

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	465
Land:	Kina
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2016 Report on International Religious Freedom – Kina (Macau)
Udgivet:	15. august 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	7. september 2017

[EN](#) | [DE](#)

- **Source:**
USDOS - US Department of State
- **Title:**
2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - China (Macau)
- **Publication date:**
15 August 2017
- **ecoi.net summary:** Macau: Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2016) [ID 345287]
- **Countries:**
China
- **Original link** <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016/eap/268728.htm>

Recommended citation:

USDOS - US Department of State: 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - China (Macau), 15 August 2017 (available at ecoi.net)

http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/345287/476438_en.html (accessed 25 August 2017)



2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - China (Macau)

Executive Summary

The Basic Law of the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR) grants residents freedom of religious belief, freedom to preach and participate in religious activities in public, and freedom to pursue religious education. The law also protects the right of religious assembly and the rights of religious organizations to administer schools, hospitals, and welfare institutions and to provide other social services. The Freedom of Religion and Worship Law states the government does not recognize a state religion, and explicitly states all religious denominations are equal before the law. The law stipulates religious groups may develop and maintain relations with religious groups abroad. Religious groups continued to report being able to have exchanges with coreligionists on the Mainland without incident.

Many religious groups, including Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and Bahais, provided diverse social services to anyone, regardless of religious affiliation.

U.S. Consulate General Hong Kong and Macau staff stressed the importance of religious freedom and diversity and discussed religious communities' relations with their coreligionists on the Mainland and in Hong Kong in meetings with high-level Macau SAR government officials and civil society representatives.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 597,000 (July 2016 estimate). The SAR Government Information Bureau reports nearly 80 percent of the population practices Buddhism. There are approximately 30,000 Roman Catholics (of whom more than half are foreign domestic workers and other expatriates) and more than 8,000 Protestants. Protestant denominations include the Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Presbyterian Churches. Evangelical Christian and independent local nondenominational churches, some of which are affiliated with Mainland churches, are also present. The government reports smaller religious groups include Bahais (estimated at 2,500 persons), Muslims (estimated at 400 persons), and Falun Gong practitioners (estimated at 50 persons).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Macau Basic Law states residents have freedom of religious belief and the freedom to publicly preach and conduct and participate in religious activities. These rights may be limited in extreme situations for national security reasons. The Basic Law further stipulates that the government shall not interfere in the internal affairs of religious groups or in their relations with their counterparts outside Macau. It bars the government from restricting religious activities that do not contravene the laws of the Macau SAR.

Under the Basic Law, the government of the Macau SAR, rather than the central government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), is charged with safeguarding religious freedom in the SAR. Religious groups coordinate their relations with coreligionists in the PRC through the Central Government Liaison Office (CGLO). The CGLO also engages in dialogue with religious groups in the SAR.

The law states the Macau SAR government does not recognize a state religion and stipulates all religious denominations are equal before the law. The law further provides for freedom of religion, including privacy of religious belief, freedom of religious assembly, freedom to hold religious processions, and freedom of religious education.

Religious groups are not required to register in order to conduct religious activities, but registration enables them to benefit from their legal status. Religious groups register with the Identification Bureau providing their names, identification card numbers, contact information, as well as the group's name and a copy of the group's charter to register. To receive tax-exempt status or other advantages, religious groups register as charities with the Identification Bureau by submitting the same information and documents as are required to register. Several religious groups reported they had tax exemptions for land use and business operations, enabling them to afford to fund charity work and operate schools.

The law guarantees religious organizations may run seminaries and schools, hospitals, and welfare institutions and provide other social services.

Schools run by religious organizations may provide religious education under the law. The Catholic Diocese of Macau runs most educational institutions; only 10 of 77 are public schools, according to government statistics. Within these 10 schools, several require coursework on ethics and/or a world religions course, although no religious education is required in public schools.

The law guarantees religious organizations the right to acquire, use, dispose of, and inherit property.

By law, religious groups may develop and maintain relations with religious groups abroad. The Catholic Church in Macau, in communion with the Holy See, recognizes the pope as its head. The Vatican appoints the bishop for the diocese.

Government Practices

Religious groups were able to apply to media organizations and companies to use mass media outlets (e.g., television or public radio) for religious purposes. No groups reported their applications were denied.

Falun Gong members continued to regularly set up informational sites at public venues without incident.

Some religious groups reported the CGLO supported their activities and exchanges with coreligionists on the Mainland. Others said the government acknowledged and did not obstruct charity work conducted on the Mainland. Religious groups said they retained their ability to conduct activities in cooperation with Mainland partners, but they said their partners from Christian groups and civil society throughout Mainland China faced increased pressure throughout the year. No Macau-based religious groups reported incidents of interference from either the Macau government or the central government in their activities.

The government provided financial support, regardless of religious affiliation, for the establishment of schools, childcare centers, clinics, homes for the elderly, rehabilitation centers, and vocational training centers run by religious groups. The government also continued to refer victims of human trafficking to religious organizations for the provision of support services.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Many religious groups, including Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and Bahais, provided social services to individuals of all faiths.

Public ceremonies and dedications often included prayers by both Christian and Buddhist groups.

The private University of Saint Joseph, an affiliate of the Catholic University of Portugal, offered a Christian studies course that included Catholic seminary students from the Mainland. University staff and students reported the St. Joseph's course was one of the few Catholic courses in which students from Mainland China were able to enroll, and said students faced greater difficulty and substantial restrictions when matriculating in Mainland seminaries. The University of Macau's Philosophy and Religious Studies Program also accepted Mainland students.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. consulate general officers at all levels, including the Consul General, stressed the importance of religious freedom and religious diversity and discussed religious communities' relations with their coreligionists on the Mainland and in Hong Kong in meetings with top Macau SAR officials and civil society interlocutors, including the Catholic Bishop of Macau, Catholic theology professors at local universities, Baptist and Methodist church leaders, Protestant nonprofit organizations, and local Muslim organizations.

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