

HONG KONG
WATCH

“Sell Out My Soul”:

The Impending Threats to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Hong Kong

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Foreword by Fiona Bruce MP and Ambassador Samuel Brownback

Freedom of religion or belief is about so much more than simply the right to go to a place of worship once a week. It is about more than the right to go to church on Sundays, the mosque on Fridays, the temple or the synagogue or any other place of worship. It is, as expressed in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a fully-fledged expression of conscience.

Interpreted in this way, this basic and fundamental human right is clearly under increasing and intensifying threat in Hong Kong, as this new and excellent report by Hong Kong Watch details.

As Patrons of Hong Kong Watch and as active leaders in the global movement for religious freedom, we endorse this report wholeheartedly and support its recommendations.

In particular, this report helps pinpoint some early warning signs of threats to freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong – related to self-censorship, the threats to religious freedom in the education sector, Beijing’s Sinicization campaign and the continued crackdown on freedom of expression which impacts freedom of religion – and it serves as a vital reminder and wake-up call to us all to watch, monitor and respond appropriately to the deterioration in freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong.

We totally support Hong Kong Watch’s call for the world to pay attention to Hong Kong, to monitor the impact on religious freedom of the continuous dismantling of overall basic freedoms, the particular impact of the draconian National Security Law and further security laws to come, and we call on the Hong Kong and Chinese governments to abide by their obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and all international treaty obligations.

Together with our colleagues in similar roles across the globe, we shall be watching Hong Kong – and we will be ready to act when needed.

Fiona Bruce MP, Patron of Hong Kong Watch

Ambassador Sam Brownback, Patron of Hong Kong Watch

Executive Summary

The title of this report, *Sell Out My Soul*, is inspired by the words of a well-known Christian hymn, *Tell Out My Soul*. It reflects the compromises which religious believers in Hong Kong are increasingly having to make in order to protect some space for freedom of religion or belief, amidst impending threats to the exercise of that basic human right.

Freedom of religion or belief, as set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is under slowly increasing pressure in Hong Kong, as other basic rights and freedoms, especially freedom of expression, assembly and association and the freedom of the press have been undermined and dismantled, under the impact of the draconian National Security Law imposed on Hong Kong on 30 June 2020.

In one sense, the specific right to *freedom of worship* remains intact – people are still free to go to church, to the mosque, to the synagogue or temple. Religious believers can still easily access the Bible, the Qu’ran or other religious sacred scriptures and religious education materials. Unlike in mainland China, where there is severe – and sometimes violent – persecution of religion, including the dismantling of crosses, the closure, destruction or desecration of places of worship and the arrest and imprisonment of religious leaders and practitioners, religious believers in Hong Kong are not yet facing religious persecution.

However, there are clear signs of violations of freedom of religion or belief and early warning signs of worse to come.

This report looks at four main indicators of the impending threats to freedom of religion or belief:

- The impact of the National Security Law and potential new restrictive, repressive laws to come;
- Self-censorship;
- The impact on the education sector, and particularly church-run schools;
- Beijing’s campaign of “Sinicization” of religion and the “patriotism” test.

Although much of the current pressure on religious leaders could arguably be described as more political than religious, including the arrest of Hong Kong’s Catholic Bishop Emeritus Cardinal Joseph Zen in 2021 and the police raid of the Good Neighbour North District Church in 2020, and the subsequent decision by HSBC to freeze the bank accounts of the church and its pastor, due to their association with the pro-democracy protest movement, nevertheless these and other actions impact the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in its fullest interpretation.

In 2022, the pro-Beijing newspaper *Ta Kung Pao*, owned by the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government, carried an unprecedented spread of four articles attacking religion from different angles. These articles, which are analysed in the report, serve as one of the clearest early warning signs that all is not well for freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong and that we should expect worse to come.

On 1 October 2023, China’s National Day, Hong Kong’s Anglican Cathedral of St John displayed the flag of the People’s Republic of China in the sanctuary beside the altar during its Sunday services.¹ Although this is normal practice in some countries, such as the United States, it is not so in many countries and was not the expected practice in Hong Kong until now. It was followed just over two weeks later by a flag-raising ceremony at the Kowloon Mosque and Islamic Centre on 17 October 2023, with the Secretary for Home and Youth Affairs Alice Mak Mei-kuen in attendance.² Symbolically, it is a significant indicator of the Chinese Communist Party’s intention to do to religion in Hong Kong what it has done in mainland China, even if it is to a less intense extent: coerce and subsume religious institutions into its apparatus of control.

In response to these early warning signs, the international community should monitor the situation of freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong, especially the upcoming legislation regarding Article 23 of the Basic Law, the crowdfunding law and possible amendments to the Chinese Temple Ordinance, very closely.

In particular:

- those governments which have official envoys dedicated to this theme, particularly the United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and the State Department Office of International Religious Freedom; the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom; the European Union’s Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief outside the EU; the United Kingdom Prime Minister’s Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief; Taiwan’s Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, and others, should monitor the situation in Hong Kong closely. They should produce an annual report on the situation of freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong, as the US State Department already does.
- All 42 countries within the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) should monitor closely and report regularly on developments in Hong Kong.
- The United Kingdom’s Six-Monthly Report annual report on Hong Kong should include the situation of freedom of religion or belief.
- The European Union’s annual report on Hong Kong should include the situation of freedom of religion or belief.
- The international community should also reiterate the UN Human Rights Committee’s recommendations to the Hong Kong and Chinese governments, in its review of Hong Kong’s obligations under the ICCPR, that the National Security Law

¹ Hong Kong Free Press, “Hong Kong’s oldest church building displays China’s flag for first time on National Day,” 1 October 2023 - <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/10/01/hong-kongs-oldest-church-building-displays-chinas-flag-for-first-time-on-national-day/>

² The Standard, “Home affairs chief praises Islamic integration after flag raising ceremony at Kowloon Mosque,” 17 October 2023 - <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news/section/4/209355/Home-affairs-chief-praises-Islamic-integration-after-flag-raising-ceremony-at-Kowloon-Mosque>, also reported by Radio Free Asia, 18 October 2023 - <https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/features/hottopic/feature-hk-muslim-10182023000647.html>

and sedition law should be repealed and the authorities should refrain from enforcing them immediately.³

- The United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the Special Rapporteur on the right to education should also pay close attention to the situation in Hong Kong.

³ United Nations, Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations, 2022 - <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPRiCAqhKb7yhsr2bAznTlrtkyo4FUNHETCQ0Y7P%2Fow040gd8LZ9d1NQu1ljjZpy6SRHxfb%2F5%2BcOjaAyzu%2Bcc17dwDhDhWKYldeLcOxK4cDHo05917Gn9hyZz%2FRZXPG%2BD%2FCW8HWkhexMQiQ%3D%3D>

Acknowledgements

This report was primarily researched and written by Benedict Rogers, co-founder and Chief Executive of Hong Kong Watch, who has spent his entire career in human rights advocacy over three decades specialising in the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Research was based on first-hand interviews and background conversations with several Christian clergy and laity from Hong Kong from multiple church traditions and denominations, as well as with several scholars and experts who specialise in freedom of religion or belief. Most, for understandable security reasons, prefer to be anonymous.

Much of the evidence compiled in this report is also drawn from publicly available sources, including media reports and information published by other organisations, such as China Aid and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), but always corroborated and verified with expert sources.

The report was reviewed internally by Hong Kong Watch’s policy and advocacy team, in particular Sam Goodman, Director of Policy and Advocacy, and Anouk Wear, Research and Policy Advisor, who also conducted some interviews and translated Chinese language materials.

The report was also reviewed externally by experts in freedom of religion or belief, including Dr Eric Lai, Visiting Researcher at the Dickson Poon School of Law, King’s College, London; Bob Fu, founder and President of China Aid; Nina Shea, Senior Fellow and Director of the Centre for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute; Pastor Roy Chan; and others who wish to remain anonymous.

Hong Kong Watch acknowledges and is grateful to everyone who helped make this important report possible.

Introduction

Freedom of religion or belief – abbreviated to “FoRB” among specialists – is about much more than simply freedom of worship. Commonly known as “religious freedom”, it is derived from Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”⁴

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),⁵ to which the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People’s Republic of China is a party, unpacks this in more detail, stating that:

“1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

3. Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.”

Hong Kong’s own Basic Law, its mini-constitution, which incorporates its obligations as a party to the ICCPR, warrants the applicability of the ICCPR in Article 39 of Chapter III of the Basic Law, including the protection of freedom of religion or belief. Article 32 of Chapter III of the Basic Law states that:

“Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of conscience. Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of religious belief and freedom to preach and to conduct and participate in religious activities in public.”⁶

Article 137 of Chapter IV of the Basic Law states that:

“schools run by religious organisations may continue to provide religious education, including courses in religion.”

⁴ Universal Declaration of Human Rights – available here: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/universal-declaration/translations/english>

⁵ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – available here: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

⁶ The Basic Law – available here: <https://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/index/>

Article 141 of Chapter IV of the Basic Law states that:

“The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall not restrict the freedom of religious belief, interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations or restrict religious activities which do not contravene the laws of the Region.

Religious organizations shall, in accordance with law, enjoy the rights to acquire, use, dispose of and inherit property and the right to receive financial assistance. Their previous property rights and interests shall be maintained and protected.

Religious organizations may, according to their previous practice, continue to run seminaries and other schools, hospitals and welfare institutions and to provide other social services.

Religious organizations and believers in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region may maintain and develop their relations with religious organizations and believers elsewhere.”

Until the imposition of the draconian National Security Law on Hong Kong by the central government in Beijing, there were few reasons to be concerned about freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong. Generally, freedom of religion or belief was upheld, protected and practised, although in 2004 the government amended the Education Ordinance to introduce a school-based management system, meaning that the sponsoring body no longer has complete control of the appointment of education institution board members. As Lai Yan-ho has written, “different stakeholders must be included on boards and, while this looks more democratic and representative, it in fact diminishes the role of sponsoring bodies, including churches.”⁷ The Hong Kong Catholic Diocese openly challenged the reform as, in Lai’s words, “an intrusion into its autonomy and religious freedoms”, but it lost a judicial review in 2011, illustrating the “diminishing influence of religious organisations in society”. This was just one of many social issues on which Cardinal Zen and other church groups found themselves increasingly in opposition to government policies, from the right of abode for new immigrants to civic and political rights and democracy. As Lai notes, “tensions between the state’s attempts at social control and the church’s advocacy on human rights increased” since the handover.⁸

Nevertheless, even today, it is important to acknowledge that freedom of worship in its most narrowly-defined form – the freedom to go to a church, a mosque, a temple or a synagogue, or any other place of worship – remains intact in Hong Kong. Unlike in mainland China, where thousands of churches, mosques and temples have been closed or destroyed, crosses dismantled and religious adherents severely persecuted, in Hong Kong today people can go to a place of worship, read religious scriptures and other religious literature and conduct other religious activities reasonably freely.

However, the impact of the National Security Law has been to dismantle or undermine many of Hong Kong’s freedoms, including freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of the press. Almost all independent or pro-democracy media has been shut down, over 66 civil society organisations, including trade

⁷ Lai Yan-ho, “Hong Kong’s Catholic Church: Which way forward?,” UCANews, 11 August 2017 - <https://www.ucanews.com/amp/hong-kongs-catholic-church-which-way-forward/79974>

⁸ Lai Yan-ho, “What can Hong Kong Catholics learn from the past 20 years?,” UCANews, 30 June 2017 - <https://www.ucanews.com/amp/what-can-hong-kong-catholics-learn-from-the-past-20-years/79631>

unions, have closed, the pro-democracy camp has been excluded from the Legislative Council, and hundreds of political prisoners are in jail, including former elected legislators.

This is already, inevitably, affecting freedom of religion or belief in its fullest form. This includes self-censorship in sermons, implications for faith-based schools, pressure on religious groups, especially the Catholic and Protestant churches, to develop closer ties with mainland China, an emphasis on “patriotism” and the criminalisation of “collusion with foreign forces”. This report will examine these and other challenges in more detail. As Theodora Yu wrote in an article in *The Washington Post* in May 2022, “Hong Kong’s wide-ranging crackdown on all forms of social protest is now being felt by its churches, a backbone of the city’s once vibrant activism, and its religious spaces are now being brought under state control much the way they are in the rest of China.”⁹

Hong Kong’s population of 7.413 million people includes many who are adherents of different religions. According to the HKSAR government statistics from July 2022, there are more than one million followers of Taoism and more than one million Buddhists; 480,000 Protestants; 379,000 Catholics; 300,000 Muslims; 100,000 Hindus; and 12,000 Sikhs.¹⁰

It should be noted that several of the key leaders of Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement are Christians – both Catholic and Protestant – including Catholics such as 91 year-old Cardinal Joseph Zen, Bishop Emeritus of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, 85 year-old barrister Martin Lee, known as the father of the democracy movement, and 75 year-old entrepreneur and publisher Jimmy Lai, who has already spent almost three years in prison and faces a new trial under the National Security Law which could lead to a life sentence; as well as Protestants such as 79 year-old pastor the Reverend Chu Yiu-ming, who was convicted for his role in the 2014 Occupy Central Movement (which became the Umbrella Movement) and received a suspended sentence, and currently imprisoned 59 year-old law professor Benny Tai, another of the leaders of the Occupy Central Movement, and 26 year-old Joshua Wong, who rose to prominence as a teenage activist.

It is also worth recalling that in the protests in Hong Kong in 2019, Christians were very prominent, with prayer vigils held regularly and the hymn “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” becoming – for a time – an anthem for the demonstrators. As Lai Yan-ho writes, “believers of various Christian denominations were deeply involved in the movement” and the hymn “signified the engagement of Christian believers and ministers in the protests and symbolised the peaceful and non-violent nature of the movement during its early stages.”¹¹

Just before the march of one million people on 9 June 2019, two major Christian denominations, the Christian Missionary Alliance Church Union Hong Kong and the Baptist Convention of Hong Kong published statements calling on the Hong Kong

⁹ The Washington Post, “Hong Kong churches no longer off-limits as Beijing tightens grip on dissent,” 13 May 2022 - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/13/hong-kong-church-crackdown-catholic-dissent/>

¹⁰ The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Census and Statistics Department - <https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/EIndexbySubject.html?pcode=FA100061&scode=190>

¹¹ Lai Yan-ho, “Discernment of Spirits and Pastoral Circle in Social Movement: A Theological Reflection on Hong Kong’s Anti-extradition Protests,” *Hong Kong Journal of Catholic Studies*, Issue No. 11, 2020, https://catholic.crs.cuhk.edu.hk/Main/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Journal_11_1218-138-191-Ch5-Eric-Lai.pdf

government to suspend and withdraw the extradition bill. Christian pastors also held a press conference to condemn the excessive use of force by the police and the use of insulting language against religion by the police. The Hong Kong Federation of Catholic Students and members of the Catholic Diocesan Youth Commission Hong Kong organised prayer meetings and outdoor Masses, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Ha attended prayer meetings at protest sites many times, and of course Cardinal Zen continued to be active in the campaign against the bill and the government’s handling of the protests. Cardinal John Tong, Apostolic Administrator of the Hong Kong Diocese, called on the government to establish an independent commission of inquiry into the police conduct.¹²

Some pastors opened their churches to provide sanctuary for the protesters as well, notably four churches along the route of rallies, including a Catholic parish, The Church of Christ in China, and two Methodist churches which opened as shelters to provide medical, psychological and spiritual assistance and shelter.¹³ They were attacked in the pro-Beijing media for doing so. As Lai notes, throughout 2019 and especially on 12 June when thousands of protestors demonstrated to try to stop the passage of the extradition bill in the Legislative Council, “hundreds of Christians held prayer meetings around the government headquarters, and some pastors formed human chains before riot police in hopes of protecting the crowds.”¹⁴

Some might argue that there is much more religious freedom in Hong Kong than in mainland China, and of course that is correct. The threats to freedom of religion or belief are much more subtle, complex and undramatic, and therefore more difficult to identify. However, this report aims to outline some of the existing challenges posed to freedom of religion or belief, and is written as an early warning sign to alert the international community to potential further erosion of this basic right in Hong Kong.

The title for this report – “Sell Out My Soul” – is inspired by the great Christian hymn “Tell Out My Soul”, and it calls attention to the clear game-plan of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its associates in the Hong Kong SAR government.

In the course of the research for this report, Hong Kong Watch conducted first-hand interviews with religious leaders and scholars from Hong Kong, many of whom requested to be cited anonymously for their security or the security of their families and congregations in Hong Kong, and much of their testimony is not directly cited but provided valuable background for the report. In addition, due to the challenges of conducting direct research in Hong Kong, the report draws extensively on available public source material.

It is unlikely – though not impossible – that we will see the dramatic, visible, physical persecution of religious adherents in Hong Kong that we see in mainland China. It is unlikely that we will witness the destruction of churches or dismantling of crosses in Hong Kong, for example.

Why?

¹² Ibid.,

¹³ Ibid.,

¹⁴ Ibid.,

Because the CCP wants to create the impression that there is freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong, especially to foreigners, as they do in Beijing and Shanghai, where foreigners can go to places of worship easily.

That said, the appointment of the former Chinese Communist Party Secretary in Zhejiang Province, Xia Baolong, as Director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office in Beijing in 2020 sent shivers down the spines of many Christians, knowing that in Zhejiang he is widely believed to have overseen a campaign of the demolition of thousands of crosses across that province between 2013 and 2015.¹⁵

Nevertheless, instead of a physical crackdown on religion in Hong Kong, the authorities' aim is to create an environment in which religious leaders and practitioners feel obligated to self-censor, compromise and kowtow, in order to protect the basic freedom of worship that they enjoy. The aim of the authorities is to create the conditions in which religious believers silence their consciences and, in some sense, sell out their souls.

We see this already, with some of the actions of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese which will be examined further in this report, the selection of the Reverend Peter Koon, Secretary-General of the Hong Kong province of the Anglican Communion (known as *Sheng Kung Hui*) as a member of the pro-Beijing Legislative Council, and the decision by the city's Anglican Cathedral of St John's to display the flag of the People's Republic of China in the sanctuary beside the altar on China's National Day on 1 October 2023 for the first time in its history.¹⁶ Although this is normal practice in some countries, such as the United States, it is not so in many countries, was not the expected practice in Hong Kong until now and is widely regarded as yet another symbolic undermining of Hong Kong's promised autonomy. The fact that it was followed just over two weeks later by a flag-raising ceremony at the Kowloon Mosque and Islamic Centre on 17 October 2023, with the Secretary for Home and Youth Affairs Alice Mak Mei-kuen in attendance, suggests that it may become the expected norm.¹⁷ We see it also with the arrest and trial of Hong Kong's 91 year-old Bishop Emeritus, Cardinal Zen, for his role as a trustee of a fund providing legal aid to pro-democracy protestors.¹⁸

The aim is to create a “chill” factor which results in compromises and ultimately the steady, subtle but clear erosion of freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong.

¹⁵ CSW, “Zhejiang cross demolitions: Timeline of events” - <https://www.csw.org.uk/zhejiangtimeline>

¹⁶ Hong Kong Free Press, “Hong Kong's oldest church building displays China's flag for first time on National Day,” 1 October 2023 - <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/10/01/hong-kongs-oldest-church-building-displays-chinas-flag-for-first-time-on-national-day/>

¹⁷ The Standard, “Home affairs chief praises Islamic integration after flag raising ceremony at Kowloon Mosque,” 17 October 2023 - <https://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news/section/4/209355/Home-affairs-chief-praises-Islamic-integration-after-flag-raising-ceremony-at-Kowloon-Mosque>, also reported by Radio Free Asia, 18 October 2023 - <https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/features/hottopic/feature-hk-muslim-10182023000647.html>

¹⁸ The Guardian, “Arrest of Cardinal Zen sends chill through Hong Kong's Catholic community,” 16 May 2022 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/16/arrest-of-cardinal-zen-sends-chill-through-hong-kongs-catholic-community>

Hong Kong’s current and future legislative framework and how it impacts freedom of religion or belief

The law which has had the most significant impact already on the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in its fullest form, as it has on the exercise of most other basic rights in Hong Kong, is the National Security Law for Hong Kong passed by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress in Beijing on 30 June 2020 and taking effect the same day.

Under the National Security Law, the crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism and “collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security” are set out. Power to interpret the law lies with the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, not with local courts, and where there are inconsistencies between the National Security Law and other Hong Kong laws, the National Security Law prevails. The National Security Law contains an “extraterritoriality” clause, meaning that one does not need to be in Hong Kong or to be a Hong Kong resident to be in violation of the law – actions by anyone, anywhere in the world could be deemed to violate Hong Kong’s National Security Law.

The main challenge with the National Security Law is that the crimes it covers – secession, subversion, terrorism and “collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security” – are poorly, broadly and vaguely defined, meaning that the “red lines” are unclear. This has resulted in censorship or self-censorship, the almost complete shut-down of freedom of expression and press freedom, and the severe curtailment of freedom of assembly and association.

The primary impact of the National Security Law on religious organisations has been self-censorship – which will be examined in the next section. However, there have been arrests of religious leaders, notably the Catholic Bishop Emeritus of Hong Kong, Cardinal Joseph Zen, in May 2022, arrested on suspicion of “collusion with foreign forces”. He was later convicted of failing to register a humanitarian aid body, popularly known as the “612 Humanitarian Relief Fund”, as a society under police supervision, and received a fine.

In addition to the National Security Law, the Seditious Offences Ordinance also has a chilling effect.

In October 2022, Pastor Garry Pang was convicted of sedition for allegedly disturbing a National Security Law court hearing in January that year and committing “acts with seditious intention” for operating a YouTube channel commenting on protest-related cases, and was sentenced to a total of 12 months in jail.¹⁹

On 18 January 2023 another Christian pastor, Pastor Alan Keung Ka-wai of the Christianity Mission in Hong Kong, was one of six individuals arrested on charges of the production and sale of a book about the 2019-2020 protests, which allegedly has seditious content. Pastor Keung had previously been involved in delivering first aid to injured protesters and police officers during the 2019 protests and is a founder of a news outlet known as Free

¹⁹ Hong Kong Free Press, “Two Hong Kong court spectators jailed for sedition over critical comments about magistrate in protest case,” 27 October 2022 - <https://hongkongfp.com/2022/10/27/two-hong-kong-court-spectators-jailed-for-sedition-over-critical-comments-about-magistrate-in-protest-case/>

HK Media.²⁰ And just five months after the implementation of the National Security Law, the pro-Beijing *Ta Kung Pao* newspaper posted a list of 20 pastors whom it accused of being “riot supporters”.²¹

On 8 December 2020, Hong Kong police raided the Kwun Tong and Fanling branches of the Good Neighbour North District Church, and HSBC froze the bank accounts of the church, its pastor, Roy Chan, and his wife.²² Pastor Chan and the Good Neighbour North District Church had played a very active role in the 2019-2020 protests, providing first-aid and pastoral care for demonstrators.²³ Pastor Chan and his family are now in exile in the United Kingdom, and he has said it would not be safe for him to return to Hong Kong. In December 2020, he told *The Telegraph*: “Churches are tense. We think about what we are saying, about whether we are touching the red lines.” Some pastors had become despondent, he added. “They told me there is no future in Hong Kong, that this is the end game. They say it sadly. They want to escape...If I encourage them to not give up and say what they want from the Bible, that could lead them into danger.”²⁴

Several other religious leaders have left Hong Kong, including the Reverend Leung Wing-sun, pastor of Ming Yan Church of Christ (Remembrance of Grace Church), who issued a pastoral letter on social media explaining that he had left Hong Kong to join his son in the United Kingdom in January 2021, as a result of harassment he had been subjected to due to his political stance which led to concern for his personal safety.²⁵

It is important to note that all the above-mentioned cases relate to what might be regarded as “political” activities, of protest or support of protesters, rather than narrowly-defined “religious” activity. But freedom of thought, conscience and religion as understood by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is broader than simply freedom of worship. In all the above-mentioned cases, the individuals concerned were inspired and motivated by their religious faith and conscience to support pro-democracy initiatives and defend human rights. Their ability to do this in Hong Kong is now severely curtailed.

According to the US State Department Office of International Religious Freedom’s 2022 annual report on Hong Kong, the Falun Dafa Association has said that the National Security Law is used to harass Falun Gong practitioners, particularly in the period prior to the visit of Xi Jinping to Hong Kong in July 2022. While Falun Gong is not outlawed in Hong Kong as it is in mainland China, Falun Gong practitioners have been subjected to

²⁰ UCANews, “Christian pastor among six arrested for ‘seditious book’ in HK,” 20 January 2023 - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/christian-pastor-among-six-arrested-for-seditious-book-in-hk/100107>

²¹ The Washington Post, “Hong Kong churches no longer off limits as Beijing tightens grip on dissent,” 13 May 2022, referencing Ta Kung Pao article - <http://www.takungpao.com.hk/news/232109/2020/0707/471583.html>

²² The Guardian, “Hong Kong police raid church hours after pastor said HSBC froze bank accounts,” 8 December 2020 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/08/hong-kong-church-pastor-says-hsbc-froze-personal-and-charity-bank-accounts>

²³ BBC, “Protecting Hong Kong’s young protesters: ‘Beat us, don’t beat the kids,’” 11 October 2019 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-china-50000995>

²⁴ The Telegraph, “Hong Kong churches face Christmas under Beijing’s shadow,” 29 December 2020 - <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/12/29/hong-kong-churches-face-christmas-beijings-shadow/>

²⁵ The Christian Times, article by Chan Yick-yin, 2 February 2021 - https://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=164622&Pid=102&Version=0&Cid=2141&Charset=big5_hkscs

periodic attacks. In August 2022 a Legislative Council member and other pro-Beijing politicians demonstrated outside a court in support of a man on trial for assaulting Falun Gong practitioners.²⁶

For some religious organisations, especially the Catholic Church and some Protestant denominations with international connections, the criminalisation of “collusion” with foreign countries or entities poses some risks. No organisation is as international as the Catholic Church, and the Anglican Communion, Methodist Church and Baptist churches are among those associated with global religious networks. One of the reasons for their self-censorship is a concern that they could be vulnerable to the charge of “collusion” with foreign forces.

The US State Department reports that “some Catholic missions took steps ranging from placing their property holdings under local ownership to localising 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.”²⁷

Similarly, in late 2021, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, one of the three largest Christian organisations in Hong Kong, adopted a motion at its annual general meeting to split its churches from one umbrella legal entity into separate entities, according to *The Washington Post*, in order to prevent the entire organisation collapsing if the government moved to freeze its assets.²⁸

When the National Security Law was introduced, some religious leaders expressed the view that it would not impact freedom of religion or belief. The former Catholic Bishop and Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Hong Kong, Cardinal John Tong, cited the protections in the Basic Law which guarantee freedom of religion or belief, as well as the dialogue between the Vatican and China, as reasons why freedom of religion or belief would not be threatened.²⁹ However, it should be noted that China has already violated its promises under the Sino-Vatican agreement on the appointment of bishops in mainland China, first agreed in 2018 and renewed again in 2020 and 2022. What happens if the “dialogue” between the Vatican and China encounters more difficulties and the relationship sours? What if the next pontiff decides to change the Vatican’s approach towards China? There are also questions to be raised regarding whether, in time, the Sino-Vatican Agreement could be extended to Hong Kong, drawing the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong deeper into the auspices of the mainland Catholic Patriotic Association.

The Anglican Archbishop of Hong Kong at the time, the Most Reverend Paul Kwong, who was also a delegate to China’s foremost advisory body, the Chinese People’s Political

²⁶ US State Department, International Religious Freedom Report, 2022 -

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/hong-kong/>

²⁷ Ibid.,

²⁸ The Washington Post, “Hong Kong churches no longer off limits as Beijing tightens grip on dissent,” 13 May 2022

²⁹ Cruz, “Hong Kong cardinal says new security law will not limit religious freedom,” 26 June 2020 - <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-asia/2020/06/hong-kong-cardinal-says-new-security-law-will-not-limit-religious-freedom>

Consultative Conference, welcomed the new law and said it “does not undermine any freedom in Hong Kong, in particular the freedom of religion.”³⁰

However, other religious leaders expressed serious concerns at the time, including Cardinal Zen and the Hong Kong Falun Dafa Association, and on 31 May 2020 a group of Christian pastors and churchgoers issued a statement expressing their opposition to the law.³¹ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) also expressed concern about the effect that the law would have on freedom of religion or belief. In a statement USCIRF Commissioner Gary Bauer said: “This new national security legislation would potentially expand the Chinese Communist Party’s war on faith in the mainland to hundreds of thousands of believers in Hong Kong.”³²

Article 23

A further concern is the likely enactment of another security law in Hong Kong, aimed at implementing Article 23 of the Basic Law. Article 23 states:

“The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People’s Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organizations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organizations or bodies.”

Since the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, there has been a regular fear that this would be implemented, even though, until now, it has not yet been legislated. In 2003 the HKSAR government at the time attempted to implement Article 23, and a widespread mass protest movement rose up in opposition to it. Over 500,000 people protested, and Cardinal Zen, who was Bishop of Hong Kong at the time, played a leading role in the opposition. Eventually, the bill was dropped and no further attempt to enact Article 23 was made until now. When the National Security Law was imposed on Hong Kong by Beijing, it was assumed by many that this was because the Hong Kong SAR government had failed to implement Article 23, and that it achieved the same purpose as Article 23. However, it appears now that Hong Kong’s Chief Executive John Lee intends to implement Article 23, tightening Hong Kong’s security laws even further.³³ The implications of this could be very serious for religious organisations in Hong Kong who have relationships and ties with foreign religious organisations or, in particular, foreign political organisations.

³⁰ Church Times, “Hong Kong Archbishop welcomes new security law,” 9 July 2020 - <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/10-july/news/world/hong-kong-archbishop-welcomes-new-security-law>

³¹ Statement by Hong Kong Christians in Response to the National Security Law, 31 May 2020, as quoted by CSW, “The new national security law and its potential impact on freedom of religion or belief,” August 2020 - <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/09/03/report/4783/article.htm#:~:text=>

³² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, “USCIRF Expresses Concern about National Security Legislation’s Threat to Religious Freedom in Hong Kong,” 26 June 2020 - <https://www.uscifr.gov/release-statements/uscifr-expresses-concern-about-national-security-legislations-threat-religious>

³³ Hong Kong Free Press, “Hong Kong security law Article 23 will ‘definitely’ be enacted this year or next, leader John Lee says,” 23 June 2023 - <https://hongkongfp.com/2023/06/23/hong-kong-security-law-article-23-will-definitely-be-enacted-this-year-or-next-leader-john-lee-says/>

Charitable status

Religious groups are not currently legally required to register with the government. However, as the US State Department International Religious Freedom annual report in 2022 notes, religious groups are required to register to receive 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 that it is established solely for religious, charitable, social or recreational reasons, provide the name and purpose of the organisation, identify its office holders and confirm the address of the principal place of activities. “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,” the US State Department report adds. “Religious groups may register as a society, a tax-exempt organisation, or both ... Government tax regulations provide that any group, including religious groups, involved in activities deemed to endanger national security would not be recognised as a charitable organisation.” The Falun Dafa Association, for example, is registered as a society rather than a religious group.³⁴

In 2021, Hong Kong’s Inland Revenue Department published a revised “Tax Guide for Charitable Institutions and Trusts of a Public Character” which includes the requirements to comply with the National Security Law. It states that “A charity’s resources must be directed towards charitable works and should not engage in or support any acts or activities which are unlawful or contrary to the interests of national security” and adds that “a charity which takes part in acts or activities which are unlawful or contrary to the interests of national security, or uses its resources to support or promote such acts or activities, will not be regarded as a genuine charity.”³⁵ Groups that are perceived to endanger national security would lose their charitable status and tax exemption.³⁶ There are concerns that churches and religious charities are under greater scrutiny by the Inland Revenue Department and could be impacted by these strict new guidelines.

Crowdfunding legislation

Similarly, the Hong Kong government’s intended new legislation to regulate crowdfunding activities could have implications for religious groups. The government intends to establish a new Crowdfunding Affairs Office (CAO), and to require “all fundraising activities, online or offline, that raise funds publicly from individuals or entities of Hong Kong, or individuals or entities located in Hong Kong” to apply “in advance to the newly proposed CAO, regardless of their purpose or location”. The government’s consultation paper contains no exemption for religious activities.³⁷

³⁴ US State Department, International Religious Freedom Report, 2022

³⁵ Hong Kong Inland Revenue Department, “Tax Guide for Charitable Institutions and Trusts of a Public Character,” June 2023 - https://www.ird.gov.hk/eng/pdf/tax_guide_for_charities.pdf

³⁶ South China Morning Post, “Groups that endanger national security to lose charities status, tax exemptions, Hong Kong’s financial services chief warns,” 13 September 2021 - <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3148543/groups-endanger-national-security-lose-charities-status-tax>

³⁷ The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Consultation on enhancing regulation of crowdfunding activities launched,” 19 December 2022 - <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202212/19/P2022121900514.htm>

Blueprint of Religion in the Greater Bay Area

In 2020, soon after the National Security Law was introduced, mainland authorities published a “blueprint of Religion in the Greater Bay Area”, which specifically criticised the involvement of the Catholic Church’s Auxiliary Bishop of Hong Kong, Bishop Joseph Ha, as well as Cardinal Zen and Reverend Chu Yiu-ming, in the 2019 protests.³⁸ The blueprint noted that “some religious groups and the schools they sponsored were involved to varying extent, where their staff spoke and behaved in ways that went against religious teachings and the law, distorted the students’ thoughts and damaged the reputation of religious institutions”. It claims prayer gatherings were used to support protests and religious organisations provided supplies to protesters.

Pro-Beijing media attacks on religion

On 27 January 2022, the pro-Beijing newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* ran an unprecedented double-page spread, containing four articles attacking religion in Hong Kong. *Ta Kung Pao* is owned by the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government and is regarded as the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party regime. The four articles included an editorial targeting Cardinal Zen and the fact that many of the protesters in 2019 “come from Christian schools”, a news article reporting support for reform of the “Chinese Temple Ordinance” by the provincial secretary-general of the Anglican Church in Hong Kong, Reverend Peter Koon, and an article by barrister Lawrence Ma calling for legislation to monitor and restrict the activities of religious groups.

In the editorial attacking Cardinal Zen, *Ta Kung Pao* claimed that he “has used his status as a Catholic clergyman to disrupt Hong Kong with ‘Hong Kong independence’ advocates like Jimmy Lai and Martin Lee”. It is important to note that neither Jimmy Lai and Martin Lee, who are both Catholics, have advocated for independence and indeed both have very strongly opposed those who advocate for independence. They have simply advocated for democracy, human rights, the rule of law and autonomy, as promised in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law. The editorial went on to argue that “from his opposition to Article 23 in 2003 to his opposition to the revision of the Education Ordinance, from his support for the ‘Occupy Central’ movement to the 2019 ‘anti-extradition’ demonstration, one can see that Zen has been cooperating with Lai and Lee to disrupt Hong Kong.” It also claims that the students from Christian schools who participated in the 2019 protests “have been incited by their teachers and clergyman to participate in the riot”. The same editorial also accuses Falun Gong of participating in the demonstrations and organising “to smear the HKSAR government, to beautify violence, to encourage ‘Hong Kong independence’ and to incite young people to engage in violent activities.”³⁹

In the second article, the provincial secretary-general of the Anglican Church in Hong Kong, Reverend Peter Koon, who is now a pro-Beijing member of the Legislative Council, condemned the involvement of clergy in the “Occupy Central” movement and the 2019

³⁸ Bastille Post, 12 August 2021 - <https://www.bastillepost.com/hongkong/article/8994582-%E9%A6%96%E9%83%A8%E3%80%8A%E7%B2%B5%E6%B8%AF%E6%BE%B3%E5%A4%A7%E7%81%A3%E5%8D%80%E5%AE%97%E6%95%99%E8%97%8D%E7%9A%AE%E6%9B%B8%E3%80%8B%E6%AD%A3%E5%BC%8F%E5%87%BA%E7%89%88>

³⁹ Ta Kung Pao, “Cardinal Zen uses his status as a clergyman to disrupt HK,” 27 January 2022 - <http://www.takungpao.com/news/232109/2022/0127/681155.html>

protests, and called for greater government oversight of religious affairs. He recommended that the Home Affairs Department should appoint an official to coordinate religious affairs, or alternatively the government should create a department for religious affairs, arguing that having such government oversight of religion would be “a very good thing”. He also referred to the Chinese Temple Ordinance, which originated during the British colonial period, as an unjust law and argued that it should either be amended or relaxed, or it should be extended to apply to all religions.⁴⁰

In another article, barrister Lawrence Ma, the executive director of the Hong Kong Legal Exchange Foundation, also called on the government to abrogate the Chinese Temple Ordinance and establish new regulations to apply to all religions. He went further, criticising “Western” religions as “intrinsically incompatible with traditional Chinese culture”, claiming that they “do not allow for ancestral worship because they teach that ancestors are idols or evil spirits; these religions encourage us to forget our ancestors”. Ma also accused Christian clergy of inciting their congregations to act against the government. “Religious freedom was abused during the 2019 riot,” Ma wrote. “Many clergymen incited the congregation to engage in anti-government protests; they corrupted the youth and aggravated the riots. This is exactly the fruit of the abuse of religious freedom. These clergymen glorified the behaviour of the rioters and beautify unlawful behaviour as a way to achieve justice. They unceasingly promoted the distinction between violating civil law and sinning.”⁴¹

With regard to the Chinese Temple Ordinance, there may be a case for reform or repeal of this particular law, and certainly any laws that relate to religious practice should apply to all religions and should not discriminate. As one religious scholar has written: “In the 1920s, the British colonial government imposed a restrictive law on indigenous Chinese religions ... The most frightening clause of this Ordinance is this: the government can – without any search warrant – enter and search any temples, even seizing any documents or books as long as it has suspicion of any violation of this Ordinance.” This scholar states that “it is true that this law is biased against the Chinese religions. However, this colonial law only exists on paper and it has rarely been used to prosecute anyone. The CCP newspaper rightly claimed that this unfair treatment should be eliminated. However, this is the insidious part: [they say that] such differential treatment should be addressed not by the elimination of this Ordinance altogether but by making sure that Christian churches must be included in this Ordinance as well.”⁴²

It is clear therefore that the agenda being advanced in these articles is not about ensuring equal rights, but much more an early warning sign of an intention to introduce restrictions on religion. Ma called on the government to promulgate a new law requiring churches to report every single donation to the government. “Do the donations go to the administration of schools or to the promotion of criminal activities,” Ma asked. “This type of regulation is necessary for the common good.” He also advocated a new law to allow law enforcement to crackdown on religious groups that promote, in his words, “the subversion of the state”

⁴⁰ Ta Kung Pao, “Keep up with the times: Peter Koon supports reform of the unjust ‘Chinese Temple Ordinance’”, 27 January 2022 - <http://www.takungpao.com.hk/news/232109/2022/0127/681157.html>

⁴¹ Ta Kung Pao, “Barrister calls for legislation to strike down extremist religious groups,” 28 January 2022 - <http://www.takungpao.com.hk/news/232109/2022/0128/681548.html>

⁴² CSW, China: Freedom of religion or belief: the untold stories,” July 2022 - <https://www.csw.org.uk/untoldstories?gad=1&gclid=>

and argued that “in regard to cults like Falun Gong and other extremist religious groups, they should be eradicated before they fully mature.” He also proposed the establishment of a new bureau in order to conduct vetting, licensing and monitoring of religious groups. “The government should employ staff who are fully dedicated to implementing and executing this whole system,” he added.

The idea of a department, committee or unit for religious affairs had previously been proposed by Carrie Lam in her campaign to become Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2017, but she withdrew the idea upon opposition from the Catholic Cardinal John Tong and other Christian leaders. Given the proposals outlined in *Ta Kung Pao*, it is quite possible that such a body may be established in the future, possibly also accompanied by a requirement for clergy and religious organisations to register and take the oath of fidelity to the government. When it is planning to introduce new legislation, regulations or policies, the Chinese government often trails the idea in the state media in advance. The articles in *Ta Kung Pao* serve as an important early warning of potential restrictions on freedom of religion or belief to come in Hong Kong.

Self-censorship in sermons and religious organisations

As a consequence of the implementation of the draconian National Security Law in Hong Kong, many religious groups and places of worship have chosen the path of self-censorship. This has taken various forms.

According to 18 pastors and religious experts interviewed by *The Washington Post*, “churches have been pushed into censoring themselves and avoiding appointing pastors deemed to have political views, and at least one major church is restructuring itself in case the government freezes its assets.”⁴³

The Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement revealed in 2021 that over a third of churches were now more inclined to adjust the content of their preaching in light of the political situation in the city.

In August 2020, almost two months after the National Security Law took effect, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese abandoned plans for a crowdfunding campaign to raise funds to buy advertising space in local newspapers promoting a prayer for the city’s democratic values in light of the National Security Law. It is believed that the plan was dropped under pressure from the Catholic Diocese.⁴⁴

Soon afterwards, on 28 August 2020, the Apostolic Administrator of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong at the time, Cardinal John Tong, issued a pastoral letter to all clergy, titled “Fraternal Admonition”, advising them to be cautious in their sermons. He literally told them to “watch your language” and avoid “slandorous and offensive statements which insinuate or incite hatred, cause social unrest” which “are never appropriate in the liturgy”. The homily, the Cardinal added, “is not meant to convey the preacher’s personal views (such as his own view on a social or political issue) but God’s message”.⁴⁵

Of course on one level the points the Cardinal makes about the purpose of a homily are correct. But on another level, the implication is that priests should avoid topics that could be provocative to the government but which are traditionally within the mandate of priests to speak about, such as human rights, human dignity, justice and freedom.

Until 2022, the Catholic Church in Hong Kong held a memorial Mass every year on 4 June, to commemorate the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, organised by its Justice and Peace Commission. After the larger, secular candlelit vigil traditionally held in Hong Kong’s Victoria Park was banned in 2020 and 2021, the memorial Mass became the last remaining organised commemoration in Hong Kong of the Tiananmen Square massacre. In 2021, seven Catholic parishes held a memorial Mass to commemorate the Tiananmen

⁴³ Washington Post, “Hong Kong churches no longer off limits as Beijing tightens grip on dissent,” 13 May 2022 - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/13/hong-kong-church-crackdown-catholic-dissent/>

⁴⁴ South China Morning Post, “After pushback from diocese, Catholic group drops plan to run post-national security law prayer for Hong Kong in local newspaper,” 29 August 2020 - <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3099412/after-pushback-diocese-catholic-group-drops-plan-run-post>

⁴⁵ Catholic News Agency, “Hong Kong cardinal warns priests to ‘watch your language’ in homilies,” 1 September 2020 - <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/45680/hong-kong-cardinal-warns-priests-to-watch-your-language-in-homilies>

Square massacre on 4 June, but found themselves surrounded by a heavy police presence and pro-Beijing protesters carrying posters with Cardinal Zen’s image demonised, in a clear and chilling effort to intimidate the churches and their participants.⁴⁶ In May 2022, however, the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese announced that it would no longer hold the memorial Mass.⁴⁷

In October 2022, the Justice and Peace Commission itself was renamed as the Diocesan Commission on Integral Human Development, reflecting the Vatican’s own merger of the pontifical councils on Justice and Peace, Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, Health Care Workers and the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, along with Caritas International, into a Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.⁴⁸ However, such renaming only commenced in 2023, while the Vatican’s merger occurred in 2017. This time lapse appears to indicate a deliberate decision to self-censor, rather than seeking consistency with the Vatican. Indeed, this broader scope dilutes the commission’s focus on human rights, democracy and freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong and mainland China, and potentially undermines its ability to defend freedom of religion or belief.

In his first press conference following the announcement of his appointment by the Vatican, Hong Kong’s new Bishop, who later became Cardinal, Stephen Chow told journalists on 18 May 2021 that he did not think it would be wise for him to comment on especially controversial issues. “That would be rash,” he said. He denied he was afraid, but “prudence is also a virtue”. However, he was willing to say that “for me, religious freedom is a basic right.” He also added, in regard to the June 4 anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, that: “I pray for China. I pray for all those who have passed in 1989.”⁴⁹

While Cardinal Chow has generally exercised caution and emphasised the importance of dialogue with Beijing, there have been a few occasions where he has tried to comment within the limitations of the situation. Soon after he became Bishop, he confirmed, once again, that he would pray for the victims and families of the Tiananmen Square massacre, saying: “I pray, I pray for China, I pray for all those who have passed in 1989, from all walks of life. Whether this year it is possible (to do it in public) it depends on legal requirements.”⁵⁰

In June 2022, he wrote in *The Sunday Examiner*, Hong Kong’s Catholic newspaper, that:

“I can feel that Hong Kong, including our Church, are becoming more like an existence within cracks. We used to enjoy much space and freedom of expression

⁴⁶ The Christian Post, “CCP threatens 7 Hong Kong Catholic churches over Tiananmen Square remembrance mass,” 6 June 2021 - <https://www.christianpost.com/news/ccp-warns-7-hong-kong-churches-over-tiananmen-square-mass.html>

⁴⁷ Washington Post, “Hong Kong Catholic church cancels Tiananmen memorial Mass,” 24 May, 2022 - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/24/hong-kong-catholic-church-tiananmen/>

⁴⁸ The Sunday Examiner, “New name for Justice and Peace reflects changing times,” 14 October 2022 - <https://www.examiner.org.hk/2022/10/14/new-name-for-justice-and-peace-commission-reflects-changing-times/news/hongkong/>

⁴⁹ Catholic News Agency, “Hong Kong bishop-elect: I am not afraid, but I believe prudence is a virtue,” 18 May 2021 - <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247694/hong-kong-bishop-elect-i-am-not-afraid-but-i-believe-prudence-is-a-virtue>

⁵⁰ Reuters, “New HK Bishop says will pray for Tiananmen victims, follow the law,” 18 May 2021 - <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/new-hk-bishop-says-will-pray-tiananmen-victims-follow-law-2021-05-18/>

when we could express our opinions in any way we like. Of course, as Christians, we should guard our tongues against immorality and self-righteousness. But that spaciousness for our freedom and expression, which we had taken for granted, seems diminishing. With that narrowing of space, we start to feel like living in cracks, which makes us nervous, anxious, disappointed, upset, frustrated, and angry. Some have chosen to settle in other countries. Some are observing, while some have little choice but to stay. As for me, I made my choice when I accepted my episcopal appointment, like many in Hong Kong who have chosen to stay.”⁵¹

In his Pastoral Letter at Easter 2023, titled “Dare to Have Hope”, he devoted a paragraph to highlighting those who were arrested in 2019:

“From news reports published in last December, there were around 6,000 arrests due to the violent outbreaks in 2019. They are waiting to see whether the police will charge them or not. When will they see light?” he wrote. “Charge or no charge, they will be signs showing them how to move on. Waiting endlessly will not help them or our society to move toward healing. Some may want to seek justice through retributive means. However, it is through compassion and leniency on lighter offences that can give hope and positive energy to our wounded community. We have seen how hatred and violence have brought the stench of death to our beloved Hong Kong. Now, we should lean on compassion and magnanimity to reinforce the fragrance of life in our recovering Hong Kong.”⁵²

Similarly, in another article in *The Sunday Examiner* on 30 June 2023, Cardinal Chow wrote:

“What is important in any society is that people should be able to feel that there is freedom of speech, even though what they say may not be objective or accurate. And that proper platforms are available for them to express their ideas and feelings, freely and safely. Eliminating such platforms can lead to deepen resentment, destructive cynicisms, and a sense of hopelessness. Then leaving will become a more attractive and viable option.”

He concluded:

“I would like to suggest that it is advisable for our government to provide some safe platforms for people of different persuasions to express their pains, hurts, frustrations, disappointments, bitterness, even anger, without being afraid to step outside of the not-so-clear red lines. That they can experience their voices heard by relevant officials, which may or may not mean that they are acceptable. Those who are hurt, hurt. So, please heal the wounds before we look into the problems.”⁵³

Significantly, the Vatican’s unofficial representative in Hong Kong, Monsignor Javier Herrera-Corona, delivered a stark warning to Catholics in the city in at least four meetings from October 2021 until March 2022, before completing his six-year posting: prepare for

⁵¹ The Sunday Examiner, “Reflections from the bishop: flourishing through the cracks,” 2 June 2022 - <https://www.examiner.org.hk/2022/06/02/reflections-from-the-bishop-flourishing-through-cracks/features/>

⁵² Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, “Dare to Have Hope – Easter Message 2023,” Pastoral Letter - <https://catholic.org.hk/en/Easter-Message-2023/>

⁵³ The Sunday Examiner, “Reflections from the bishop: Those who are hurt, hurt,” 30 June 2023 - <https://www.examiner.org.hk/2023/06/30/reflections-from-the-bishop-those-who-are-hurt-hurt/news/hongkong/>

a crackdown on religious freedom in Hong Kong. He urged Catholic clergy and missionaries to take steps to protect their missions' property, files and funds, move archives out of Hong Kong to Rome and, according to Reuters, warned that closer integration with China in coming years could lead to mainland-style restrictions on religious groups.⁵⁴

The situation is similar for Protestants. According to one Christian church leader in Hong Kong, who must remain anonymous, the government holds a blacklist of churches which supported or were perceived to support the protests in 2019, including Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches. Since the imposition of the National Security Law, churches in Hong Kong have been divided, with some taking the side of the government and Beijing and others, which previously supported democracy and human rights, being effectively silenced.

According to *The Washington Post*, the Evangelical Lutheran Church issued an internal memo in 2021, regarding a policy to only qualify pastors who will not be outspoken against the government. The memo reportedly stipulated that because pastors may eventually become bishops, who have a significant influence on the church's "political stance" and "relationship with the government" and with the church's members, examiners would need to take this into consideration when selecting potential pastors.⁵⁵

"The threats are pretty severe these days, and many churches are worried about retaliation," one Christian leader said. "They stop and drop any topics that touch on or might violate the National Security Law. The topics for preaching become dull and pointless, as the National Security Law is bottomless and vague, which causes severe self-censorship."

Another Protestant church leader who has left Hong Kong said that many churches no longer share sermons on their websites. "My church has removed all of my sermons from the past 30 years from our website," he said. "This is to prevent any additional pressure and is a reflection of the additional self-censorship and the need to edit information that could be sensitive." One example of self-censorship he cited was on 1 July, 2021 when a police officer was stabbed in Causeway Bay. The following Sunday, three days after the stabbing, in one particular church a young preacher was going to speak about the story of Cain and Abel from the Bible. "Because of this stabbing, the church decided that he could not speak about this because it was too sensitive," the pastor said.

In addition to self-censoring sermons, several sources revealed that many churches which previously engaged extensively in evangelistic missions into mainland China or bringing unregistered house church Christians to Hong Kong for training workshops and conferences have now had to cease such activities, due to both the crackdown on freedom of religion in mainland China and the repression in Hong Kong as a result of the National Security Law.

⁵⁴ Reuters, "Insight: Vatican envoy in Hong Kong warns Catholic missions to prepare for China crackdown," 5 July 2022 - <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vatican-envoy-hong-kong-warns-catholic-missions-prepare-china-crackdown-2022-07-05/>

⁵⁵ The Washington Post, "Hong Kong churches no longer off-limits as Beijing tightens grip on dissent," 13 May 2022

As one Christian pastor said:

“A lot of churches supported the church inside China, by bringing Bibles into China or supporting humanitarian assistance or the provision of medical, dental and eye test procedures. However, in the last few years, these have all stopped. Now, there are much more serious checks at the border and so we are told not to bring Bibles into China.”

One mainland Chinese Christian and religious freedom advocate said:

“For decades, mainland Chinese Christians looked to Hong Kong as a safe haven, a training centre, a financial engine, an advance camp for Christianity in China. But now our hopes have been dashed.” He went on to note that for Falun Gong practitioners, Hong Kong was also a safe haven. “But now, Falun Gong practitioners can no longer practice their faith and express themselves freely in Hong Kong. They have to plan to escape elsewhere.”

The price, it would appear, for being allowed to continue merely to exist and to worship in some limited way is increasing self-censorship of what topics are spoken about and growing curtailment of what activities can be undertaken.

The education sector: The impacts on faith-based schools

In Hong Kong, only a small percentage of government-funded schools are actually government-run. The majority of government-funded schools are operated by religious groups, while some are run by non-religious charitable organisations. The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, for example, operates over 200 schools across the city, across the secondary, primary and kindergarten sectors, while the Anglican Diocese run 130 schools. Dozens of schools are run by other denominations, such as the Lutheran Church and the Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China, a uniting church bringing together Presbyterian and Congregational traditions. Some experts estimate that as many as 60% of Hong Kong’s schools are church-run.

Under the Basic Law, government-subsidised schools must adhere to the government curriculum and must not discriminate on grounds of religion, but they may offer non-mandatory religious instruction as part of their curriculum.⁵⁶ Article 137 of the Basic Law states that “schools run by religious organisations may continue to provide religious education, including courses in religion” and Article 141 states that the government of the Hong Kong SAR “shall not restrict the freedom of religious belief, interfere in the internal affairs of religious organisations or restrict religious activities which do not contravene the laws of the Region.”⁵⁷

The National Security Law and the resulting crackdown on freedom of expression and, ultimately, freedom of religion or belief, is already impacting Hong Kong’s church-run schools, and is likely to further affect freedom of religion or belief in the education sector in the future.

The impact began almost immediately after the law was imposed on Hong Kong. In August 2020, the Hong Kong Catholic diocese issued a letter to the principals of all Catholic primary and secondary schools, urging them to enhance students’ awareness of the new national security legislation and the national anthem law, and cultivate “correct values” on national identity.⁵⁸

The letter, from the then Episcopal Delegate for Education in the diocese, Peter Lau, called for Catholic schools to put in place structures for evaluating “materials, assignments, examination papers and books” used by teachers, to prevent “unilateral promotion of political messages, positions or views.”⁵⁹

School authorities should, the letter continued, “enhance students’ awareness to national security and [the importance of] abidance to the law, have them learn and respect the national flag, the national emblem and the national anthem and foster the correct values on their national identity, consistent with the Catholic teaching”.

⁵⁶ US State Department, International Religious Freedom Report, 2022

⁵⁷ The Basic Law – available here: <https://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/index/>

⁵⁸ Catholic News Agency, “HK diocese promotes ‘national identity’, security law in Catholic schools,” 11 August 2020 - <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/45458/hk-diocese-promotes-national-identity-security-law-in-catholic-schools>

⁵⁹ Hong Kong Free Press, “Hong Kong Catholic diocese urges schools to promote national security education,” 7 August 2020 - <https://hongkongfp.com/2020/08/07/hong-kong-catholic-diocese-urges-schools-to-promote-national-security-education/>

In addition, “policies and regulations within schools should prevent campuses from politicisation and should bar people from using premises for the unilateral promotion of political messages, positions or views.”

Although these comments relate to political rather than religious expression, there is growing concern that faith-based schools will come under increasing pressure. One independent religious scholar has said that “the CCP knows very well that in order to control a state, the first step is to control the mind[s] of young children”, but that “rather than closing Christian schools all at once and turning them into public schools, the CCP’s plan is to corrupt Christian education from within by compromising those who work in the field” through the CCP Liaison Office in Hong Kong and “training sessions” for principals who are later reportedly approached to join the CCP.⁶⁰

A Catholic priest, known as Reverend L, believes that the CCP’s infiltration and ultimate control of church-based schools, through the recruitment of pro-Beijing school principals and teachers and the enforcement of National Security Law education, may ultimately impact churches themselves. According to the Catholic News Agency, “many religious schools associated with parishes, and parishes, could be held accountable for what the school does if they do not comply with the National Security law, and parishes could be shut down as a result.”⁶¹

One Protestant pastor whom we interviewed for this report agrees, and claims that Anglican schools are “diluting their religious education”. In his observation, “students who study in these schools now hardly notice that they are in a Christian school”. At the open day of one Anglican school, he noted, the principal’s speech did not make any reference to the school’s Christian heritage, but placed a lot of emphasis on the national flag, National Security Law education and patriotic education. “It is an open secret that many spies from the CCP have joined the Christian churches and their top management.”

The CCP, he adds, “use tactics like penetration and threats to trigger internal conflicts among the churches in Hong Kong, dirty tricks to insert discomfort and make people unsettled and scared.” School boards, for example, are required to include representatives of parents and teachers, and there is concern that the CCP could use some of these representatives to influence and infiltrate the boards of schools run by religious groups, diluting the influence of the faith-based ethos of the schools.

Two Protestant pastors also highlight the increasing challenges Protestant churches which do not have their own facilities face, in relation to renting space from schools.

“A lot of churches are part of schools. So if you are affiliated with a school, you can organise gatherings. However, if you are not and you need to rent space, you will face a challenge,” he said.

“Using my own church as an example, we had five church congregations that needed to rent space from schools. Now, the schools have said that they could no longer allow us to meet each Sunday. They have said that they now have conditions in place, which mean

⁶⁰ CSW, China: Freedom of religion or belief: the untold stories, July 2022 -

<https://www.csw.org.uk/untoldstories>

⁶¹ Catholic News Agency, “Religious repression in Hong Kong could soon worsen, Christian cleric warns,” 10 February 2022 - <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/250353/religious-repression-in-hong-kong-could-soon-worsen-christian-cleric-warns>

that they cannot let the same group use the space every Sunday. So for the past two years we have been able to use those spaces. The government says they support the schools' educational activities, but not church activities. A lot of churches in Hong Kong are facing this pressure.”

A second pastor recounted a similar experience. “Churches which rent venues from schools for worship are finding that the Education Bureau now sends a rejection letter to those churches.”

If the CCP can successfully penetrate and subvert the education sector, and sever the link between schools and churches at least in terms of values and beliefs if not in name and nominal management, it will achieve its objective of controlling and restricting religion in Hong Kong.

Beijing’s campaign of “Sinicization” of religion

In a speech at the Central United Front Conference held by the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front Work Department (UFWD) in May 2015, Xi Jinping introduced the principle of “Sinicization of religion”. This policy requires religions in mainland China to be independent of foreign influences and aligned to the Chinese Communist Party’s goals and values and under the Party’s control. “We must manage religious affairs in accordance with the law and adhere to the principle of independence to run religious groups on our own accord,” Xi said. “Active efforts should be made to incorporate religions into socialist society,” Xi said.⁶² The Sinicization campaign has resulted in tighter restrictions and regulations on religion, the promotion of Chinese Communist Party propaganda within the state-controlled religious bodies, the display of pictures of Xi Jinping and Party propaganda banners in state-controlled places of worship and increased surveillance of such places of worship.

The campaign was developed further at a National Conference on Religious Work in April 2016, at which Xi outlined the Chinese Communist Party’s policies regarding religious activities, emphasising that “religious affairs carry special importance” in the work of the Chinese Communist Party and the government and that the “relationship of national security and the unification of the motherland” has a place within “socialist religious theory with Chinese characteristics.”⁶³ He added that “religious groups must adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party of China” and that the Party “should guide and educate the religious circle and their followers with the socialist core values”.⁶⁴

As Nina Shea, senior fellow and Director of the Centre for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC said, “Sinicization is a strategy to absorb China’s religious communities into the party’s United Front, to help the CCP indoctrinate, surveil, and ensure ideological conformity. Since 2018, Sinicization regulations have restricted mainland churches in their preaching and practice of Christian teachings that are not authorised by the atheistic CCP. Moreover, they require them to actively support the party leadership and promote ‘values of socialism’ and Xi’s thought in sermons and ‘learning sessions’.”⁶⁵

A Catholic priest from Hong Kong, Father Vincent Woo, agrees. In an interview with the Catholic television channel EWTN in April 2022, he described Sinicization as a policy

⁶² The Guardian, “President Xi Jinping warns against foreign influence on religions in China,” 21 May 2015 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/21/president-xi-jinping-warns-against-foreign-influence-on-religions-in-china>

⁶³ The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, SPF China Observer, “Why Does the Xi Jinping Administration Advocate the ‘Sinicization’ of Religion,” No.8 2018/08/11 - <https://www.spf.org/spf-china-observer/en/document-detail008.html#note4>

⁶⁴ Hong Kong Free Press, “Religious groups ‘must adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party’ – Pres. Xi Jinping,” 24 April 2016 - <https://hongkongfp.com/2016/04/24/religious-groups-must-adhere-to-the-leadership-of-the-communist-party-pres-xi-jinping/>

⁶⁵ National Review, “China Now Threatens Religious Freedom in Hong Kong,” 20 March 2022 - <https://www.nationalreview.com/2022/03/china-now-threatens-religious-freedom-in-hong-kong/>

whereby anything in Christian teaching that is not in conformity with the CCP’s teaching must be “cast out”.⁶⁶

These themes have been repeated in many speeches in subsequent years, and there are signs now that Beijing wants to promote its Sinicization of religion in Hong Kong.

On 31 October 2021, an online meeting was held between three mainland Chinese bishops and 15 religious leaders from the state-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association and 15 senior clergy in the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, specifically on Xi Jinping’s vision of religion with “Chinese characteristics”. While clergy from Hong Kong and mainland China had met on previous occasions, this was reportedly the first ever meeting to be formally organised by the Central Government Liaison Office, Beijing’s representatives, in Hong Kong. It was reported that the Liaison Office and officials from the State Administration of Religious Affairs monitored the online day-long meeting.⁶⁷

A year later, in November 2022, a second online meeting, titled “Second Mainland-Hong-Kong Catholic Sinicized Theology Exchange,” was held, involving over 50 specialists from mainland China and Hong Kong, jointly organised by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CPCA), the Chinese Catholic bishops’ conference theological research committee and the Holy Spirit Study Centre of the Diocese of Hong Kong. In his opening speech, the president of China’s Catholic bishops’ conference and vice-president of the CPA, Bishop Joseph Shen Bin, praised the Chinese Communist Party for its “victoriously held” 20th National Congress, in which Xi Jinping secured an unprecedented third term, and emphasised that Xi had “once again put forward the requirement of adhering to the direction of Sinicization of religion in China and actively guiding religion to adapt to the socialist society”.⁶⁸

Similar initiatives have been held with Protestant churches in Hong Kong. In May 2023, a delegation of at least two dozen from China’s state-approved Protestant bodies, the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), came to Hong Kong for a two-day meeting with local pastors and scholars. Participants, who totalled about 120 people, included teachers from Hong Kong seminaries and leaders of different denominations, churches, and Christian organisations.⁶⁹

In his opening remarks, the chair of the Hong Kong Christian Council, Rev. Wong Ka-fai, said: “The Sinicization of Christianity is a very important research field for the churches and academia in the mainland. To understand the situation of the churches in China, this issue cannot be ignored.”

⁶⁶ Catholic News Agency, “Hong Kong priest: China trying to control religion in Hong Kong,” 26 April 2022 - <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/251069/hong-kong-priest-china-trying-to-control-religion-in-hong-kong>

⁶⁷ Reuters, “Historic conclave: Chinese bishops, priests brief Hong Kong clerics on Xi’s religious views,” 30 December 2021 - <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/exclusive-historic-conclave-chinese-bishops-priests-brief-hong-kong-clerics-xis-2021-12-30/>

⁶⁸ National Catholic Register, “Leaders from China’s State-run Catholic Church Brief Hong Kong Clergy on President Xi’s ‘Sinicization’ plan,” 29 November, 2022 - <https://www.ncregister.com/news/leaders-from-china-s-state-run-catholic-church-brief-hong-kong-clergy-on-president-xi-s-sinicization-plan>

⁶⁹ China Aid, “Hong Kong Holds Its First Seminar on the Sinicization of Christianity,” 25 May 2023 - <https://chinaaid.org/persecution-by-province/hong-kong/hong-kong-holds-its-first-seminar-on-the-sinicization-of-christianity/>

The President of the China Christian Council, Pastor Wu Wei, emphasised that adhering to Sinicization is to “take the core values of socialism as the origin, carry forward the fine traditions of the Chinese nation, and cultivate the concepts such as unity, progress, peace, and tolerance.”

The pro-Beijing newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* quoted Wu Wei’s remarks on the Sinicization of Christianity, and argued that Hong Kongers should stop their attachment to foreign concepts and focus more on stories from Chinese history.

As China Aid, a Christian human rights advocacy organisation, observed, “the fact that a Sinicization conference was held in Hong Kong ... shows that Christianity in Hong Kong is under political pressure.”⁷⁰

The former secretary-general of the Hong Kong province of the Anglican church (*Sheng Kung Hui*), Reverend Peter Koon, now a member of the pro-Beijing Legislative Council, is reported to have supported “Sinicization”. However, he distorts the concept and implies that it means “localisation” or “indigenisation” and avoiding “Western influences”, but this is incorrect and ignores the reality at the heart of “Sinicization” – the aim to ensure the political loyalty of religious groups to the CCP.⁷¹

In April 2023, the Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong, Bishop (now Cardinal) Stephen Chow, visited Beijing, the first visit of its kind since Cardinal Wu’s visit in 1994. In remarks which caused some controversy, he urged Hong Kong Catholics to be “patriotic”, saying: “We all have to learn to love the country and the Church. Everybody wants their country to do well. Nobody wants their country to be bad. Being patriotic is a duty. If you are [a] resident of Hong Kong or the mainland, you should love your own country”.⁷²

While on the surface, a call for religious believers to love their country is not in itself problematic, in the context of China, and religion, where “patriotism” is understood to mean love of the Chinese Communist Party, Cardinal Chow’s comments have caused some concern. He went on to extend an invitation to the Archbishop of Beijing, who is the Chairman of the state-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association, to visit Hong Kong, and said: “We hope that the Diocese of Hong Kong, the Diocese of Beijing, and all the Catholic communities on the mainland can have more intense collaboration and exchanges in the communion of love.” Such trends become more concerning principally because theologians and state officials in mainland China appear to blur the boundaries between “inculturation”, which is encouraged by the Second Vatican Council to adapt the culture of the Chinese people into evangelisation, and “Sinicization” which attempts to induce ideological patriotism in preaching and organisational management of the churches following the party-state. Many observers are concerned that such remarks may draw the Diocese of Hong Kong, which is currently independent of the state-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association, further into China’s “patriotic” religious structures, with similar implications for Hong Kong’s Protestant Christian denominations, leaving Hong Kong’s

⁷⁰ Ibid.,

⁷¹ See comments as quoted in this news report:

<https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202305290116.aspx>

⁷² Asia Times, “Bishop Chow invites the archbishop of Beijing to visit Hong Kong,” 22 April 2023 -

<https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Bishop-Chow-invites-the-archbishop-of-Beijing-to-visit-Hong-Kong-58246.html>

promised autonomy and freedoms – already dismantled in regard to other basic rights – in tatters with regard to freedom of religion or belief.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To the casual observer, freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong may appear to be the one remaining freedom still standing. While Hong Kongers are no longer free to protest, or publish what they wish to in the media or online, as basic freedoms of expression, association, assembly and the press have been stripped away, they are at least still free to go to church, to the mosque, to the synagogue or to the temple. Unlike in mainland China, where places of worship have been shut down, destroyed or desecrated, crosses destroyed, Chinese Communist Party propaganda banners placed alongside religious imagery, surveillance cameras placed at the altar, youth under the age of 18 prohibited from going to places of worship and clergy arrested and jailed, in Hong Kong places of worship are open.

However, if you look a little beneath the surface, as this report has done, it is clear that freedom of religion or belief is under threat.

In a sense, it is inevitable that freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong would be undermined, for two reasons.

Firstly, when freedom itself is dismantled, sooner or later religious freedom is impacted. All the basic rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are inter-linked and interdependent. You cannot have freedom of religion or belief without freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Secondly, the Chinese Communist Party has always been inherently hostile to religion, and has sought at various stages since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 to either eradicate, suppress, control or co-opt religion. So it was inevitable that as it exerts greater direct control of Hong Kong, undermining the high degree of autonomy set out in the “one country, two systems” principle, freedom of religion or belief would come under pressure.

Currently, the threats to freedom of religion or belief are subtle but clear. As this report sets out, the climate of fear surrounding the draconian National Security Law has led to widespread self-censorship by clergy in their sermons, the impact of this new law on the education sector and the fact that the majority of Hong Kong’s schools are run by religious organisations means a cause for concern for the future of religious freedom in schools, and Beijing’s campaign of “Sinicization” of religion raises alarm bells for the future of religion in Hong Kong.

As one religious scholar said, “The most violent form of attack on religious freedom is not necessarily the burning of churches and the killing of believers, for the persecutors kill the bodies but not the souls. Rather, the more dangerous and insidious attack on a religion could be its corruption from within, so that its believers can only practice the faith in name rather than in essence. In this regard, the CCP is about to use the latter strategy to attack religious freedom in Hong Kong. Why? Hong Kong is an international city, and it is the world’s number three international financial centre, ranked only behind New York and London. Closing Christian schools and churches may be too shocking to foreign expatriates and affect the city’s international reputation. Rather, the CCP can totally

restrict religious freedom by using an insidious means: corrupting Christian education and exerting total control on churches without closing them.”⁷³

Where might this lead? The same scholar predicts that Christian churches may be required to register and to take an oath of fidelity to the government, and that their options for how to respond are limited to either complying and becoming part of an “official” state-controlled church, or refusing to comply and establishing an underground church movement.⁷⁴ For Protestants in particular, who unlike Catholics have more flexibility and less hierarchy, Hong Kong could see the development of “house” churches similar to those in mainland China, with small groups of believers meeting in private homes to read the Bible, pray and worship, instead of attending an established church service.

Pastor Shou King-kong, who has been preaching sermons to groups of ten people at a time, told *The Washington Post* that “the norm in the future” will be “mosquito-sized churches”, independent from the registered church and the structures of the state. “To continue to speak the truth and call out for social justice, to tell people what the Bible teaches and how the Christ taught us, shall be the greatest challenge we endeavour in this era,” he said.⁷⁵

The response of the Hong Kong government to the US State Department’s 2022 International Religious Freedom report is a telling sign of the deteriorating situation. In a press release, the Hong Kong government said it “strongly disapproves of and firmly rejects the US’ attempt, through the so-called annual report once again, to smear and attack the HKSAR in its dutiful, faithful and lawful implementation of the [national security law] using the name of religious freedom to disguise its despicable political motives.”⁷⁶

In response to these early warning signs, the international community should monitor the situation of freedom of religion or belief, especially the upcoming legislation regarding Article 23 of the Basic Law, the crowdfunding law and possible amendments to the Chinese Temple Ordinance, very closely.

In particular:

- those governments which have official envoys dedicated to this theme, particularly the United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and the State Department Office of International Religious Freedom; the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom; the European Union’s Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief outside the EU; the United Kingdom Prime Minister’s Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief; Taiwan’s Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, and others should produce an annual report on the situation of freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong, as the US State Department already does.

⁷³ CSW, China: Freedom of religion or belief: the untold stories, July 2022

⁷⁴ Ibid.,

⁷⁵ The Washington Post, “Hong Kong churches no longer off-limits as Beijing tightens grip on dissent,” 13 May 2022

⁷⁶ The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, “HKSAR Government strongly disapproves of and firmly rejects remarks related to Hong Kong in US’ 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom,” 16 May 2023 -

<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202305/16/P2023051600462.htm>

- All 42 countries within the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) should monitor closely and report regularly on developments in Hong Kong.
- The United Kingdom’s Six-Monthly Report annual report on Hong Kong should include the situation of freedom of religion or belief.
- The European Union’s annual report on Hong Kong should include the situation of freedom of religion or belief.
- The international community should also reiterate the UN Human Rights Committee’s recommendations to the Hong Kong and Chinese governments, in its review of Hong Kong’s obligations under the ICCPR, that the National Security Law and sedition law should be repealed and the authorities should refrain from enforcing them immediately.
- The United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the Special Rapporteur on the right to education should also pay close attention to the situation in Hong Kong.

As one Hong Kong Christian leader put it, since the regime has already arrested, charged and convicted almost all their key opponents in Hong Kong, and with the economic slowdown in both mainland China and Hong Kong, a severe, dramatic crackdown on religion on Hong Kong in the immediate future is not expected. Instead, the authorities “will continue to penetrate” religious institutions, “threatening to scare people”. That climate of fear may not lead to outright religious persecution, but it is already causing religious adherents to make compromises which they should not have to make, and as a result undermining their basic right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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