

# MACAU 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## 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. Bylaws to the National Security Law (NSL) give the Judiciary Police investigative authority over religious groups and personnel.

Most religious groups in the SAR maintained close ties with the PRC government. During the year, multiple provincial government delegations from the mainland met with local Roman Catholic and Buddhist religious leaders during visits to the SAR to discuss religious affairs. Religious delegations from the SAR also visited the mainland to foster ties and cooperation. Some religious activists in the diaspora called on the PRC government to allow greater religious expression in the SAR, as provided for by the Basic Law.

The Catholic Church in Macau continued to recognize the Pope as its head. Falun Gong practitioners reported they continued to be able to discuss their beliefs openly with Macau residents but had reduced their public activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In virtual meetings with SAR government officials, civil society representatives, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), 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 of Macau at 635,000 (midyear 2022). The SAR government estimates the total population at 677,000. According to a 2022 estimate by the research group Association of Religion Data Archives, as of 2020, 58.7 percent of the population are folk religionists, 17.3 percent Buddhist, 4.9 percent Catholic, 1.6 percent Protestant, 15.8 percent nonreligious, and less than 2 percent other religious groups, including other Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Taoists, and Jews.

The SAR Government Information Bureau 2021 yearbook states a 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 4.7 percent of the population are Catholic (approximately 32,000), of whom almost half are foreign domestic workers and other expatriates, and 1.2 percent of the population are Protestant (approximately 8,000). Protestant denominations include 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, the majority of whom, according to the Association of Religion Data Archives, are Sunni. 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.

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. Under the SAR's NSL bylaws, the Judiciary Police has four national security branches that have investigative authority over religious groups and personnel, among others: 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.

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 must 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 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 operated 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**

Most religious groups in the SAR maintained close ties with the PRC government. During the year, multiple provincial government delegations from the mainland met with local religious leaders during visits to the SAR. According to a press release of the Guangdong Provincial Ethnic and Religious Commission, on May 23-26, the commission and the Guangdong Provincial Institute of Ethnic and Religious Studies visited the SAR. The commission said that the purpose was to discuss “the basic situation of religion in Macau,” and how religious groups could support the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area initiative. The Guangdong delegation met with SAR government agencies and Buddhist, Catholic, Christian evangelical, Taoist, and Muslim organizations.

According to a Facebook post, on September 4, a group of approximately 100 Buddhist representatives from the SAR, along with officials from the PRC’s Liaison Office, visited Guangdong Province for cultural exchange. During the visit, Master Jie Sheng, president of the Macau Buddhist International Federation and president of the Macau Buddhist Association, called on participants to support the PRC policy of “loving the motherland and Macau” in the context of promoting Buddhism.

Some religious activists in the diaspora called on the PRC government to allow greater religious expression in the SAR, as provided for by the Basic Law.

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**

The Catholic Church in Macau continued to recognize the Pope as its head. The Holy See 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, although they also indicated their public activities had diminished due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some media reports portrayed Falun Gong members negatively.

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

The U.S. government was represented in Macau by the U.S. Consulate General, Hong Kong and Macau, located in Hong Kong. Macau's strict COVID-19 travel restrictions limited consulate general representatives' visits to Macau as well as their ability to engage directly with civil society representatives and religious leaders during the year. In virtual meetings with SAR government officials, civil society representatives, and NGOs, consulate general representatives in Hong Kong, including the Consul General, continued to stress the importance of religious diversity and religious freedom and discussed religious communities' relations with their coreligionists on the mainland and in Hong Kong.