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2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - China (Hong Kong)

Executive Summary

The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), as well as other laws and policies, protects religious freedom. The Bill of Rights Ordinance incorporates the religious freedom protections of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Religious groups are exempt from the legal requirement that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) register, and can apply for subsidies and concessionary terms to run schools and lease land. The government invites all religious groups to comment on whether proposed measures discriminate on the basis of religion. Some residents reported mainland authorities encroached on their religious outreach and engagement activities with mainland visitors and students.

There were no reports of significant societal action affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. consulate general affirmed 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 7.1 million (July 2015 estimate). The government's Information Services Department data notes that approximately 43 percent of the population practices some form of religion. The two most prevalent religions are Buddhism and Taoism, often observed in the same temple. According to government statistics, there are approximately 1.5 million Buddhists and Taoists; 480,000 Protestants; 379,000 Roman Catholics; 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. Local Islamic groups state the HKSAR is also home to approximately 300,000 Muslims. Small communities of Bahai and Zoroastrians also reside in the HKSAR. Confucianism is widespread, and in some cases elements of Confucianism are practiced in conjunction with other belief systems. Human rights organizations estimate there are between 500 and 1,000 practitioners of Falun Gong.

There are approximately 50 Protestant denominations, including Anglican, Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance groups, 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; the bishop of Hong Kong and his retired predecessor are the only Catholic cardinals in greater China.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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 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 cannot interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations or restrict religious activities which do not contravene other laws.

The Bill of Rights Ordinance incorporates the religious freedom protections of the ICCPR. 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 Bill of Rights Ordinance states that 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 exempt from the legal requirement that NGOs register with the government. Religious groups are only required to register if they seek 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. Applicants for registration 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. Religious groups may register as a society or tax-exempt organization as long as they have at least three members who hold valid HKSAR identity documents; the registration process normally takes about 12 working days. Falun Gong is not classified as a religious group under the law and must register if the group wishes to establish offices, collect dues from members, or have legal status.

The Basic Law allows private schools to provide religious education. The government offers funding to cover 90 percent of the budget of schools built and run by religious groups, should they seek such support. Government subsidized schools may not bar students based on religion, but they may provide religious instruction as part of their curriculum, which may be mandatory for all students. Teachers, however, may not discriminate against students on account of their religious beliefs. The public school curriculum mandates coursework on ethics and religious studies, with a focus on religious tolerance; the government's curriculum also includes elective modules on different world religions.

Religious groups may apply to the government to lease land at concessionary 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 HKSAR 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 also provides grants to the Home Affairs Bureau for eventual disbursement as financial assistance to needy ethnic Chinese citizens. The colonial-era law does not require new temples to register.

Procedures under the current law have resulted in the six largest religious groups in the HKSAR holding 60 seats on the approximately 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. Many of these groups hold their own internal elections to determine which member(s) will hold seats on the election committee.

Government Practices

In contrast to the previous year, Falun Gong practitioners did not report any incidents of discrimination. Falun Gong practitioners were regularly permitted to maintain information displays in high-traffic areas and conduct public protests against the repression of fellow practitioners in mainland China. The lack of interference in

public displays followed an October 2014 court decision that sustained government officials' actions in 2013 to remove several hundred Falun Gong banners from the streets, with the justification that the group failed to obtain requisite permissions before placing the displays, which is required for all posters regardless of content. The judge dismissed the Falun Gong application, noting the group had never applied for a poster permit. In that case the government only removed posters that had not obtained permits and continued to issue permits for Falun Gong posters without reference to their religious content.

Some religious leaders reported Mainland authorities harassed them during their visits to the Mainland. A Christian NGO stated mainland security agents blocked approximately 100 mainland citizens from traveling to Hong Kong to participate in religious meetings the group organized in March. One pastor from Hong Kong reported mainland authorities told him to cease his ministry to mainland students in Hong Kong.

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

Senior government leaders often participated in large-scale events held by religious organizations. For example, clergy from all major faiths led a prayer or recitation at a Remembrance Day Ceremony to pay respects to all who died during the two World Wars. HKSAR Government and Legislative Council representatives participated in Confucian and Buddhist commemorative activities, Taoist festivals, and other religious events.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Members of the Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant communities participated in a range of social services open to all religious groups, including welfare, elder care, hospitals, publishing services, media and employment services, rehabilitation centers, youth and community service functions, and other charitable activities. Jewish leaders hosted public Holocaust awareness events.

Catholic and Protestant clergy from the HKSAR accepted invitations from state-sanctioned patriotic religious associations on the mainland to teach at religious institutions. There were also student exchanges between state-sanctioned religious groups on the Mainland and HKSAR-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, NGOs, and community representatives to receive reports about the status of religious freedom both in Hong Kong and in the Mainland.

The Consul General met with Buddhist, Taoist, Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim leaders throughout the year to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. In all these interactions, he discussed the work of Hong Kong's Colloquium of Religious Leaders, a local organization aimed at fostering interreligious dialogue and promoting tolerance. He also attended numerous events to commemorate the Holocaust. In each of these interactions, the Consul General voiced support for religious freedom and emphasized the importance of tolerance and community building.

The Consul General met frequently with leaders and members of the local Islamic community. Noting that Hong Kong is one of the only communities in the world in which Sunni and Shia Muslims regularly worship together, the Consul General discussed the community's contributions to the protection of religious freedom. In July he hosted an iftar at which he discussed the importance of religious freedom and cooperative activities to counter violent extremism, as well as the promotion of religious tolerance. In September, the Consul General visited the Ammar Mosque, where he and Islamic Community of Hong Kong leaders discussed the promotion of interfaith dialogue, religious freedom, and community engagement.

Throughout the year, the Consul General marked all major Chinese traditional holidays through regular visits to the SAR's local Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist temples. The consulate general's coverage of his visits on social media platforms, which regularly included captions highlighting the importance of religious freedom, generated widespread local support.

The U.S. Ambassador for International Religious Freedom visited in August and met with leaders of Catholic, Anglican, Sikh, Taoist, and Islamic organizations for discussions regarding practice of faith without restrictions.

The Ambassador also met with local human rights organizations and NGOs to learn more about the freedom of religion in Hong Kong and the Mainland.

Other consulate general officials participated in Holocaust-related events and hosted religious leaders at prominent events.

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