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Executive Summary

The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), as well as other laws and policies, protects religious freedom. The Bill of Rights Ordinance incorporates the religious freedom protections of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Religious groups are exempt from the legal requirement that nongovernmental organizations register, and can apply for subsidies and concessionary terms to run schools and lease land. The government invites all religious groups to comment on whether proposed measures discriminate on the basis of religion.

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

The U.S. consulate general affirmed 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

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.2 million (July 2014 estimate). Hong Kong's Information Services Department data notes 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, 220,000 Muslims, 40,000 Hindus, 20,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 10,000 Sikhs, and 5,000-6,000 Jews. Confucianism is also prevalent, and in some cases elements of Confucianism were practiced in conjunction with other religions. There are between 300 and 500 practitioners of Falun Gong.

There are approximately 50 Protestant 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 and maintains links to the Vatican.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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 Basic Law also states the HKSAR cannot interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations or restrict religious activities which do not contravene other laws.

The Bill of Rights Ordinance incorporates the religious freedom protections of the UN 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 Bill of Rights Ordinance states that 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 "manifestation" of religious beliefs may be limited by law when necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the rights of others. Such limitations may not discriminate solely on the basis of religion.

Religious groups may apply to the government to lease land at concessionary terms through Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) sponsorship. Religious groups may apply to develop or use facilities in accordance with local legislation.

The only direct government role in managing religious affairs is the Chinese Temples Committee, led by the secretary for home affairs. The Hong Kong Chief Executive appoints its members. The committee oversees the management and logistical operations of 24 of the region's 600 temples and provides grants to other charitable organizations. The committee also provides grants to the Home Affairs Department for eventual disbursement as financial assistance to needy ethnic Chinese citizens. The colonial-era law does not require new temples to register.

Procedures under the current law have resulted in the six largest religious groups in Hong Kong holding 60 seats on the approximately 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, the Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternal Association, the Hong Kong Christian Council (which represents Protestant denominations), the Hong Kong Taoist Association, the Confucian Academy, and the Hong Kong Buddhist Association. Many of these groups hold their own internal elections to determine which member will hold a seat on the election committee.

Religious groups are exempt from the legal requirement that nongovernmental organizations register with the government. Religious groups are only required to register if they seek government benefits, such as tax-exempt status, rent subsidies, government training, the use of government facilities, or other professional development training, or receive a grant to provide social services. The Falun Gong and similar groups are not classified as religious groups under the law and must register if they wish to establish offices, collect dues from members, or have legal status.

The Basic Law allows private schools to provide religious education. The government offers funding to cover 90 percent of the budget of schools built and run by religious groups, should they seek such support. Government subsidized schools may not bar students based on religion, but they may provide religious instruction as part of their curriculum, which may be mandatory for all

students. Teachers, however, may not discriminate against students on account of their religious beliefs.

Government Practices

Falun Gong representatives stated that mainland authorities pressured the HKSAR to restrict the group's activities in the region. Practitioners reported that relevant authorities consistently denied them access to public facilities they wished to rent for functions, usually by stating the facilities were already booked. The group, however, was regularly permitted to maintain information displays in high-traffic areas and conduct public protests against the repression of fellow practitioners outside the HKSAR.

In April Falun Gong members reported violations of their right to free speech when Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) officials removed approximately 130 Falun Gong banners and nearly 500 media boards from the streets, with the justification that the group failed to obtain permission before placing the displays. Falun Gong members challenged the FEHD's decision in court on the basis of free speech protections contained in the Basic Law. This lawsuit was a continuation of a case Falun Gong practitioners originally submitted in 2013, when practitioners requested a stay of FEHD's enforcement actions against the group's existing displays in protest areas.

In October a judge of the High Court's Court of First Instance sustained the FEHD's enforcement actions to remove posters, writing "the requirement for permission does not interfere with the applicants and their fellow Falun Gong practitioners' 'right to freedom and expression'" as protected in Hong Kong's human rights law or Basic Law. The judge dismissed the Falun Gong suit, noting the group had never applied for a poster permit.

The HAB functioned as a liaison between religious groups and the government. The government invited all interested groups, including affected organizations or individuals, to provide views on whether proposed measures discriminate on the basis of religion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Falun Gong reported disputes with the private, pro-Beijing Hong Kong Youth Care Association (HKYCA). These disputes took the form of a "poster war" in which both groups sought prominent placement for their own messages.

Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Members of the Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant communities participated in a range of social services open to all religious groups, including welfare, elder care, hospitals, publishing services, media and employment services, rehabilitation centers, and other charitable activities. Jewish leaders hosted public Holocaust awareness events. The chief imam and Islamic scholars hosted events and lectures open to the public, and taught courses on both Islam and history.

Senior government leaders often participated in large-scale events held by religious organizations. For example, clergy from all major faiths led a prayer or recitation at a Remembrance Day Ceremony to pay respects to all who died during the two World Wars.

Catholic and Protestant clergy from the HKSAR accepted invitations from state-sanctioned patriotic religious associations on the Mainland 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.

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 receive reports about the status of religious freedom both in Hong Kong and in the mainland.

The Consul General met with Buddhist, Taoist, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim leaders throughout the year. For example, he attended numerous events to remember the Holocaust, celebrated Hindu Diwali, and supported local imams through U.S. exchange programs. Other consulate officials participated in Islamic culture festivals, hosted religious leaders at prominent events, and visited various Christian charity centers and programs. These events highlighted U.S. government support for religious freedom and tolerance.

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