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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China — Hong Kong

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Executive Summary

The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) as well as other laws and policies state 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). On June 30, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) imposed a broad National Security Law (NSL) for the SAR with the stated aim of combating secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign powers. Religious leaders and advocates stated that religious freedom remained unchanged during the year, although they expressed concerns about possible future encroachment by PRC authorities. Religious leaders expressed no public reaction in February when the PRC appointed as the new Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office chief, Xia Baolong, who in 2014 led a suppression campaign against local churches in mainland China’s Zhejiang Province. Sources said most Christian denominations were internally divided on the NSL, with some viewing it as a necessary measure for stability that did not encroach upon religious freedom, and others viewing it as a threat to civil liberties and religious freedom. Other religious leaders said they and their institutions preferred to stay neutral. Cardinal John Tong, leader of the Catholic Church of Hong Kong, who described the NSL as “understandable,” said the NSL would not curtail religious freedom; other religious leaders made similar comments. Tong’s predecessor, Cardinal Joseph Zen, and some other Christian leaders said they were concerned the law would enable the government to curtail religious liberty and freedom of expression in the name of combating subversion. One Protestant leader said the law’s ambiguous wording meant churches raising funds from overseas were open to accusations of colluding with foreign powers and money laundering. Although in-person services were not permitted for much of the year due to COVID-19 restrictions, the government granted churches permission to resume in-person or hybrid (in-person/online) services when health restrictions were lifted. Authorities did not curtail activities of Falun Gong practitioners during the year, but the Hong Kong Falun Dafa Association said it was concerned practitioners could be accused of “subversion of state power” under the NSL and sentenced to prison for activities that were currently permitted, including criticizing the PRC’s persecution of practitioners in mainland China. In May, a phishing campaign targeted Hong Kong Catholic Diocese leadership using a method “typically associated with Chinese state groups.” In an August letter to principals and supervisors of Catholic primary and secondary schools, the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong episcopal delegate for education, Peter Lau, urged them to guard against campus politicization and to “foster the correct values on their national identity, consistent with the Catholic teaching.” In December, police froze the bank accounts, raided two buildings, and arrested two members of the Good Neighbor North District Church, saying the church was under investigation for money laundering and fraud related to a crowd-funding campaign. Police said they froze the church’s assets because the church had underreported donations. The church pastor said the raid and asset freezes were in retaliation for church members’ support for prodemocracy protestors in 2019.

Falun Gong practitioners reported some incidents of harassment and vandalism at public information booths. Religious observers and practitioners stated groups were able to worship in line with their religious norms and without incident. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many groups moved observances online or made provisions within their physical organizations to allow in-person observations while strictly following health precautions. Observers reported Christian churches in Hong Kong provided underground churches in mainland China with spiritual and monetary support – including Bibles and Christian literature and visits from church members – until their shared border closed due to COVID-19 health restrictions. Some churches reported they were able to conduct cross-border online services, while others, including the Catholic Church, reported PRC authorities prohibited attending their online services.

The U.S. consulate general affirmed U.S. government support for protecting freedom of religion and belief in meetings with public officials, religious leaders, and community representatives. In September, the Secretary of State said imposition of the NSL could be used to repress religious believers.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.2 million (midyear 2020 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; 403,000 Catholics; 300,000 Muslims; 100,000 Hindus; and 12,000 Sikhs. The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, which recognizes the Pope and maintains links to the Vatican, reported approximately 620,000 followers (403,000 local residents and 217,000 residents with other nationalities). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reported it has approximately 25,100 members. According to the World Jewish Congress, there are approximately 2,500 Jews, primarily expatriates. 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 Dafa Association estimates there are approximately 500 Falun Gong practitioners.

There are numerous Protestant denominations, including Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, the Church of Christ in China, Seventh-day Adventist, and Pentecostal.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

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 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. If a state of emergency is proclaimed, the rights may not be limited based solely on religion.

On June 30, with the support of Chief Executive Carrie Lam, the PRC National People's Congress (NPC) announced the imposition of an NSL for Hong Kong. The law prohibits secession, subversion, terrorism and “collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security.” The law states that it shall override local Hong Kong laws if there are inconsistencies. The NSL states power to interpret the law lies with the NPC Standing Committee, not local Hong Kong courts.

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, 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, a tax-exempt organization, or both, provided they have at least three members who hold valid SAR identity documents; the registration process normally takes approximately 12 working days. The Falun Dafa Association is registered as a society rather than a religious group; as a society, it may 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.

The NSL includes articles on public education, stipulating that the SAR “shall take necessary measures to strengthen public communication, guidance, supervision and regulation over matters concerning national security, including those relating to schools, universities, social organizations, the media, and the internet.” The NSL states the SAR “shall promote national security education in schools and universities[.]” The SAR and Education Bureau advised that subsidized schools, which include most religious schools, must comply with the NSL.

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 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 composed 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

Religious leaders and advocates stated that religious freedom remained unchanged during the year, although they expressed concerns about possible future encroachment by PRC authorities. Religious leaders expressed no public reaction in February when China appointed as the new head of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office Xia Baolong, who in 2014 led a suppression campaign against local churches in mainland China’s Zhejiang Province.

The Catholic News Agency reported that in April, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Diocese of Hong Kong called for the Chinese government to respond to prodemocracy demonstrators’ demands, including an independent inquiry into police tactics.

Sources said most Christian denominations were internally divided on the NSL – some viewed it as a necessary measure for stability that did not encroach upon religious freedom, but others viewed it as a threat to civil liberties and religious freedom. Other religious leaders said they and their religious institutions preferred to stay neutral on the politically polarizing law.

Several Christian groups and religious leaders issued statements and open letters to the government regarding the NSL. After the May announcement that the NPC would pass the NSL, Cardinal Tong, leader of the Catholic Church of Hong Kong, described the NSL as “understandable” and said it would not curtail religious freedom. He stated the Church’s relationship with the Vatican should not be seen as collusion with foreign forces. Anglican Archbishop Paul Kwong said he supported the NSL, stating, “I cherish our Hong Kong freedoms – in particular the freedom of religion and way of life – as much as anyone, and I don’t think this law will change any of that....What I hope the new law will do is diminish the agitation against the government that last year brought things to a standstill, and to restore law and order.”

In June, the Hong Kong Christian Council released a public statement acknowledging the Hong Kong government’s inability to pass its own NSL legislation but calling for the NPC to abide by the principles of the Basic Law and to “fully guarantee human rights and all types of freedoms (including freedom of expression, publication, information, assembly, religion, association, etc.) that have been enjoyed under the one country, two systems principle.” In May, Cardinal Joseph Zen, Cardinal Tong’s predecessor, told the Catholic News Agency that he worried the NSL would be used to subvert freedom of religion in the SAR. According to the NGO International Christian Concern, Chairman of the Hong Kong Baptist Convention Reverend Hing Choi Lo said in a statement to all member churches in May, *“When the Church thinks it is ‘acting justly and [with] loving mercy,’ but the authorities consider the Church to be overthrowing [the regime], what choices do we have? Do we dance with the authorities’ baton?”*

Although in-person services were not permitted for much of the year due to COVID-19 restrictions, churches petitioned directly to the government to resume in-person or hybrid services and did not report any difficulty in getting approval once health restrictions eased.

During the year, Falun Gong practitioners reported they generally were able to operate openly and engage in behavior that remained prohibited in mainland China, including distributing literature, conducting public exhibitions, sharing information about the group on social media, and accessing and downloading online materials. In June, a practitioner in the Hong Kong Falun Dafa Association said the community was fearful. “Falun Gong practitioners take part in activities exposing the CCP’s crimes and encourage Chinese people to renounce the CCP and its affiliated organizations....These activities can all be considered ‘subversion of state power’ under the so-called National Security Law. Falun Gong practitioners could be sentenced to prison for activities that they are now able to freely partake in on a daily basis.” Falun Gong practitioners continued to state they suspected that the CCP funded private groups that harassed them at informational displays. No Falun Gong rallies were permitted during the year due to COVID-19 health restrictions.

In July, the NGO International Christian Concern stated that in May, a phishing campaign targeted leaders of the Catholic Church. According to a malware analyst, the campaign involved a type of malware “typically associated with Chinese state groups.” The malware files made use of “lure documents” associated with the Catholic Church,

including communications from Vatican officials and news articles from the Union of Catholic Asian News. The NGO said that as the legitimate documents loaded, malware was installed, allowing the hacker remote access and full control of the victim’s computer.

Media reported in August that in a letter to principals and supervisors of Catholic primary and secondary schools, the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong episcopal delegate for education Peter Lau told them to guard against campus politicization. The letter stated in part that school authorities should “enhance students’ awareness to national security and [the importance of] abidance to the law, have them learn and respect the national flag, the national emblem and the national anthem and foster the correct values on their national identity, consistent with the Catholic teaching.” Critics on social media accused the Catholic Diocese of pandering to the PRC. Some members of the Catholic Church leadership said adhering to the law did not invalidate the Church’s vision or mission.

In August, the Justice and Peace Commission, comprised of 18 elected bishops, began to solicit donations to place advertisements in media that included a prayer to preserve democracy in Hong Kong. The Catholic Diocese suspended the donation campaign and pulled the advertisements, stating it did not approve of the method of fundraising or the content of the advertisements.

Media reported that on December 8, police froze the bank accounts of the Good Neighbor North District Church, raided two of its buildings and three homeless shelters it ran, arrested two church members, and ordered the arrests of church pastor Roy Chan and his wife, who were abroad. The police said this was done because the church had raised 27 million Hong Kong dollars (\$3.5 million) through crowd funding campaigns from June 2019 through September 2020 but had publicly declared raising only one-third of that amount. The church stated the investigation was an “act of political retaliation” because some of its members had formed a group called “Safeguard Our Generation” in 2019 in an attempt to deescalate violent clashes between police and prodemocracy protesters.

In December, Radio Free Asia reported that Reverend Chi Wai Wu, general secretary of the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement, said, “The wording of the national security law is ambiguous, which means that churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, are now open to accusations of colluding with foreign powers.” He said police were using the law’s vague definition of “money laundering” to target religious groups that garnered overseas donations or host conferences with overseas church groups. Wu said the targeting of the Good Neighbor North District Church sent “shock waves” through religious communities in Hong Kong and that it was likely intended as a warning to them.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Falun Gong-affiliated publication *Epoch Times* reported that in August, a man reportedly defaced a Falun Gong display several times in one week and said to a Falun Gong practitioner, “The national security law is enacted, yet you dare to show these [Falun Gong materials]?” When the practitioners said he would call the police, the man responded, “Okay, I also want the police to come....See who the police will arrest, you or me?” *Epoch Times* reported that more than a dozen people gathered at the display the following day and cursed at Falun Gong practitioners. According to *Epoch Times*, in December, Falun Gong practitioners reported experiencing harassment at informational booths, as well as multiple instances of vandalism.

Religious observers and practitioners stated they were able to worship consistent with their religious norms and without incident. With COVID-19 measures requiring more restrictions, many religious groups moved observances online or made provisions within their physical organizations to allow in-person observation while strictly following health precautions.

Observers reported Christian churches in Hong Kong provided underground churches in mainland China with spiritual and monetary support – including Bibles and Christian literature and visits from church members – until their shared border closed due to COVID-19 health restrictions. Some Hong Kong churches reported that they were able to conduct cross-border online services, while others, including the Catholic Church, reported PRC authorities prohibited attending their online services.

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 public officials, religious leaders, NGOs, and community representatives. In June, the Consul General met with the Hong Kong Christian Council to discuss the effects of political divisions on congregations within the Hong Kong Christian community. 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.

In September, the Secretary of State said imposition of the NSL “raises the specter that the Party will use the same tactics of intimidation and the full apparatus of state repression against religious believers.”

Throughout the year, consulate general officials promoted respect for religious traditions by marking traditional religious holidays and visiting local Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist temples. In May, the Consul General met the Chief Imam and toured the Blue Mosque, the largest mosque in Hong Kong. At all these events, consulate general officials stressed in public and private remarks the importance of religious freedom, tolerance, and diversity.

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