HONG KONG 2023 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, the central government imposed a broad National Security Law (NSL) on Hong Kong with the stated aim of combating secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign powers.

The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Freedom House reported religious freedom was generally respected in Hong Kong, but the organization downgraded Hong Kong's freedom of expression and belief rating during the year "due to evidence that the broader crackdown on dissent has prompted some churches to self-censor sermons and curtail other religious activities." According to the report, Falun Gong adherents were free to practice in public but faced counterdemonstrations and harassment by groups with ties to the Chinese Communist Party. At year's end, the trial of 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" remained pending. In March, the Hong Kong Taoist Association canceled a scheduled parade to celebrate "Taoist Day" in favor of a small, private event after police did not approve organizers' request to hold the march. At a conference of Protestant leaders in April, participants said government retaliation for

religious groups' participation in social movements, the COVID-19 pandemic, the NSL, and emigration from Hong Kong since 2020 adversely affected local churches. According to a November report from the NGO Hong Kong Watch, some religious leaders said religious schools in the SAR, under pressure from the Hong Kong government, were "diluting religious education" due to new NSL and "patriotic" education mandates.

In April, Stephen Chow, Roman Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong, met with Roman Catholic Bishop of Beijing Joseph Li Shan in Beijing and wrote afterwards in the Hong Kong diocese's official publication that the catechism states "the duty of the citizen is to cooperate with the government and to contribute to the welfare of society in an atmosphere of truth, justice, joint responsibility and freedom." Chow's comments drew mixed reactions. The Catholic News Agency for Asia published an opinion piece stating Chow's visit to Beijing reflected the suppression of religious freedom in Hong Kong, but the Christian Times cited a Hong Kong Baptist University scholar saying that Chow's remarks merely affirmed the Catholic Church's view of patriotism as loving "the people who live in this country" rather than love for specific "political groups." In November, Bishop Li of Beijing, president of the government-affiliated Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), attended a theological conference in Hong Kong. According to media reports, at the conference, Li promoted the "Sinicization" of faith and stressed the need to more closely combine Catholic faith and Chinese culture.

Religious leaders reported hosting and participating in interfaith activities, some of which the religious groups characterized as patriotic. Amid controversy among their members about separation of church and state, the Buddhist Association, Anglican Church, and Muslim community flew People's Republic of China (PRC) flags in September and October to

celebrate PRC National Day, and religious leaders made statements about the role of religion in supporting the government and promoting patriotism and national prosperity. 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 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, NGOs, and community representatives, as well as in public messages. Throughout the year, U.S. officials attended religious events and organized public outreach events to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.3 million (midyear 2023). 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 593,000 followers (395,000 citizens and 198,000 residents of 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, 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, to 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 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 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 a sponsorship from the Home and Youth Affairs Bureau. 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 and Youth 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 and Youth Affairs Bureau for disbursement in the form of financial assistance to individuals in need. 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 of 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

As of year's end, the trial of 91-year-old Cardinal Joseph Zen on charges that he violated the NSL by "colluding with foreign forces" remained pending. Zen, the former Bishop of Hong Kong and an outspoken defender of civil rights in the SAR and mainland China, remained free on bail, following his arrest in December 2022. Zen had to surrender his travel documents, including his passport, to Hong Kong authorities as a condition of his bail; however, in January, the Hong Kong government allowed Zen to travel to the Vatican to attend the funeral of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and media reported he met privately with Pope Francis.

Media outlets reported that on March 20, a court sentenced Alan Keung, founder of independent media outlet Free HK Media and known as "Pastor Keung," and two others to 10 months in prison for selling a "seditious book" that discussed the 2019 prodemocracy protests.

In its *Freedom in the World 2023* report, the NGO Freedom House stated that religious freedom was generally respected in Hong Kong, but the organization downgraded Hong Kong's freedom of expression and belief rating from 4/4 in 2022 to 3/4 in 2023 "due to evidence that the broader crackdown on dissent has prompted some churches to self-censor sermons and other religious activities." According to the report, Falun Gong adherents were free to practice in public but faced counterdemonstrations and harassment by groups with ties to the Chinese Communist Party. In an interview with the *Catholic Reporter* in November, Benedict Rogers, chief executive of the UK-based rights NGO Hong Kong Watch, said, "It's fair to say … that freedom of worship, narrowly defined, is still intact. People in Hong Kong are still free to go to church, to the mosque, to the temple or the

synagogue, to go to places of worship, and to access sacred scriptures and religious texts and literature." He added, however, "It's almost impossible to find clergy who will preach in their sermons on anything relating, explicitly or implicitly, to human rights, human dignity, freedom or justice. This essentially means co-option, coercion and corruption of religion."

Vision Times reported that on April 21, a court sentenced Hu Aimin and Chow Wing-lam to 15 weeks and nine weeks in prison, respectively, for vandalizing six Falun Gong information booths in 2021. On April 3, a court acquitted a third defendant in the case, Zhou Jinshen, due to insufficient evidence.

Local media reported that in March, the Hong Kong Taoist Association canceled a scheduled parade to celebrate "Taoist Day." Organizers instead held a religious assembly open only to members in a small soccer field in Kowloon. The association said it had expected approximately 1,600 persons to take part in the parade. An organizer told media outlets the group moved the event because police did not approve organizers' request to hold the march, but police officials did not reply to media inquiries about whether they objected to the demonstration. Government officials and legislative council members attended the stadium rally.

The local outlet *Christian Times* reported that on April 17, the Jiandao Theological Seminary held a conference on "Shaping the Future of the Church in Hong Kong." At the conference, which brought together more than 740 pastors, lay leaders, and seminarians, the heads of Hong Kong's three largest Protestant denominational coalitions – the China Christian Evangelistic Association, Hong Kong Baptist Convention, and Hong Kong Federation of Chistian and Missionary Alliances – called for church leaders to display flexibility in the face of dwindling numbers and government

pressure. Participants said government retaliation for religious groups' participation in social movements, the COVID-19 pandemic, the NSL, and emigration from Hong Kong since 2020 all adversely affected local churches. According to the dean of Jiandao Theological Seminary, Cai Shaoqi, in recent years, the overall number of worshippers had dropped by 15 to 25 percent, while donations dropped 10 to 20 percent, and the number of pastors dropped 5 to 10 percent. In a closed-door meeting, leaders of seven different denominations discussed the challenges churches faced under the NSL and the need to cooperate with the Hong Kong Education Bureau.

The *Christian Times* reported that at the April 17 conference, Fan Kwok Kwong, general secretary of the Hong Kong Federation of Christian and Missionary Alliances, said that after two years of discussions with authorities over government concerns about the group allowing prodemocracy protestors to rest inside its church in 2019, authorities permitted it to continue holding meetings in the church. Fan said the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government, which represents the central government in Hong Kong, was actively communicating with federation leaders, and he reported that some local political leaders had blocked religious figures active in the 2019 prodemocracy movement from applying for new projects.

In April, shortly after the government lifted the COVID-19 mask mandate, media reported that some Catholics expressed concern about new police rules regarding participation in a march to mark Palm Sunday, including requirements that all marchers must wear a red ribbon and carry a palm branch. The media report also said the police did not permit marchers to wear masks. Police said the rule was in place to ensure participants did not use facial coverings to avoid being identified.

In June, the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong for the second consecutive year did not hold memorial masses on June 4 to honor the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. In 2022, the diocese's Justice and Peace Commission, which had organized the masses for more than three decades, cited concern that the masses could violate the NSL.

A November report from Hong Kong Watch highlighted some Hong Kong religious leaders' concerns that since the NSL went into effect, religious schools in Hong Kong, under pressure from the Hong Kong government, were "diluting religious education" due to new NSL and "patriotic" education mandates. Some Protestant Christian leaders also voiced concern about new difficulties reserving space in public schools for church activities, according to the report.

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 Hong Kong residents by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, more than 500 responded and rated the degree of religious freedom in the SAR on average as 7.34 out of 10, compared with an average of 7.30 a year earlier.

Catholic media reported that in April, Stephen Chow, Bishop of Hong Kong, the most senior Catholic cleric in Hong Kong, who became a cardinal in September, and several senior priests went to Beijing, at the invitation of Bishop of Beijing Joseph Li Shan; this marked the first visit of a Hong Kong bishop to Beijing in nearly 30 years. In a press statement prior to the visit, Chow said he hoped to "promote exchanges and interactions" between the mainland and the broader Catholic Church in Asia. Following the visit to Beijing, Chow wrote in the diocese's official publication *Kung Kao Po* that "patriotism is part of the Catholic Church's teaching." He said the catechism states "the duty of the citizen is to cooperate with the government and to contribute to the welfare of society in an atmosphere of truth, justice, joint responsibility and freedom," and that "citizens are called to do their duty in the life of the political community." Chow said he expected there would be opportunities for dialogue between the government and the Catholic Church, and that people should "help the government to become better for the sake of the country." Separately, Chow told media that the Hong Kong church had a mission to be a "bridging church" between the West and China. In a May interview with the Italian Jesuit publication *La Civilta Cattolica*, Chow said, "According to one of the government officials whom we met during the trip, Sinicization is similar to our concept of inculturation." He called for more dialogue with the mainland Catholic Church on the issue. Chow's comments drew mixed reactions. The Catholic News Agency for Asia published an opinion piece stating Chow's visit to Beijing reflected the suppression of religious freedom in Hong Kong, but the Christian Times cited a Hong Kong Baptist University scholar saying that Chow's remarks merely affirmed the Catholic Church's view of patriotism as loving "the people who live in this country" rather than love for specific "political groups."

In November, Bishop Li, president of the government-affiliated CCPA, paid a reciprocal visit to Hong Kong, reportedly to strengthen ties between the two dioceses, and participated in a theological conference. According to media reports, Li promoted the Sinicization of faith and stressed the need to more closely combine Catholic faith and Chinese culture. Cardinal Chow also participated in the conference.

Religious leaders continued to participate in interfaith activities, some of which the groups characterized as patriotic. Several religious groups held ceremonies in September and October to mark the 74th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. On September 19, Buddhist, Catholic, Confucian, Muslim, Christian, and Taoist religious leaders and representatives of the local government and the central government's liaison office attended a conference in Kowloon to celebrate the anniversary. In their speeches, religious leaders said the religious community had a role to play in promoting national prosperity.

Media reported that on September 28, the Buddhist Association held its first ever flag-raising ceremony for PRC National Day at a Buddhist temple in Hong Kong. Taking place at the Po Lin Monastery on Lantau Island, Yin Zonghua, deputy director of the central government's liaison office, was the officiating guest of honor; Master Kuan Yun, president of the Hong Kong Buddhist Federation, and Leung Wang-ching, deputy director of the Home and Youth Affairs Bureau also attended. Monks offered prayers for the "prosperity and stability of the motherland." Master Kuan Yun said the Buddhist community had always advocated patriotism, abiding by the law, loyalty to the country, and supporting the policies of the central and SAR governments.

Local media reported that on October 1, St John's Anglican Cathedral, Hong Kong's oldest church, displayed for the first time the PRC national flag during a service to commemorate PRC National Day and pray for the country. The move was reportedly suggested by lawmaker and Reverend Peter Koon, who was elected as a member of the city's "patriot-only" legislature in December 2021. Koon dismissed online criticism of the decision to fly the PRC flag in the church, saying it stemmed from a "misunderstanding of our country" and that the Anglican Church had never separated the church and the state. Koon said the national flag would be displayed at National Day services in the future.

Radio Free Asia reported that in June, the Kowloon Mosque flew the PRC flag to celebrate the 26th anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong to the PRC. In October, the mosque flew the PRC flag to celebrate PRC National Day. PRC and Hong Kong government officials attended these events, which featured the PRC national anthem and members of the Muslim community marching in military style. Representatives of the liaison office, senior government and police officials, senior Muslim leaders, and personnel from the consulates general of Egypt, Pakistan, and Qatar in Hong Kong also attended. The organizers stressed that the raising of the PRC flag at the mosque was in compliance with China's religious guidelines of "patriotism and love of religion" and "Sinicization of Islam." According to media outlets, the Muslim community was divided on the issue, with some community members calling the raising of the flag "a normal thing," while others expressed concern, calling it a "blasphemy."

Observers reported that 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. 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, 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.

During the year, the consulate conducted outreach to religious communities and the broader public that promoted religious pluralism and tolerance. On May 20, the consulate organized a cultural event for 60 members of the general public at the Khalsa Diwan Sikh Temple in Hong Kong, where two diplomats discussed their Asian American heritage and shared their thoughts on cultural diversity, while members of the temple talked about the history and community role of Sikhism. In November, the consulate sponsored, promoted, and delivered opening remarks at the screenings of

two American films at the 24th annual Jewish Film Festival in Hong Kong, including one focused on the history of antisemitism. In connection with the festival, the Consul General and members of other diplomatic missions and civil society groups attended a Shabbat dinner hosted by the Jewish community.

In October, the consulate hosted a three-day visit by a Catholic University professor and consultant to the Holy See Mission to the United Nations, who met with members of academia, civil society, and the religious community in Hong Kong to discuss conflict, reconciliation, and strategic peacebuilding. The consulate convened an interfaith roundtable with Jewish, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian faith leaders, academics, and the visiting professor to discuss religious freedom. The professor also delivered lectures for professors and students of religious education, met with high school teachers and NGOs to discuss peacebuilding, and trained social workers from a religious organization on reconciliation work.