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2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: China — Macau

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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. These rights may be limited in extraordinary situations for national security reasons. The law protects the right of religious assembly and stipulates religious groups may develop and maintain relations with religious groups abroad. 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. In June, a group of 25 representatives from various religious groups, accompanied by officials from Beijing's Central Government Liaison Office in Macau, visited Zhejiang Province in mainland China. The office said the visit was designed to maintain good relations between the PRC government and Macau's religious communities. Some religious activists in the diaspora called on the PRC government to allow for greater religious expression in Macau, as provided for by the Basic Law. Some activists on social media criticized the meeting as insincere, stating the PRC has frequently cracked down on religious expression.

In May, a video showing more than 100 primary school students from a prominent Macau Catholic school singing "We Are the Successors of Communism" in front of a Catholic site sparked discussion online on the ability of religious schools to preserve their religious values and implement their educational mission while conforming to government ideology. Falun Gong practitioners reported they continued to be able to discuss their beliefs openly with Macau residents.

In virtual meetings with civil society representatives, religious leaders, and nongovernmental organizations, representatives from the U.S. Consulate General Hong Kong and Macau stressed the importance of religious diversity and religious freedom 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 630,000 (midyear 2021). According to a 2015 estimate by the research group Association of Religion Data Archives, 48.1 percent of the population are folk religionists, 17.3 percent Buddhist, 11 percent Taoist, 4.5 percent Catholic, 2.5 percent other Christian, 1.2 percent other religious groups (including Hindus, Muslims, and Jews), and 15.4 percent nonreligious. The SAR Government Information Bureau 2021 yearbook states the majority of the population practices Buddhism or Chinese folk religions. The yearbook does not provide an estimate for Buddhists, but it states they are numerous and individuals often practice a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk religions. The SAR Government Information Bureau estimates 4.5 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, of whom almost half are foreign domestic workers and other expatriates, and 2.5 percent of the population is Protestant. 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 officially recognized 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 extraordinary 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 PRC, safeguards religious freedom in the SAR.

PRC State Administration for Religious Affairs regulations entitled “Administrative Measures for Religious Clergy,” which came into force on the mainland May 1, requiring clergy to pledge allegiance to the CCP and promote the “Sinicization of religion,” do not apply to Macau.

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. In 2020, the SAR enacted bylaws to the 2009 NSL allowing the Judiciary Police to create four new national security branches: the National Security Information Division; the National Security Crime Investigation Division; the National Security Action Support Division; and the National Security Affairs Integrated Service Division, with investigative authority over religious groups and personnel, among others.

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 receiving financial assistance from the government. Religious groups are required to 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 separately as a charity under a similar or different name in order to provide charitable services.

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

There is no religious education in public schools. A small number of schools run by religious organizations receive no public funding, and these schools may require students to receive religious education.

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

Government Practices

In June, a group of 25 representatives from various religious groups, accompanied by officials from Beijing’s Central Government Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in Macau, visited Zhejiang Province in mainland China. The delegation included representatives of Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism, Taoism, and the Baha’i Faith. The office stated the goal of the visit was to maintain good relations between the PRC government and Macau’s religious communities. Some religious activists in the diaspora community called on the PRC government to allow for greater religious expression in Macau, as provided for by the Basic Law. Some activists on social media criticized the meeting as insincere, stating the PRC has frequently cracked down on religious expression.

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.

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

In May, a video went viral on social media showing more than 100 primary school students from the Catholic Pui Ching Middle School singing “We Are the Successors of Communism” in front of the Ruins of St. Paul’s, the site of a former Catholic Church, as part of events commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. The event sparked discussion online among Macau residents about whether religious schools could preserve their religious values and implement their educational mission while conforming to government ideology. Some educators stated they believed that politics should not be brought onto campus, and that patriotism did not equate to loving the Communist Party.

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.

Falun Gong practitioners reported they continued to be able to discuss their beliefs openly with Macau residents.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. Consulate General representatives were unable to visit Macau during the year due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. U.S. Consulate General representatives in Hong Kong, including the Consul General, stressed the importance of religious diversity and religious freedom and discussed religious communities’ relations with their coreligionists on the mainland and in Hong Kong. They raised these points in virtual meetings with civil society representatives, religious leaders, and nongovernmental organizations.

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