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Executive Summary

The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), as well as other laws and policies, protect religious freedom, and in practice the government generally respected religious freedom.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Falun Gong practitioners reported an increase in harassment by one pro-Beijing group.

The U.S. consulate general stated U.S. government interest in the full protection of freedom of religion in meetings with the government. Consulate general officers at all levels, including the Consul General, met regularly with religious leaders and community representatives.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.2 million (July 2013 estimate). Hong Kong's Information Services Department data note that approximately 43 percent of the population practice some form of religion. The two most prevalent religions are Buddhism and Taoism, often observed in the same temple. There are approximately 1.5 million Buddhists and Taoists, 480,000 Protestants, 363,000 Roman Catholics, 220,000 Muslims, 40,000 Hindus, 20,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 10,000 Sikhs, and 5,000-6,000 Jews. Confucianism is also prevalent. There are between 300 and 500 practitioners of Falun Gong.

There are approximately 50 Protestant denominations, including Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Christian and Missionary Alliance groups, the Church of Christ in China, Methodists, and Pentecostals. The Hong Kong Catholic Diocese recognizes the Pope. A bishop, priests, monks, and nuns serve Catholics and maintain links to the Vatican.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Basic Law and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. Under

the Basic Law, the HKSAR has autonomy in the management of religious affairs. The Basic Law calls for ties between the region's religious groups and their Mainland counterparts to be based on "nonsubordination, noninterference, and mutual respect." The Basic Law states that 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. These protections 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 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."

The Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) functions as a liaison between religious groups and the government. The government invites all interested groups, including affected organizations or individuals, to provide views on whether proposed measures discriminate on the basis of religion.

Religious groups may apply to the government to lease land at concessionary terms through HAB 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 Hong Kong chief executive appoints its members. The committee oversees the management and operations of 24 of the region's 600 temples. The colonial-era law does not require new temples to register.

The law stipulates that the six largest religious groups in Hong Kong hold 60 seats on the 1,200-member election committee tasked with nominating and voting for the region's chief executive. The groups represented are the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, the Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternal Association, the Hong Kong Christian Council (which represents Protestant denominations), the Hong Kong Taoist Association, the Confucian Academy, and the Hong Kong Buddhist Association.

Religious groups are exempt from the legal requirement that nongovernmental organizations register. Registration for religious groups is needed only if a group seeks government benefits or receives a grant to provide social services. The Falun Gong and similar groups are not classified as religious groups under the law and must register if they wish to establish offices, collect dues from members, or have legal status.

The government offers funding to cover 90 percent of the budget of schools built and run by religious groups, should they seek such support. Subsidized schools may not bar students based on religion, but they may provide religious instruction as part of their curriculum.

Government Practices

Falun Gong representatives asserted that Mainland authorities pressured the HKSAR to restrict the group's activities in the region. Practitioners reported that relevant authorities consistently denied them access to public facilities they wished to rent for functions, usually by stating the facilities were already booked.

Falun Gong representatives maintained regular information displays in high-traffic areas and conducted public protests against the repression of fellow practitioners outside the HKSAR. They reported a significant increase in harassment from a pro-Beijing group called the Hong Kong Youth Care Association (HKYCA) beginning immediately before the July 2012 inauguration of Hong Kong Chief Executive C.Y. Leung. Falun Gong leaders stated that the police did not protect their practitioners when the association's members harassed them, which included at least one case of bodily harm to a Falun Gong member.

Religious belief was not a barrier to public service, and a wide range of faiths were represented in the government, judiciary, and civil service.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, for example, against the Falun Gong. The Falun Gong reported that members of the HKYCA attacked and damaged Falun Gong information sites, slandered Falun Gong with illegal banners, and threatened and harassed practitioners and tourists who stopped by Falun Gong information sites.

Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. Senior government leaders often participated in large-scale events held by religious organizations.

A large variety of faith-based aid groups, including Jewish, Protestant, Muslim, and Catholic groups, provided education services.

Catholic and Protestant clergy from the HKSAR accepted invitations from state-sanctioned patriotic religious associations on the Mainland to teach at religious institutions in China. There were also student exchanges between state-sanctioned religious groups on the Mainland and Hong Kong-based religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Consulate general officers at all levels, including the Consul General, stressed the importance of religious freedom in meetings with HKSAR government representatives. Consulate General representatives met regularly with religious leaders and community representatives to receive reports about the status of religious freedom both in Hong Kong and in the Mainland.

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