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Executive Summary

The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), as well as other laws and policies, protect religious freedom, and in practice the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. Falun Gong practitioners reported an increase in harassment by one pro-Beijing group.

There were few reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The consulate general clearly stated U.S. government interest in the full protection of freedom of religion in meetings with the government. Consulate general officers at all levels, including the consul general, met regularly with religious leaders and community representatives.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the Census and Statistics Department, the population is 7 million. Information Services Department data note that approximately 43 percent of the population practice some form of religion. The two most prevalent religions are Buddhism and Taoism, often observed in the same temple. There are approximately 1.5 million Buddhists and Taoists, 480,000 Protestants, 363,000 Roman Catholics, 20,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 220,000 Muslims, 40,000 Hindus, 10,000 Sikhs, and 5,000-6,000 Jews. Confucianism is also prevalent, although few believers practice Confucianism as a formal religion. There are between 300 and 500 practitioners of Falun Gong, a self-described spiritual discipline.

There are approximately 600 Taoist and Buddhist temples (including temples affiliated with Tibetan Buddhist schools), 800 Christian churches and chapels, five mosques, seven synagogues, one Hindu temple, and one Sikh temple.

There are approximately 1,400 Protestant congregations, representing 50 denominations, including Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Christian and Missionary Alliance groups, the Church of Christ in China, Methodists, and Pentecostals. The Hong Kong Catholic Diocese recognizes the Pope. A bishop, priests, monks, and nuns serve Catholics and maintain links to the Vatican.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Basic Law and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. Since transferral of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China (PRC) on July 1, 1997, the Basic Law provides the legal framework for the HKSAR. Under "one country, two systems," the HKSAR has a high degree of autonomy in all matters except foreign relations and defense. Under the Basic Law, the HKSAR has autonomy in the management of religious affairs. The Basic Law calls for ties between the region's religious groups and their mainland counterparts to be based on "nonsubordination, noninterference, and mutual respect." 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 Bill of Rights Ordinance incorporates the religious freedom protections of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These protections 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 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."

The Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) functions as a liaison between religious groups and the government. The government invites all interested groups, including affected organizations or individuals, to provide views on whether proposed measures discriminate on the basis of religion.

The only direct government role in managing religious affairs is the Chinese Temples Committee, which the secretary for home affairs leads. The chief executive appoints its members. The committee oversees the management and operations of an estimated 24 of the region's 600 temples. The colonial-era Chinese Temples Ordinance does not require new temples to register.

Religious groups may apply to the government to lease land at concessionary (less than market value) terms through HAB sponsorship. Religious groups may apply to develop or use facilities in accordance with local legislation.

The Election Committee Ordinance stipulates that the six largest religious groups in Hong Kong hold 60 seats on the 1,200-member election committee tasked with nominating and voting for the region's chief executive. The groups represented are the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternal Association, Hong Kong Christian Council (which represents Protestant denominations), Hong Kong Taoist Association, the Confucian Academy, and the Hong Kong Buddhist Association.

Religious groups are exempt from the Societies Ordinance, which requires that nongovernmental organizations register. Registration for religious groups is needed only if a group seeks government benefits or receives a grant to provide social services. Spiritual movements such as the Falun Gong are not classified as religious groups and must register under the Societies Ordinance if they wish to establish offices, collect dues from members, or have legal status.

The government offers funding to cover 90 percent of the budget of schools built and run by religious groups, should they seek such support. Subsidized schools may not bar students based on religion, but they may provide religious instruction as part of their curriculum.

The government observes Christmas and the Buddha's birth as public holidays.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom, and the government generally respected religious freedom in practice. However, there were reports of restrictions on the Falun Gong.

Falun Gong representatives asserted that mainland authorities pressured the HKSAR to restrict the group's activities in the region. The PRC government banned the Falun Gong under an "anti-cult" provision in the criminal law in 1999. Practitioners also reported that relevant authorities in Hong Kong consistently denied them access to public facilities they wished to rent for functions, usually because administrators reported the facilities to be booked previously. According to Falun Gong representatives, when they tried to rent commercial space, the Beijing authorities also pressured owners not to rent.

Falun Gong representatives maintained regular information displays in high-traffic areas and conducted public protests against the repression of fellow practitioners outside the HKSAR. They reported a significant increase in harassment from a pro-Beijing group called the Hong Kong Youth Care Association beginning immediately before the July inauguration of Hong Kong Chief Executive C.Y. Leung. Falun Gong leaders reported that the police did not protect their practitioners when the association's members harassed them. Other spiritual movements, including Xiang Gong and Yan Xin Qigong, were free to practice.

Religious belief was not a barrier to public service, and a wide range of faiths was represented in the government, judiciary, and civil service.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Beyond increasing harassment of Falun Gong practitioners, there were few reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. Senior government leaders often participated in large-scale events held by religious organizations.

The Jewish community reported few acts of anti-Semitism during the year. However, the Jewish community expressed concerns regarding the hate-filled sermons of visiting speakers before some gatherings of Hong Kong's generally peaceful Muslim community.

A large variety of faith-based aid groups, including Jewish, Protestant, Muslim, and Catholic groups, provided education services.

State-sanctioned patriotic religious associations on the Mainland invited Catholic and Protestant clergy from the HKSAR to teach at religious institutions in China. There were also student exchanges between state-sanctioned religious groups on the Mainland and Hong Kong-based religious groups.

Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant communities participated in a range of social services, including welfare, elder care, hospitals, and other charitable activities.

The Taoist community requested that Lao-tse's birthday be made a public holiday. The imam of one of Hong Kong's major Muslim communities suggested in the media that Eid al-Fitr be made a public holiday as well.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Consulate general officers at all levels, including the consul general, stressed the importance of religious freedom in meetings with HKSAR government representatives. Consulate general representatives met regularly with religious leaders and community representatives to hear about the status of religious freedom both in Hong Kong and in the mainland.