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2021 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). In 2020, 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. The Falun Dafa Association and some churches active in the prodemocracy movement said the government had grown less tolerant since passage of the NSL. Other religious leaders and advocates stated the NSL did not impair their ability to conduct or attend worship services in conformity with their religious norms; however, they continued to express concern regarding self-censorship and potential PRC targeting of civil society organizations affiliated with religious groups active in the 2019 prodemocracy movement. An unknown assailant physically attacked the head of the Hong Kong Falun Dafa Association, and unknown assailants vandalized and destroyed printing presses at the contracted printer's facility of the Falun Gong-affiliated publication *Epoch Times*. On April 2 and April 3, masked individuals wielding knives and spray paint destroyed eight Falun Gong public information displays in what the group said appeared to be coordinated attacks across several locations. In April, Lo Hing-choi, president of the Baptist Convention and a critic of the NSL, resigned and moved abroad, saying he feared government retaliation if he remained in Hong Kong. In May, the Good Neighbor North District Church, which had supported the prodemocracy movement, ceased operations. There were reports of emigration of other religious leaders. Media reported that on October 31, bishops and religious leaders from mainland China briefed Hong Kong Catholic clergymen on the PRC central government's policy of "Sinicizing" Christianity. Authorities curtailed activities of Falun Gong practitioners during the year, banning their street kiosks under what practitioners said was a pretext of violating COVID-19 protocols. In July, several members of the SAR Legislative Council urged the SAR government to outlaw the Falun Dafa Association under the NSL. In September, an editorial in the PRC-owned media outlet Wen Wei Po called on SAR authorities to ban "cult organizations," a term the PRC government has historically used to refer to Falun Gong, among other groups. In April, Wen Wei Po reported that national security police blocked access to the website of the Taiwan Presbyterian Church for internet users in Hong Kong due to "national security" concerns.

In June, an unknown group hung banners defaming Cardinal Joseph Zen, an outspoken critic of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Catholic Church policy on China, around each of the seven Catholic churches that were planning to hold a memorial Mass for the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing. On May 17, Pope Francis named Reverend Stephen Chow Sau-Yan Bishop of Hong Kong. The Vatican-affiliated outlet *AsiaNews* stated Chow was a "balanced" choice between prodemocracy and pro-Beijing camps. Observers reported Christian churches in Hong Kong continued to provide spiritual and monetary support to underground churches in mainland China.

The U.S. Consul General and staff repeatedly raised concerns regarding the shrinking space for civil society, including religious groups, during meetings with a range of official counterparts in which they also affirmed U.S. government support for protecting freedom of religion and belief. U.S. officials delivered similar messages to religious leaders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and community representatives, as well as in public messages.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.3 million (midyear 2021). According to SAR government statistics, there are more than one million followers of Taoism and approximately one million followers of Buddhism; 800,000 Protestants; 404,000 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 621,000 followers (404,000 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 counterparts in mainland China 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 the "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.

In 2020, the PRC National People's Congress (NPC) imposed the 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 laws if there are inconsistencies. The NSL states power to interpret the law lies with the NPC Standing Committee, not local courts.

PRC State Administration for Religious Affairs regulations entitled "Administrative Measures for Religious Clergy," which came into force in mainland China on May 1, which require clergy to pledge allegiance to the CCP and promote the "Sinicization of religion," do not apply to Hong Kong.

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 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 government curriculum mandates coursework on ethics and religious studies, with a focus on religious tolerance; it also includes elective modules on different world religions.

The NSL stipulates 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.” Pursuant to the NSL, the Education Bureau issued new guidelines on February 4 to incorporate lessons on “national security” into the government curriculum, beginning at the kindergarten level. All schools following the Education Bureau curriculum, including those run by religious groups, must incorporate this material. Private and international schools that do not receive funding from SAR authorities, including those run by religious groups, are not required to follow the new guidelines, but the guidelines state that these schools have the “responsibility to help their students... acquire a correct and objective understanding and apprehension of the concept of national security and the National Security Law.”

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. A colonial-era law does not require new temples to register to be eligible for Temples Committee assistance.

In March, the PRC NPC Standing Committee imposed new measures to amend Hong Kong’s electoral system. Hong Kong’s majority pro-Beijing legislature passed a bill in May incorporating these measures into local legislation. The new electoral system creates a nomination and vetting system for all candidates for political office that Beijing and Hong Kong authorities described as designed to ensure that only “patriots” govern Hong Kong. Hong Kong voters directly elect 20 of the Legislative Council’s newly expanded 90 seats. Forty of the seats are elected by the Chief Executive Election Committee (CEEC) directly, while 30 are selected as representatives of “functional constituencies” from various economic and social sectors. The CEEC comprises 1,500 members from five sectors. The religious subsector, under the third sector (“Grassroots, labor, religious, and other”), is composed of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternal Association, Hong Kong Christian Council, Hong Kong Taoist Association, Confucian Academy, and Hong Kong Buddhist Association. These six bodies are each entitled to 10 of the 60 seats for the religious subsector on the CEEC. 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

The Falun Dafa Association and some churches active in the prodemocracy movement stated the government had grown less tolerant since passage of the NSL. For example, Falun Gong practitioners reported that SAR authorities shut down their public information kiosks on May 27 and 28 on what practitioners said was the pretext of violating COVID-19 prevention rules under Food and Environmental Hygiene ordinances. Other religious leaders and advocates stated the NSL did not impair freedom to conduct or attend worship services, although they continued to express concerns regarding self-censorship and potential PRC targeting of civil society organizations affiliated with religious groups active in the 2019 prodemocracy movement. Archbishop Andrew Chan, the head of the Hong Kong Anglican Church, stated that all religious activities continued to be organized and carried out “as normal” but said preachers were “very cautious to use sensitive terminologies in their homilies.”

Some religious leaders and activists said they were concerned SAR and PRC authorities could target religiously affiliated groups using tactics they repeatedly applied to associations or groups affiliated with the prodemocracy movement. SAR authorities began investigations into and cut existing government ties with civil society groups, pressuring these groups into disbanding. Even after threatened groups disbanded, SAR authorities publicly stated that individuals associated with these groups could face further investigations or arrests. Observers stated these government actions had set numerous legal precedents that undermined fundamental freedoms guaranteed under the Basic Law, including freedom of religion.

During the year, Falun Gong practitioners reported that unknown individuals for months surveilled Sarah Liang, head of the Hong Kong Falun Dafa Association, and a journalist with the Falun Gong-affiliated publication *Epoch Times*. On May 11, an unidentified man struck Liang more than 10 times with a baseball bat, bruising her legs. June Guo, director of the Hong Kong edition of the *Epoch Times*, said the CCP was behind the assault on Liang.

The *Epoch Times* reported that on April 12, unknown assailants vandalized and destroyed printing presses at its contracted printer, forcing the facility to suspend operations for several days. Guo stated the safety of the staff at the outlet's printing plant was a continuing concern. Falun Gong practitioners reported that no one had been prosecuted for the attacks as of year's end.

The Falun Dafa Infocenter reported that on April 2 and April 3, masked individuals wielding knives and spray paint destroyed eight Falun Gong public information displays in what the group said appeared to be coordinated attacks across several locations. At one location, an assailant pushed a volunteer to the ground. Practitioners said they believed the attacks were instigated by pro-CCP groups. The Falun Dafa Infocenter spokesperson said, "These violent acts against a religious minority that unfolded in broad daylight on Hong Kong's streets are a clear indication that basic freedoms, and even the rule of law, are indeed in jeopardy in Hong Kong."

In August, an unknown group falsely claiming to represent the Falun Dafa Association posted on social media that the group would leave Hong Kong. The Falun Dafa Association stated it had no plans to leave the city.

Media reported that Baptist pastor Lo Hing-choi, president of the Baptist Convention since May 2018, resigned and moved abroad in April. According to media, Lo led the Baptist Convention to publicly campaign against the Hong Kong government's extradition law, and Lo also personally criticized the NSL in June 2020. In 2019, he openly supported prodemocracy protests, writing articles comparing protesters to Jews facing persecution in the Old Testament. In July and September 2020, pro-Beijing newspapers such as *Ta Kung Pao* publicly criticized Lo, reportedly causing him to fear repercussions under the NSL if he remained in Hong Kong.

In May, the Good Neighbor North District Church ceased operations. Hong Kong police had launched an investigation into the church in December 2020 for alleged money laundering and fraud, arrested two individuals affiliated with the church, and ordered a freeze of the church's bank accounts. The church's former pastor, Roy Chan, who relocated in 2020 to the United Kingdom, continued to state the investigation was an act of political retaliation because some church members had formed a group called "Safeguard Our Generation" in 2019 in an attempt to deescalate violent clashes between police and prodemocracy protesters. In October, the former pastor said accusations against religious leaders for "inciting subversion" had resulted in self-censorship within local churches and had caused some religious leaders to emigrate.

Reuters reported that on October 31, bishops and religious leaders from mainland China briefed Hong Kong Catholic clergymen on the government's policy of "Sinicizing" Christianity to bring religious doctrine and practice in line with CCP doctrine. Clerics who attended or had knowledge of the meeting said that while individual meetings with counterparts in mainland China had occurred in the past, this was the first formal meeting, and that PRC central government officials had arranged and monitored it.

In June, SAR authorities denied permission for gatherings to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, including the annual vigil in Hong Kong's Victoria Park, but they did not interfere with memorial masses held at seven Catholic churches around the city honoring the victims of the massacre. A spokesperson for the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Diocese, which organized the masses, said that police for the first time questioned the commission about arrangements for the masses and the number of attendees, citing COVID-19 concerns.

Falun Gong practitioners stated they still operated openly and engaged in behavior that remained prohibited in mainland China, including distributing literature, sharing information about the group on social media, and accessing and downloading online materials. No Falun Gong rallies were permitted during the year due to COVID-19 health restrictions, but practitioners continued to publicly gather in small groups, adhering to COVID-19 restrictions. Falun Gong practitioners reported the group gathered in front of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government on July 20 to commemorate the 22nd anniversary of the mass arrest of practitioners in mainland China. Practitioners reported the Hong Kong police instructed them to remove three of their four banners during the event.

Methodist-run Wa Ying College reported difficulties obtaining SAR authorization or funding to renovate school buildings. The *South China Morning Post* reported in May that these difficulties may have stemmed from concerns several legislators had regarding the positions many Methodists and the school allegedly took during the prodemocracy protest movement.

In July, several members of the SAR Legislative Council – including Elizabeth Quat, Wong Kwok-kin, and Holden Chow Ho-ding – urged the SAR government to outlaw the Falun Dafa Association under the NSL. Quat stated the group “aims to subvert state power and should be immediately outlawed,” while Wong called for SAR authorities to freeze the group’s assets. The SAR Security Secretary promised to investigate the group.

On October 7, pro-PRC Hong Kong media HK01 reported that according to a Hong Kong Public Opinion Exchange Association survey conducted between September 1 and October 5 among 8,855 respondents, 72 percent believed Falun Gong was an “anti-China and Hong Kong” organization that violated the NSL and should be banned. At a press conference announcing the survey’s findings, Legislative Council member Eunice Yung stated Falun Gong should be banned in Hong Kong “as soon as possible.” Yung said that Falun Gong had established an “anti-CCP platform” in Hong Kong and called for authorities to investigate the group’s funding sources.

On September 14, an editorial in the PRC-owned media outlet Wen Wei Po identified the Buddhist movement called the True Buddha School as a “cult” and a national security risk. The editorial requested SAR authorities create legislation banning “cult organizations,” a term that the PRC government has historically used to refer to Falun Gong and the True Buddha School, among other groups, “to prevent Hong Kong from becoming a haven for filth.”

In April, Wen Wei Po reported that national security police blocked access to the website of the Taiwan Presbyterian Church for internet users in Hong Kong due to “national security” concerns. A pastor of the Church told Radio Free Asia the interference was done in retaliation for the Church’s support of the 2019 prodemocracy movement in Hong Kong and said, “Blocking the site like this is a warning sign that Beijing is extending more mainland China-style restrictions to Hong Kong.”

In the Legislative Council election in December, Peter Koon, the then secretary general of the Province of the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui (the Anglican Church in Hong Kong), won one of the 40 seats in the Legislative Council elected by the CEEC.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In June, an unknown group hung banners around each of the seven Catholic churches that were planning to hold a memorial Mass for the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing. The banners contained photographs of Cardinal Joseph Zen, an outspoken critic of the CCP, with the word “devil,” as well as slogans, including “A Cult Has Invaded the Faith” and “Incitement in the Name of Worship.”

Media reported that on May 17, Pope Francis named Reverend Stephen Chow Sau-Yan as the new Bishop of Hong Kong. Chow, head of Hong Kong’s Jesuit order, replaced Cardinal John Tong, who had served as interim bishop since 2019. According to one senior cleric, “The security law has made the job a lot more tricky and the pressure is intense.” The Holy See and the PRC do not have formal diplomatic relations, but the 2018 Sino-Vatican agreement reportedly gives both Chinese authorities and the Holy See a role in the process of appointing bishops in mainland China. According to Reuters, Vatican officials said the agreement did not apply to Hong Kong; however, some senior clergy stated the PRC was seeking to extend its control over the Diocese of Hong Kong. The Vatican-affiliated outlet *AsiaNews* stated Chow was a “balanced” choice between prodemocracy and pro-Beijing camps. On May 18, Chow told media, “Religious freedom is our basic right. We want to really talk to the government not to forget that. It is important to allow religious freedom, matters of faith – not just Catholic – but any religion should be free.”

Observers reported Christian churches in Hong Kong continued to provide underground churches in mainland China with spiritual and monetary support, including Bibles and Christian literature and visits from church members. 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 individuals in mainland China from attending their online services.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Consul General and staff repeatedly raised concerns about the shrinking space for civil society, including religious groups, during meetings with a range of official counterparts, although there is no specific Hong Kong government office that regulates religious behavior. Consulate General Hong Kong officials, including the Consul General, stressed the importance of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue in these meetings with public officials.

Consulate general officials, including the Consul General, also continued to meet with a wide range of religious organizations, including Buddhist, Catholic, Taoist, Jewish, Muslim, Falun Dafa, Sikh, and Protestant religious leaders and adherents, to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance and to receive reports regarding the status of religious freedom both in Hong Kong and in mainland China. They also met with NGOs and community representatives regarding the same topics.

Throughout the year, consulate general officials promoted respect for religious traditions by marking traditional religious holidays and visiting local Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist temples and other religious sites. At all these events, consulate general officials stressed in public and private remarks the importance of religious freedom, tolerance, and diversity. Consulate social media posts celebrating International Religious Freedom Day on October 27 and highlighting the Consul General's visits to religiously affiliated civil society organizations also reflected U.S. government support for the value placed on religious freedom in Hong Kong.

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