

# MACAU 2023 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 local Judiciary Police investigative authority over religious groups and personnel.

Most religious groups in the SAR maintained close ties with the PRC government. According to a government report, senior government officials regularly consulted with religious leaders as part of a Beijing-led strategy to foster greater regional religious and cultural exchange within the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area. 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. One former legislator said police prohibited Falun Gong adherents from setting up information stalls at the Ruins of St. Paul's, claiming they obstructed pedestrian movement.

The Catholic Church in Macau continued to recognize the Pope as its head, and the Holy See appointed the bishop of the diocese. Despite some

restrictions, Falun Gong practitioners reported they generally continued to be able to discuss their beliefs openly with Macau residents. Some media reports portrayed Falun Gong members negatively.

In exchanges 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. In June, the Consul General visited multiple religious sites in Macau and met with a local Catholic charity.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population of Macau at 640,000 (midyear 2023). According to a 2022 estimate by the research group Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), 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 2023 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 5 percent of the population is Catholic (approximately 32,400), 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 Church of the United Brethren, Church of Christ in China, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Assemblies of God, Baptists, and Anglicans. Evangelical Christian and independent local nondenominational churches, some of which are affiliated with officially recognized mainland churches, are also present. ARDA estimates the Muslim population at 1,300, the majority of whom are Sunni. Smaller religious groups include Baha'is; ARDA approximates their membership at 200. Falun Gong practitioners 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 to 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 who choose to register must do so 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 central government. During the year, multiple provincial government delegations from the mainland met with local religious leaders during visits to the SAR. The SAR government reported it had a long-standing relationship with local religious communities. According to a government report issued in January, senior officials regularly consulted with religious leaders as part of a Beijing-led strategy to foster greater regional religious and cultural exchange within the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area. Under this initiative, the Buddhist federations of Guangdong Province, Hong Kong, and Macau, with support from the Macau Foundation and the SAR's Cultural Affairs Bureau, held a Buddhist Puja in Macau in December 2022 to celebrate the 23rd anniversary of the transfer of sovereignty over Macau to the PRC.

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. A former lawmaker said that although in prior years Falun Gong practitioners had been tacitly allowed to set up promotion stalls at the city's landmark Ruins of St. Paul's, after 2022, police refused to approve their stalls saying the stalls obstructed pedestrian movement.

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 to a variety of 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.

On January 9, at a meeting with representatives of several religious groups, Chief Executive Ho Lat Seng said the government had always respected diverse religious beliefs and that residents enjoyed freedom of religion. Ho praised religious groups' activities to "help residents tide over the difficult times," including the COVID-19 pandemic, and said he and hoped they would continue "to uphold the spirit of doing good and convey positive messages to the general population, especially the young people of Macau."

### **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, either directly or through other Catholic groups, including approximately one-third of the 64 private primary and secondary schools.

Despite some restrictions, Falun Gong practitioners reported they generally continued to be able to discuss their beliefs openly with Macau residents. 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. In exchanges with SAR government officials, civil society representatives, and NGOs, representatives from the U.S. Consulate General Hong Kong and Macau, including the Consul General, stressed the importance of religious diversity and religious freedom and discussed religious communities' relations with their coreligionists on the mainland and in Hong Kong.

In June, the Consul General made his first post-pandemic official trip to Macau, where he visited the Morrison Chapel and the Old Protestant Cemetery and met with a local Catholic charity.