

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	577
Land:	Kina
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: China – Hong Kong
Udgivet:	10. juni 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	2. juli 2020

Document #2031255

USDOS – US Department of State

2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: China - Hong Kong

Executive Summary

The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), as well as other laws and policies, 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 (ICCPR). In February, the SAR government introduced a bill that would have allowed for extradition of SAR residents to other jurisdictions worldwide, including mainland China. Protests against this bill took place regularly throughout the latter half of the year. Some Christian groups used the broader protest movement to highlight what they stated was the high degree of religious freedom in Hong Kong, contrasted with the lack of religious freedom in mainland China and strongly supported the SAR government's eventual withdrawal of the extradition bill. While Christian sources did not express concern about Hong Kong's current level of religious freedom, foreign-based religious freedom advocates expressed fears for the potential future of religious freedom in Hong Kong if the mainland government further encroached on Hong Kong's autonomy. Falun Gong practitioners 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 July with the stated purpose of raising awareness of 20 years of CCP persecution of the Falun Gong in mainland China.

In September two assailants attacked a Falun Gong practitioner after she met with police to discuss a planned Falun Gong demonstration. In November a printing warehouse for the *Epoch Times Hong Kong Edition*, a Falun Gong-associated media outlet, was subject to an arson attack by four masked assailants armed with batons. According to media reports, some Hong Kong Christian churches reduced their physical assistance to counterparts in mainland China for fear of endangering those counterparts but continued to travel there to dine and pray with them. Christian media sources reported that Christian protesters received anonymous messages threatening them and their families with physical violence if they did not stop speaking out against the government. Other sources stated that many other people on both sides of Hong Kong's political divide received similar messages.

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. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Hong Kong in March to meet with religious leaders and promote religious freedom in China.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.2 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to SAR government statistics, there are more than one million followers of Taoism and approximately one million followers of Buddhism; 500,000 Protestants; 389,000 Roman Catholics (The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong recognizes the pope and maintains links to the Vatican.); 100,000 Hindus; and 12,000 Sikhs. According to the World Jewish Congress, approximately 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. SAR government statistics estimate there are 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.

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.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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 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 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 that religious organizations “may maintain and develop their relations with religious organizations and believers elsewhere.”

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. They must, however, 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. The Falun Gong is registered as a society rather than a religious group; as a society, it is 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 that are built and run by religious groups. 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 on concessional terms through Home Affairs Bureau sponsorship. Religious groups may apply to develop or use facilities in accordance with local legislation.

The Chinese Temples Committee, led by the secretary for home affairs, has a direct role in managing the affairs of some temples. The SAR chief executive appoints its members. The committee oversees the management and logistical operations of 24 of the region's 600 temples and gives 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

Protests, including several with over a million participants, took place regularly throughout the latter half of the year. The protests began in response to the SAR government’s introduction of a bill in February that would have allowed for extradition of SAR residents to other jurisdictions worldwide, including mainland China. Participants included a wide variety of civic groups, including some religious groups. Observers said that while the protesters did not highlight religious issues and the majority of the protesters did not claim affiliation to any religious groups, some Christian advocates used the protest movement to highlight what they stated was the high degree of religious freedom in Hong Kong, which they contrasted with the lack of religious freedom in mainland China, also expressing strong support for the SAR government’s eventual withdrawal of the extradition bill. While Christian activists did not express concern about Hong Kong’s current level of religious freedom, foreign based religious freedom advocates expressed fears for the potential future of religious freedom in Hong Kong if the mainland government further encroached on Hong Kong’s autonomy.

During the year, Falun Gong practitioners reported generally being able to operate openly and engage in behavior that remained prohibited in mainland China, including distributing literature and conducting public exhibitions. A court in November heard the government’s appeal of a 2018 decision overturning the government’s confiscation of Falun Gong banners based on a requirement to obtain prior government approval for such displays. The court’s decision remained pending at year’s end. Falun Gong practitioners continued to state they suspected 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 businesses. According to Falun Gong practitioners, the SAR 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. In April a private camping ground agreed to rent space for a Falun Gong conference with more than 1200 participants, of which 800 had planned to stay at the campsite; however, two days before the event, the private venue cancelled.

Falun Gong practitioners held a rally in July with the stated purpose of raising awareness of 20 years of CCP persecution of the Falun Gong in mainland China.

In October police sprayed the front of a mosque with blue dye using a water cannon during a police response to protest activity in the vicinity of the mosque. Government officials, including the chief executive and chief of police, apologized for the incident.

In December Hong Kong police pepper-sprayed prodemocracy protestors who demonstrated in support of Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, and members of other Muslim minority groups in mainland China. The police said the protestors assaulted police officers and threw hard objects at police officers.

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

In September two assailants attacked a Falun Gong practitioner after she met with police to discuss a planned Falun Gong demonstration.

In November a printing warehouse for the *Epoch Times Hong Kong Edition*, a Falun Gong-associated media outlet, was subject to an arson attack by four masked assailants armed with batons. The fire was extinguished with no casualties reported, but a printing press was damaged.

Christian media sources reported that more than 40 Christian protestors received anonymous messages on their WhatsApp accounts threatening them and their families with physical violence if they did not stop speaking out against the government. One of these messages reportedly said, “If you don’t stop voicing your opinion, all the members of your family will die,” and another, “your limbs will be chopped off.” One Christian who received the messages said the anonymous sender or senders knew a great deal of personal information about those to whom they sent the messages. He said he and other recipients did not report the messages to the police because they have lost confidence in the police due to what they perceived as brutality against protestors throughout the year. During the year, many protestors and police officers were anonymously threatened or had their personal information posted online. It was difficult to categorize these incidents as being solely or primarily based on religious identity, as opposed to political activity.

Media reported that Christian churches in Hong Kong provided underground churches in mainland China with monetary support, Bibles, blacklisted Christian literature, theological training, and assistance in founding new churches. Under new regulations in mainland China, however, many Hong Kong pastors were suspending or canceling their work in the mainland to avoid endangering contacts there, according to media reports. Some churches continued to provide support by sending members to dine and pray with Christians across the border, rather than providing more tangible assistance.

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, and Protestant 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.

The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Hong Kong in March where he spoke at the Foreign Correspondents' Club to discuss religious freedom abuses in mainland China. In his remarks, the Ambassador stated that persons in mainland China do not enjoy religious freedom in the way that the people of Hong Kong do, noting that “the Chinese government is at war with faith...It is a war they will not win.” During his visit to Hong Kong, he met with religious leaders, NGO representatives, and religious and cultural studies students and faculty.

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. Consulate officers participated in other festival celebrations with the Buddhist, Confucian, and Muslim communities. At all these events, consulate general officials stressed in public and private remarks the importance of religious freedom, tolerance, and diversity.

ecoi.net summary:

Hong Kong: Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2019)



Country:

China

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#) [\(/en/source/11558.html\)](#)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/hong-kong/> (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/hong-kong/>)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

10 June 2020

Document ID:

2031255

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

