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2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: China: Macau

Executive Summary

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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. The law also protects the right of religious assembly and the rights of religious organizations to administer schools, hospitals, and welfare institutions and to provide other social services. The law states the government does not recognize a state religion and explicitly states all religious denominations are equal before the law. The law stipulates religious groups may develop and maintain relations with religious groups abroad. Falun Gong continued to hold rallies and protests of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) treatment of Falun Gong practitioners in Mainland China.

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

In meetings with religious leaders and civil society representatives, representatives from the U.S. Consulate General in Hong Kong and Macau stressed the importance of religious freedom and tolerance for all religious groups 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 606,000 (July 2018 estimate). The latest SAR yearbook does not provide an estimate for Buddhists but states they are numerous and that individuals often practice a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk religions. Other sources say the majority of the population practices Buddhism or Chinese folk religions. The SAR Government Information Bureau estimates there are approximately 30,000 Roman Catholics, of whom more than 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. Evangelical Christian and independent local nondenominational churches, some of which are affiliated with 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 above 2,000, and a small group of Falun Gong practitioners, with some estimates 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 extreme 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 Macau SAR.

Under the Basic Law, the Macau SAR government, rather than the central government of the People's Republic of China, safeguards religious freedom in the SAR.

The law 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.

Religious groups are not required to register in order to conduct religious activities, but registration enables them to benefit from legal status. Religious groups 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 to register. To receive tax-exempt status or other advantages, religious groups register as charities with the Identification Bureau by submitting the same information and documents as are required to register.

The law 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 under the law. No religious education is required in public schools.

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

Government Practices

Falun Gong members continued to hold rallies and set up informational sites at public venues without incident. In July Falun Gong practitioners held a rally to protest the CCP’s persecution of Falun Gong members on the Mainland and a candlelight vigil to commemorate deceased practitioners.

Some religious groups reported they retained their ability to conduct charitable activities on the Mainland by working through official channels and officially recognized churches. There were reports that Mainland students could not attend local seminaries.

The Catholic Diocese of Macau continued to run many educational institutions.

The government provided financial support, regardless of religious affiliation, for the establishment of schools, child-care 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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. Consulate General representatives in Hong Kong, including the Consul General, stressed the importance of religious diversity and discussed religious communities’ relations with their coreligionists on the Mainland. They raised these points in meetings with civil society interlocutors, including the Catholic Bishop of Macau, Catholic nongovernmental organizations, and Protestant clergy.

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ecoi.net summary:

Macau: Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2018)

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