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## 2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - China (Macau)

### 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 to pursue religious education. The law also protects religious assemblies and the rights of religious organizations to run schools, hospitals, and welfare institutions and to provide other social services. The Freedom of Religion and Worship Law states the government does not recognize a state religion, explicitly notes all religious denominations are equal before the law, and stipulates that religious groups may develop and maintain relations with religious groups abroad.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

The U.S. Consulate General in Hong Kong and Macau engaged with government, religious, and civil society leaders on religious freedom. Consulate general staff stressed the importance of religious freedom in meetings with top Macau SAR government officials and civil society representatives.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 593,000 (July 2015 estimate). The Government Information Bureau of the Macau SAR reported nearly 80 percent of the population practices Buddhism. There are approximately 30,000 Roman Catholics (of whom over half are foreign domestic workers and other expatriates) and more than 8,000 Protestants. Protestant denominations include the Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Presbyterian Churches. There are also evangelical groups and independent local nondenominational churches, some of which are affiliated with mainland churches. The government reports smaller religious groups include Bahais (estimated at 2,500 persons), Muslims (estimated at 400 persons), and Falun Gong practitioners (estimated at 50 persons).

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal Framework

The Macau Basic Law states, "Macau residents shall have freedom of religious belief, and freedom to preach and to conduct and participate in religious activities in public." These rights may be limited for national security reasons in extreme situations. The Basic Law further stipulates that the government shall not interfere in the internal affairs of religious groups or in the relations religious groups maintain with 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 government of the Macau SAR, rather than the central government of the People's Republic of China (PRC), is charged with safeguarding religious freedom in the SAR. Religious groups coordinate their relations with coreligionists in the PRC through the Central Government Liaison Office (CGLO). The CGLO also engages in dialogue with religious groups in the SAR.

The Basic Law's provisions for the protection of religious freedom are further delineated in the Freedom of Religion and Worship Law, which states the Macau SAR government does not recognize a state religion and stipulates all religious denominations are equal before the law. The law further provides for freedom of religion, including privacy of religious belief, freedom of religious assembly, freedom to hold religious processions, and freedom of religious education. The law specifically guarantees religious organizations may run seminaries and schools, hospitals, and welfare institutions and provide other social services. Schools run by religious organizations may provide religious education. The law also guarantees religious organizations the right to acquire, use, dispose of, and inherit property.

The law allows religious groups to register directly with the Identification Bureau. Applicants must supply their names, identification card numbers, and contact information, as well as the group's name and a copy of the group's charter to register. Registration is not required to conduct religious activities, and it does not automatically confer tax-exempt status or other advantages, though several religious groups reported they had tax exemptions for land use and business operation, enabling them to afford to fund charity work and operate schools.

The law stipulates religious groups may develop and maintain relations with religious groups abroad. The local Catholic Church, in communion with the Holy See, recognizes the pope as its head. The Vatican appoints the bishop for the diocese.

## **Government Practices**

The government provided financial support, regardless of religious affiliation, for the establishment of schools, childcare centers, clinics, homes for the elderly, rehabilitation centers, and vocational training centers run by religious groups. The government also continued to refer victims of human trafficking to religious organizations for the provision of support services.

Religious groups can apply to media organizations and companies to use mass media (e.g., television or public radio) for religious purposes. No groups reported their applications were denied.

Some religious groups reported the CGLO supported their activities and exchanges with coreligionists in the mainland. Others said the government acknowledged and did not obstruct charity work conducted on the mainland.

## **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Relations among the various religious groups were good according to sources across different denominations and affiliations, as well as civil society groups. Many religious groups, including Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and Bahais, provided extensive social services available to anyone regardless of religious affiliation. Falun Gong members regularly set up informational sites in public venues without incident.

Public ceremonies and dedications often included prayers by both Christian and Buddhist groups.

The private University of Saint Joseph (formerly the Macau Inter-University Institute), an affiliate of the Catholic University of Portugal, offered a Christian studies course that included Catholic seminary students from the mainland. The University of Macau's Philosophy and Religious Studies Program also accepted mainland students.

## **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. consulate general affirmed U.S. government interest in the full protection of freedom of religion in meetings with the government and civil society leaders. Consulate general officers at all levels, including the Consul General, stressed the importance of religious freedom in meetings with top Macau SAR officials and civil society interlocutors.

The consulate general also worked with Hong Kong-based Islamic organizations in support of their activities to promote their ability to establish a house of worship in Macau.

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