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2019 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 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 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. Falun Gong practitioners continued to hold rallies and protests against Chinese Communist Party (CCP) treatment of Falun Gong practitioners in mainland China. According to Asia News, from September 29 to October 1, the Government Tourism Office projected a slideshow of CCP symbols onto the Ruins of Saint Paul's facade to mark the 70th anniversary of communist rule in China. In response, the Catholic Diocese of Macau stated concerns over the government's use of historically religious sites for secular purposes.

In September the Catholic diocese opened the Redemptoris Mater College for Evangelization to train new seminary students from the region.

In meetings with religious leaders and civil society representatives, representatives from the U.S. Consulate General stressed the importance of religious freedom and tolerance for all religious groups and discussed religious communities' relations with their coreligionists on the mainland and in Hong Kong.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 611,000 (midyear 2019 estimate). According to a Pew Research Center 2010 estimate, 58.9 percent of the population are folk religionists, 17.3 percent Buddhist, 7.2 percent Christian, 1.2 percent other religions (including Hindus, Muslims, and Jews), and 15.4 percent unaffiliated. The SAR Government Information Bureau 2019 yearbook does not provide an estimate for Buddhists but states they are numerous and that individuals often practice a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk religions. According to the yearbook, the majority of the population practices Buddhism or Chinese folk religions. The SAR

Government Information Bureau estimates 5.2 percent of the population (approximately 31,700 individuals) are Roman Catholics, of whom more than half are foreign domestic workers and other expatriates, and 1.3 percent of the population (more than 8,000 individuals) are 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. Various reports estimate the Muslim population at 5,000 to 10,000. Smaller religious groups include Baha'is, who estimate their membership at more than 2,000, and Falun Gong practitioners, who estimate their numbers at 20 to 50 persons.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Basic Law states residents have freedom of religious belief and the freedom to publicly preach as well as conduct and participate in religious activities. These rights may be limited in extreme situations for national security reasons. The Basic Law further stipulates 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 SAR.

Under the Basic Law, the SAR government, rather than the central government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), safeguards religious freedom in the SAR.

The law states there is no official religion in the SAR and stipulates all religious denominations are equal before the law. The law 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 to conduct religious activities, but registration enables them to benefit from legal status. Benefits include exemption from taxation (such as property tax, stamp duty, complementary tax (profit tax), and industrial tax) and financial assistance from the government. Religious groups register with the Identification Bureau, providing the name of an individual applicant and that person's position in the group, identification card number, and contact information, as well as the group's name and a copy of the group's charter. Registered charities receive the same benefits as registered religious groups. Religious groups need to be registered as a charity under a similar or different name in order to provide charitable services.

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

Most public schools do not require religious education. Nonreligious public schools do not offer religious or world religion courses. A small number of religious organizations receive public funding for schools, and under the law, these schools may require religious education. Students may not opt out of taking a religious class if they attend a public institution that has it in the required curriculum.

By law, religious groups may develop and maintain relations with religious groups abroad.

Government Practices

Falun Gong practitioners continued to hold rallies and set up informational sites at public venues without incident. According to the Falun Gong website Minghui.org, in April outside the Ruins of St. Paul's, Falun Gong practitioners set up message boards with information about the history of the group and used megaphones to play recorded messages about persecution of practitioners on the mainland. On July 19, Falun Gong practitioners held a rally and a candlelight vigil to mark the 20th anniversary of the CCP's ban on Falun Gong.

Some religious groups continued to report they retained their ability to conduct charitable activities on the mainland by working through official channels and officially recognized churches.

According to Asia News, from September 29 to October 1, the Government Tourism Office projected a slideshow of CCP symbols onto the Ruins of Saint Paul's facade to mark the 70th anniversary of communist rule in China. In response, the diocese issued a declaration that “the use of historical monuments ought to correspond to its intended character.” According to the article, while the Catholic Church no longer owns the ruins, St. Paul's remains a symbol of Catholic faith in the country for the Church and Catholic believers. In December, during the week prior to the 20th anniversary of the transfer of sovereignty from Portugal to the PRC, the government projected a light show onto the facade, which drew no reaction from the diocese.

The government continued to provide financial support, regardless of religious affiliation, to religious groups to establish schools, child-care centers, clinics, homes for the elderly, rehabilitation centers, and vocational training centers. 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

The Catholic Church in Macau, in communion with the Holy See, continued to recognize the pope as its head. The Vatican appointed the bishop for the diocese.

The Catholic Diocese of Macau continued to run many educational institutions. In September Redemptoris Mater College for Evangelization in Asia opened. According to Vatican media outlets, the college has a mandate to train new seminary students from all over the region, including from the mainland.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. Consulate General representatives in Hong Kong, including the Consul General, stressed the importance of religious diversity and discussed religious communities' relations with their coreligionists on the mainland. They raised these points in meetings with civil society representatives, religious leaders, and nongovernmental organizations.

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