

HONG KONG 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), as well as other laws and policies, 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 (ICCPR). In 2020, Beijing imposed a broad National Security Law (NSL) on Hong Kong with the stated aim of combating secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign powers.

Religious leaders and religious rights advocates stated religious practice remained largely intact during the year, although some religious groups reported facing greater pressure, and stated they were self-censoring politically sensitive content from their services and not appointing clergy deemed to be critical of the government. In May, Hong Kong national security police arrested Cardinal Joseph Zen, the former Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong and an outspoken defender of civil rights in the SAR and mainland China on suspicion of “collusion with foreign forces.” In October, a court convicted Protestant Pastor Garry Pang of sedition for disturbing an NSL-related court hearing in January and sentenced him to 12 months’ imprisonment. Multiple Catholic Church leaders, including Bishop Stephen Chow, said the space for freedom of expression in Hong Kong was “diminishing.” Some Catholic missions took steps ranging from placing their property holdings under local ownership to localizing their boards and corporate registrations in order to protect their property from the SAR authorities’ potentially targeting churches using the NSL’s provision against foreign collusion and their power to seize assets.

The Falun Dafa Association stated the government used the NSL to harass Falun Gong practitioners, including during the period prior to President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping’s July visit to the SAR. Falun Gong practitioners stated, however, that they still operated openly and engaged in behavior that remained prohibited in mainland China. In August, a Legislative Council member and other pro-Beijing politicians demonstrated outside the courthouse in support of a man on trial for assaulting Falun Gong practitioners.

During the year, the government increased control over religious education in schools. In May, the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong announced that no Catholic churches in the city would hold memorial masses on June 4 to honor the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, citing concerns the masses could violate the NSL. This was the first time that churches did not hold memorial masses since the 1989 massacre. In November, leaders from mainland China's state-affiliated Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) and leading Catholic clergy from Hong Kong held a virtual conference to discuss "Sinicizing" the church.

Religious leaders reported hosting and participating in interfaith activities, some of which the religious groups characterized as "patriotic." In June, media reported the Wong Tai Sin Temple became the first major religious venue in the SAR to hold a national flag-raising ceremony, which the temple stated was done to "promote Chinese culture and display our patriotism." Media reported Gratia Christian College instituted mandatory "national security education" courses. Observers reported Christian churches in Hong Kong continued to provide spiritual and monetary support to underground churches in mainland China.

The U.S. Consul General and consular staff regularly met with a range of government officials managing religious affairs to obtain more information on government policies and to advocate for greater religious freedom and tolerance. U.S. officials repeatedly raised concerns regarding the arrest of religious figures and the shrinking space for civil society, including religious groups, during meetings with official counterparts, religious leaders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and community representatives, as well as in public messages. U.S. officials publicly marked religious holidays, attended religious events, and used social media to demonstrate support for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.3 million (midyear 2022). According to SAR government statistics from July 2022, there are more than one million followers of Taoism and more than one million followers of Buddhism; 480,000 Protestants; 379,000 Catholics; 300,000 Muslims; 100,000 Hindus; and 12,000 Sikhs. The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, which recognizes the Pope and maintains links to the Vatican, reported approximately 621,000 followers (404,000 local residents and 217,000 residents with other nationalities). The

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reported it has approximately 25,100 members. According to the World Jewish Congress, there are approximately 2,500 Jews, primarily expatriates. Small communities of Baha'is and Zoroastrians also reside in the SAR. Confucianism is widespread and, in some cases, elements of Confucianism are practiced in conjunction with other belief systems. The Falun Dafa Association estimates there are approximately 500 Falun Gong practitioners.

There are numerous Protestant denominations in the SAR, including Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, the Church of Christ in China, Seventh-day Adventist, and Pentecostal groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Basic Law states 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 government may not interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations or restrict religious activities that do not contravene other laws. The Basic Law calls for ties between the region's religious groups and their counterparts in mainland China based on "nonsubordination, noninterference, and mutual respect." The Basic Law states that religious organizations "may maintain and develop their relations with religious organizations and believers elsewhere."

The Bill of Rights Ordinance incorporates the religious freedom protections of the ICCPR, which 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 states 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 the "manifestation" of religious beliefs may be limited by law when necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals, or the rights of others. If a state of emergency is proclaimed, the rights may not be limited based solely on religion.

The NSL prohibits secession, subversion, terrorism, and “collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security.” The law states that it shall override local laws if there are inconsistencies. The NSL states power to interpret the law lies with the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, not with local courts.

Religious groups are not legally required to register with the government. They must, however, register to receive government benefits such as tax-exempt status, rent subsidies, government or other professional development training, use of government facilities, or a grant to provide social services. To qualify for such benefits, a group must prove to the satisfaction of the government that it is established solely for religious, charitable, social, or recreational reasons. Registrants must provide the name and purpose of the organization, identify its office holders, and confirm the address of the principal place of business and any other premises the organization owns or occupies. If a religious group registers with the government, it enters the registry of all NGOs, but the government makes no adjudication on the validity of any registered groups. Religious groups may register as a society, a tax-exempt organization, or both, provided they have at least three members who hold valid SAR identity documents; the registration process normally takes approximately 12 working days. The Falun Dafa Association is registered as a society rather than a religious group; as a society, it may establish offices, collect dues from members, and have legal status.

Government tax regulations provide that any group, including religious groups, involved in activities deemed to endanger national security would not be recognized as a charitable organization.

The Basic Law allows private schools to provide religious education. A small percentage of government-funded schools are government-run; most government-funded schools are operated by religious groups, with the remainder operated by nonreligious charitable organizations. Government-subsidized schools must adhere to government curriculum standards and may not bar students based on religion, but they may provide nonmandatory religious instruction as part of their curriculum. Teachers may not discriminate against students because of their religious beliefs. The government curriculum mandates coursework on ethics and religious studies, with a focus on religious tolerance; it also includes elective modules on different world religions.

The NSL stipulates the SAR “shall take necessary measures to strengthen public communication, guidance, supervision and regulation over matters concerning national security, including those relating to schools, universities, social organizations, the media, and the internet.” All schools following the Education Bureau curriculum, including private institutions and those run by religious groups, must incorporate lessons on “national security” into the curriculum, beginning at the kindergarten level. Private and international schools that do not receive funding from SAR authorities, including those run by religious groups, are not required to follow the new guidelines, but the guidelines state that these schools have the “responsibility to help their students...acquire a correct and objective understanding and apprehension of the concept of national security and the National Security Law.”

Religious groups may apply to the government to lease land on concessional terms through Home Affairs Bureau sponsorship. Religious groups may apply to develop or use facilities in accordance with local legislation.

The Chinese Temples Committee, led by the Secretary of the Home Affairs Bureau, oversees the management and logistical operations of 24 of the region’s 600 temples and gives grants to other charitable organizations. The SAR Chief Executive appoints its members. The committee provides grants to the Home Affairs Bureau for disbursement in the form of financial assistance to needy ethnic Chinese citizens. A colonial-era law does not require new temples to register to be eligible for Temples Committee assistance.

The Chief Executive Election Committee (CEEC) is composed of 1,500 members drawn from five sectors, divided into 40 subsectors, representing various trades, professions, and social services groups. The religious subsector, under the third sector (“Grassroots, labor, religious, and other”), is composed of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternal Association, Hong Kong Christian Council, Hong Kong Taoist Association, Confucian Academy, and Hong Kong Buddhist Association. These six bodies are each entitled to 10 of the 60 seats for the religious subsector on the CEEC. The religious subsector is not required to hold elections under the Chief Executive Election Ordinance. Instead, each religious organization selects its electors according to its own rules. Each of the six designated religious groups is also a member of the Hong Kong Colloquium of Religious Leaders.

Government Practices

Media reported that on May 11, Hong Kong national security police arrested Cardinal Joseph Zen, the former Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong and an outspoken defender of civil rights in the SAR and mainland China, on suspicion of alleged “collusion with foreign forces,” an offense under the NSL carrying a potential life sentence. At year’s end, Zen had not been formally charged but remained on bail in connection with that allegation. Local and international media reported Zen’s NSL arrest led to fears that other religious figures who supported the prodemocracy movement could face similar prosecutions. Media outlets said the arrest would further discourage religious leaders and organizations from speaking out on political issues. *Vatican News* reported that in a separate case, authorities also charged Zen and five others with the non-NSL-related offense of failing to register the now-dissolved 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund as a “society” under Hong Kong’s colonial-era Societies Ordinance. Zen was a trustee of the fund, which provided medical aid, legal advice, and financial relief for individuals arrested during the 2019 prodemocracy protests in the SAR. *Vatican News* reported that on November 25, authorities convicted Zen and the five others and fined them each \$2,500 to \$4,000 Hong Kong dollars (\$320-\$510).

In April, police arrested Garry Pang, a Protestant pastor, and charged him under a colonial-era sedition law for disrupting the proceedings at an NSL-related court hearing in January by applauding the defendant in the courtroom. Police filed a second sedition charge against Pang in connection with videos he uploaded to YouTube between 2020 and 2022 in which he commented on proceedings in Hong Kong’s courts. On October 27, a court convicted Pang and sentenced him to 12 months’ imprisonment.

There were reports that some Catholic missionary societies and religious orders took steps, including placing their property holdings under local ownership and localizing their boards and corporate registrations in order to protect them from the risk that SAR authorities could target churches by invoking the NSL’s provision against foreign collusion and the power of SAR authorities to order seizure of assets. The Christian-Missionary Alliance restructured by reorganizing itself into separate entities to prevent the government from freezing the assets of the whole organization.

The Falun Dafa Association stated the government used the NSL to harass Falun Gong practitioners. For example, Falun Gong practitioners reported that in the period prior to General Secretary Xi Jinping's July visit to Hong Kong for the 25th anniversary of the handover from Great Britain, several editors of the Falun Gong-affiliated publication *Epoch Times* received telephone calls from individuals claiming to be police officers and asking whether Falun Gong practitioners would protest during Xi's visit. Falun Gong practitioners stated, however, that they still operated openly and engaged in behavior that remained prohibited in mainland China, including distributing literature, sharing information about the group on social media, and accessing and downloading online materials. Local officials, citing COVID-19 restrictions, denied the group permission to display banners and posters and to set up street kiosks. No Falun Gong rallies were permitted during the year due to COVID-19 health restrictions, but practitioners, adhering to COVID-19 protocols, continued to publicly gather in small groups.

According to Sarah Liang, head of the Falun Dafa Association, on March 31, she received an email from a person claiming to be a Hong Kong national security officer who stated Liang had violated the NSL and could be "extradited from other jurisdictions," a reference to her being abroad at the time. Hong Kong police later stated they did not send the email and condemned it as an individual illegally impersonating an officer.

According to the Falun Dafa Infocenter, on December 1, a court sentenced Hu Aimin to two weeks in prison, suspended for two and a half years, for destroying Falun Dafa stalls and belongings in 2020. During Hu's trial, his lawyer argued Falun Dafa was an illegal organization and that it was Hu's duty as a patriotic citizen to stop the group. Pro-Beijing Legislative Council member Priscilla Leung was one of the proposed expert witnesses for the defense in the case on how Falun Dafa's activities "violated the NSL," although the judge did not permit her testimony. During the trial, Leung's fellow Legislative Council member Bill Tang and other pro-Beijing politicians stood outside the courthouse chanting pro-Hu slogans, beating a drum, and holding banners calling Hu a national hero.

The Falun Dafa Infocenter reported that on January 26, the West Kowloon Court sentenced Ke Yanzhan to two years and nine months in prison for involvement in the physical assault of a Falun Gong practitioner in 2019 as she was leaving a police station, where she had gone to discuss an upcoming parade. The victim

suffered bruising and a head wound that required medical treatment. The trial of two accused accomplices continued as of year's end.

On June 2, a court ruled that Falun Gong practitioner Poon Lianhua was guilty of resisting or obstructing a public officer and illegally displaying bills or posters on government land. The case originated in 2013, when Poon refused to surrender banners criticizing the government that she had hung without permission on the footpath of the Chief Executive's Office.

In January, *Ta Kung Pao*, a newspaper controlled by the central government's liaison office in Hong Kong, published a series of articles arguing that the colonial-era government favored Protestant and Catholic churches at the expense of other religions, including Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. The newspaper cited pro-Beijing politicians as calling for Hong Kong authorities to establish a Religious Affairs Committee or to create new regulations that would enable the authorities to supervise all religious institutions and scrutinize their funding sources. The articles accused some religious figures, including Cardinal Zen, of inciting their followers against the Hong Kong government. The articles also cited certain pro-Beijing figures who described Falun Gong as a "cult" and called for the group to be banned. According to media reports, some Christian leaders worried the articles could signal new government oversight of religious groups was coming, although pro-Beijing lawmaker and Anglican Canon Peter Koon denied any such plans existed.

Reuters reported that in a series of meetings in late 2021 to March 2022, Monsignor Javier Herrera-Corona, then serving as the Vatican's unofficial representative in Hong Kong, told the SAR's Catholic missionary groups the freedoms they had enjoyed for decades no longer existed. Per media reports, the monsignor warned his colleagues that as the People's Republic of China (PRC) tightened its control over the city, they needed to protect their missions' property, files, and funds. Herrera-Corona also reportedly warned that closer integration with mainland China in coming years could lead to mainland-style restrictions on religious groups.

In January, the Hong Kong Education Bureau added an item to its School Administration Guide stating, "schools should not compel students to receive religious education or partake in religious rituals/activities" and that "parents may

submit individual applications for exemption from religious education or rituals/activities for their children.” Religious leaders and activists said they feared the new guideline as applied to religious schools receiving government funding would make it very difficult for religious schools to operate.

In May, the *Washington Post* reported religious leaders and religious rights advocates stated the NSL did not impair their freedom to conduct or attend worship services in conformity with their religious norms, although they reported practicing increased self-censorship, particularly avoiding political topics in their sermons. A 2021 study by the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement released in 2022 found that more than one-third of churches said they adjusted the content of their sermons due to the social and political situation in the city. According to an article in the *Washington Post*, religious institutions were less likely to appoint clergy deemed to be critical of the government. The article reported Hong Kong’s Evangelical Lutheran Church issued an internal memo suggesting only pastoral candidates unlikely to create problems with the government should be considered for positions.

In May, the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong announced that no Catholic churches in the city would hold memorial masses on June 4 to honor the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, breaking with the annual tradition that stretched back more than three decades. Diocese officials cited concern from staff of the Diocese Justice and Peace Commission, which organized the masses, that the masses could violate the NSL.

On April 21, Father Vincent Woo, a priest of the Diocese of Hong Kong and a canon lawyer, told Eternal Word Television Network, a U.S.-based Catholic cable television station, that the CCP increasingly used ideological tactics such as reeducation and propaganda to control freedom of religion in Hong Kong. Woo stated that many Christian leaders were reluctant to speak out against the CCP’s actions for fear of being detained.

In June, Bishop Stephen Chow, the most senior Catholic official in Hong Kong, wrote in the Catholic Diocese’s weekly newspaper the *Sunday Examiner*, “[O]ur freedom and expression, which we had taken for granted, seems [to be] diminishing,” likening the situation to the “tight and awkward environment” of plants growing in a crack in a street. In an interview with a local Catholic news

outlet, Chow said, “The difficulty of the national security law lies in not knowing where the red line is... Experts and law enforcers might have a different understanding... Everyone needed to know where the boundaries were so they would know how to express themselves.”

On November 18, the state-affiliated CCPA issued a press release stating that on November 15-16, CCPA leaders from mainland China and leading Catholic clergy from Hong Kong, including Bishop Chow, virtually held the second “Mainland-Hong Kong Catholic Sinicization Theology Sharing and Exchange Conference.” Participants discussed “Sinicizing” the church based on Vatican II’s Charter of the Doctrine of Revelation in a manner that was “compatible with socialist society.”

On June 22, the *Epoch Times*, the main Falun Gong newspaper, stopped publishing the *Epoch Weekly* because the Hong Kong Office for Film, Newspaper, and Article Administration did not process its August 2021 registration application. Authorities gave no explanation for not processing the application.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religious groups, some of which received government funding, provided a wide range of social services open to individuals regardless of religious affiliation, including welfare, elder care, hospitals, publishing services, employment services, rehabilitation centers, youth and community service functions, and other charitable activities. SAR officials reportedly attended some of those activities to show the government’s support for those religious groups.

According to an August telephone survey of 1,004 Hong Kong residents by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, more than half responded and rated the degree of religious freedom in the SAR as 7.3 out of 10, an increase of 0.5 point compared with the same period in 2021.

Religious leaders reported hosting and participating in interfaith activities, some of which the groups characterized as “patriotic.” For example, media reported that nearly 100 Buddhist, Catholic, Confucian, Muslim, Christian, and Taoist religious leaders attended a seminar on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Hong Kong’s handover to China. On June 27, media outlets reported Wong Tai Sin Temple, the most popular Taoist temple in Hong Kong, became the first major

religious venue in the SAR to hold a national flag-raising ceremony. The temple, which built a platform specifically for future flag-raising ceremonies, stated this was done to “promote Chinese culture and display our patriotism.”

Media reported Gratia Christian College, a private, Protestant-affiliated, postsecondary institution, instituted “national security education” courses, which in 2020 became compulsory for all universities. Students were required to pass a national security test at the end of the course. College president Chui Hong-sheung told the *Christian Times*, “It is a fundamental biblical truth that citizens should comply with government laws.”

Observers reported Christian churches in Hong Kong continued to provide underground churches in mainland China with spiritual and monetary support, including Bibles and Christian literature and visits from church members. Some Hong Kong churches reported that they were able to conduct cross-border online services, while others, including the Catholic Church, reported PRC authorities prohibited individuals in mainland China from attending their online services.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Consul General and consular staff repeatedly raised concerns regarding the arrest of religious figures and the shrinking space for civil society, including religious groups, during meetings with a range of official counterparts, although there is no specific Hong Kong government office regulating religious behavior. In these meetings, consulate general officials, including the Consul General, stressed the importance of religious pluralism, tolerance, and the role religious groups played in addressing social issues.

Consulate general officials, including the Consul General, also continued to meet with a wide range of religious organizations, including Buddhist, Catholic, Taoist, Jewish, Muslim, Falun Dafa, Sikh, and Protestant religious leaders and adherents to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance and to receive reports regarding the status of religious freedom both in Hong Kong and in mainland China. They also met with NGOs and community representatives regarding the same topics.

Throughout the year, consulate general officials promoted respect for religious traditions by marking traditional religious holidays and visiting local Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist temples and other religious sites. At these events, consulate general officials stressed in public and private remarks the importance of religious freedom, tolerance, and diversity. Consulate general social media posts celebrating International Religious Freedom Day on October 27 and highlighting the Consul General's visits to religiously affiliated civil society organizations also communicated the U.S. government's support for religious freedom in Hong Kong. The Department of State exchange alumni association in Hong Kong and Macau organized a five-month youth program that brought participants to visit (in person or through virtual visits) the Kowloon Mosque, Hindu Temple, and cemeteries of different religions as part of efforts to promote respect for the diversity of religions in Hong Kong. The consulate used social media to engage the public on religious freedom issues.