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U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Hong Kong



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HONG KONG

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Basic Law (Hong Kong's mini-constitution) provides for freedom of religion, and the Bill of Rights Ordinance prohibits religious discrimination; the Government respects these provisions in practice. Religious leaders have noted that the Basic Law, which calls for ties between Hong Kong and mainland religious organizations to be based on "nonsubordination, non-interference and mutual respect," could be used to limit such contacts. However, there were no reports of any limits being applied or proposed.

The Government does not recognize a state religion but did grant a long-standing request for a public holiday to mark Buddha's birthday in 1998. Some Christian holidays are marked in the same manner. Religious groups are not required to register with the Government and are specifically exempted from the Societies Ordinance, which requires the registration of nongovernmental organizations. However, religious groups have a long history of cooperating with the Government on social welfare projects. Religious groups raise capital for schools and hospitals, but once built the operating costs for these institutions are met from public revenues. The Bureau of Home Affairs is responsible for religious policy, including the construction of religious schools and hospitals, but functions basically as a contact point for liaison and exchange of views. In practice, if a religious group wants to purchase a church site, it works with the Lands Department; if it wants to open a clinic, it works with the Health and Welfare Department. Six of the largest religious groups (Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, Muslim, Roman Catholic and Anglican) have long collaborated in a collegium on community affairs and make up the Joint Conference of Religious Leaders. This Conference elects 40 members of the 800-member Selection Committee, which chooses Hong Kong's Chief Executive.

Approximately 43 percent of the population participate in some form of religious practice. The two most popular religions are Buddhism and Taoism. Approximately 4 percent of the population are Roman Catholic, 5 percent are Protestant, and 1 percent Muslim. There are also small numbers of Hindus and Jews. There are 1,300 Protestant congregations representing 50 denominations. The Baptists are the largest Protestant denomination, followed by the Lutherans. Other major denominations include Seventh-Day Adventists, Anglicans, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Church of Christ in China, Methodist, Pentecostal and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. There has been marked growth in the number of independent churches since the 1970's.

There are about 600 Buddhist and Taoist temples and numerous convents and monasteries, all open to the public. The Catholic population is served by 337 priests, 78 monks, and 557 nuns with traditional links to the Pope. More than 277,000 children are enrolled in Catholic schools. The Assistant Secretary General of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference has his office in Hong Kong. Protestant churches run three colleges and over 700 schools.

Religious leaders tend to focus primarily on local spiritual, educational, social, and medical needs. However, some religious leaders maintain active contacts with their mainland counterparts. Catholic and Protestant clergy have been invited to give seminars on the mainland, to teach classes there, and to develop two-way student exchanges (although some mainland students have had difficulty in receiving the necessary approval from the authorities to depart mainland China).

A wide range of faiths are represented in the Government, the judiciary, and the civil service. A large number of influential non-Christians had Christian educations.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

In June 1999, the Government of the People's Republic of China, which has responsibility for Hong Kong's foreign affairs, blocked a proposed Papal visit to Hong Kong; the Government of the People's Republic of China reportedly insisted on treating the visit as one of a Head of State rather than as one of a religious leader.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the various religious communities are amicable. Two ecumenical bodies facilitate cooperative work among the Protestant churches and encourage local Christians to play an active part in society.

In 1998 some social workers complained of discrimination by government-subsidized social work organizations (especially Catholic and Protestant ones) against job seekers of other faiths. The Bureau of Home Affairs investigated, but no specific complaints were filed.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

Consulate General officers meet regularly with religious leaders. In February 1998, the Consulate General hosted a U.S. Religious Leaders Delegation, which made an unprecedented 3-week tour to China at the invitation of Chinese President Jiang Zemin. The Delegation met with over 150 representatives of religious organizations in Hong Kong, including Taoist and Buddhist groups; the Hong Kong Christian Council; the Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternal Organization; representatives of the Catholic, Jewish and Eastern Orthodox faiths; and representatives of several human rights organizations.

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