong Kong pastors' exchanges with Mainland counterparts reportedly were negatively affected by changed regulations on the Mainland. Religious leaders reported hosting and participating in interfaith activities, such as a local mosque and a Jewish synagogue maintaining regular interaction between religious leaders of each community.

The U.S. consulate general affirmed U.S. government support for protecting freedom of religion and belief in meetings with the government. The Consul General and consulate general officials met regularly with religious leaders and community representatives to promote religious equality.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.2 million (July 2018 estimate). According to SAR government statistics, there are more than one million followers of Buddhism and more than one million followers of Taoism; 480,000 Protestants; 379,000 Roman Catholics; 100,000 Hindus, and 12,000 Sikhs. According to the World Jewish Congress, about 2,500 Jews live in Hong Kong. According to a 2017 *South China Morning Post* article, there are approximately 25,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints residing in Hong Kong. SAR government statistics estimate the SAR has approximately 300,000 Muslims. Small communities of Baha'is and Zoroastrians also reside in the SAR. Confucianism is widespread, and in some cases, elements of Confucianism are practiced in conjunction with other belief systems. The Falun Gong estimates there are approximately 500 Falun Gong practitioners in Hong Kong.

There are dozens of Protestant denominations, including Anglican, Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Church of Christ in China, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Seventh-day Adventists. The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong recognizes the pope and maintains links to the Vatican.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Under the Basic Law, the Hong Kong SAR has autonomy in the management of religious affairs. The Basic Law calls for ties between the region's religious groups and their mainland counterparts based on “nonsubordination, noninterference, and mutual respect.” The Basic Law states residents have freedom of conscience; freedom of religious belief; and freedom to preach, conduct, and participate in religious activities in public. The Basic Law also states the government may not interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations or restrict religious activities that do not contravene other laws.

The Bill of Rights Ordinance incorporates the religious freedom protections of the ICCPR, which include the right to manifest religious belief individually or in community with others, in public or private, and through worship, observance, practice, and teaching. The Bill of Rights Ordinance states persons belonging to ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities have the right to enjoy their own culture, profess and practice their own religion, and use their own language. The ordinance also protects the right of parents or legal guardians to “ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.” These rights may be limited when an emergency is proclaimed and “manifestation” of religious beliefs may be limited by law when necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the rights of others. Such limitations may not discriminate solely on the basis of religion.

Religious groups are not legally required to register with the government; however, they must register to receive government benefits such as tax-exempt status, rent subsidies, government or other professional development training, the use of government facilities, or a grant to provide social services. To qualify for such benefits, a group must

prove to the satisfaction of the government that it is established solely for religious, charitable, social, or recreational reasons. Registrants must provide the name and purpose of the organization, identify its office holders, and confirm the address of the principal place of business and any other premises owned or occupied by the organization. If a religious group registers with the government, it enters the registry of all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), but the government makes no adjudication on the validity of any registered groups. Religious groups may register as a society and/or tax-exempt organization as long as they have at least three members who hold valid SAR identity documents; the registration process normally takes approximately 12 working days. is not classified as a religious group under the law, as it is registered as a society, under which its Hong Kong-based branches are able to establish offices, collect dues from members, and have legal status.

The Basic Law allows private schools to provide religious education. The government offers subsidies to schools built and run by religious groups, should they seek such support. Government-subsidized schools must adhere to government curriculum standards and may not bar students based on religion, but they may provide nonmandatory religious instruction as part of their curriculum. Teachers may not discriminate against students because of their religious beliefs. The public school curriculum mandates coursework on ethics and religious studies, with a focus on religious tolerance; the government curriculum also includes elective modules on different world religions.

Religious groups may apply to the government to lease land at concessional terms through Home Affairs Bureau sponsorship. Religious groups may apply to develop or use facilities in accordance with local legislation.

The only direct government role in managing religious affairs is the Chinese Temples Committee, led by the secretary for home affairs. The SAR chief executive appoints its members. The committee oversees the management and logistical operations of 24 of the region's 600 temples and provides grants to other charitable organizations. The committee provides grants to the Home Affairs Bureau for disbursement, in the form of financial assistance to needy ethnic Chinese citizens. The colonial-era law does not require new temples to register to be eligible for Temples Committee assistance.

An approximately 1,200-member Election Committee elects Hong Kong's chief executive. The Basic Law stipulates that the Election Committee's members shall be "broadly representative." Committee members come from four sectors, divided into 38 subsectors, representing various trades, professions, and social services groups. The religious subsector is comprised of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, the Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternal Association, the Hong Kong Christian Council, the Hong Kong Taoist Association, the Confucian Academy, and the Hong Kong Buddhist Association. These six bodies are each entitled to 10 of the 60 seats for the religious subsector on the Election Committee. The religious subsector is not required to hold elections under the Chief Executive Election Ordinance. Instead, each religious organization selects its electors in its own fashion. Each of the six designated religious groups is also a member of the Hong Kong Colloquium of Religious Leaders.

Government Practices

During the year, Falun Gong practitioners reported generally being able to operate openly and engage in behavior that remained prohibited elsewhere in the People's Republic of China (PRC), such as distributing literature and conducting public exhibitions. In August, in an ongoing Falun Gong lawsuit against the Hong Kong government to contest a requirement to obtain government approval for the display of posters, a court overturned government decisions to confiscate Falun Gong banners.

Falun Gong practitioners said they suspected that the CCP funded private groups that harassed them at public events. Practitioners also reported continuing difficulties renting venues for large meetings and cultural events from both government and private facilities. According to Falun Gong practitioners, the Hong Kong government, which controls a significant number of large venues in the city, denied Falun Gong members' applications to rent venues, often telling practitioners that the venues were fully booked. Private venues also refused to rent space to the Falun Gong, which Falun Gong practitioners attributed to concerns about harassment by anti-Falun Gong groups that they believed were linked to the central government.

Falun Gong practitioners held a rally on October 1 to raise awareness of what they said was 19 years of CCP persecution of the Falun Gong in the Mainland. The Falun Gong reported that many local political leaders spoke at the rally to support their cause.

The Home Affairs Bureau functioned as a liaison between religious groups and the government.

Senior government leaders often participated in large-scale events held by religious organizations. The SAR government and Legislative Council representatives participated in Confucian and Buddhist commemorative activities, Taoist festivals, and other religious events throughout the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some religious groups expressed concern that new PRC religious affairs regulations that entered into force in February had a negative impact on exchanges and interactions with counterparts in the Mainland. Media reported that Hong Kong Christian churches provided underground churches on the Mainland with monetary support, Bibles, blacklisted Christian literature, theological training, and assistance in founding new churches. Under the new regulations in the Mainland, however, many Hong Kong pastors were suspending or canceling their work with Mainland churches to avoid endangering people there, according to media reports.

Religious groups, some of which received government funding, provided a wide range of social services open to those of all religious affiliations including welfare, elder care, hospitals, publishing services, media and employment services, rehabilitation centers, youth and community service functions, and other charitable activities.

Religious leaders reported hosting and participating in interfaith activities. For example, a local mosque and a local Jewish synagogue maintained regular interaction between religious leaders of each community. Jewish leaders also hosted public events to raise Holocaust awareness.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Consulate general officials, including the Consul General, stressed the importance of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue in meetings with government officials, religious leaders, NGOs, and community representatives. The Consul General and other consulate officials met with Buddhist, Catholic, Taoist, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, and Sikh religious leaders and adherents to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance and to receive reports about the status of religious freedom both in Hong Kong and in the Mainland.

Throughout the year, consulate general officials promoted respect for religious traditions by marking traditional religious holidays and visiting local Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist temples. The Consul General hosted an annual iftar at his residence, and consulate officers participated in other festival celebrations with the Buddhist, Confucian, and Muslim communities. Consulate general officials also participated in Holocaust commemorations. At all these events, consulate general officials stressed in public and private remarks the importance of religious freedom, tolerance, and diversity.

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