



Macau — Va-PoReg Country Report

Kailitz, Steffen, et al., 2026: Varieties of Political Regimes (Va-PoReg). Country Report Macau, Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYEL7U>

12/01/1887 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal]: The Sino-Portuguese Treaty of Peking was signed on 12/01/1887. It established a significant trade agreement between the Qing dynasty of China and the Kingdom of Portugal. Widely recognized by the Chinese as one of the unequal treaties following the Second Opium War, it granted Portugal perpetual colonial rights over Macau. This concession was conditional upon Portugal's cooperation in combatting the illicit trafficking of opium.¹ Despite intermittent conflicts between Cantonese authorities and the colonial administration, Macau's legal status remained unchanged during the republican revolutions in Portugal in 1910 and in China in 1911. The Kuomintang further confirmed Portuguese jurisdiction over Macau when the Treaty of Peking was reexamined in 1928. During World War II, the Empire of Japan opted not to seize control of Macau, respecting Portuguese neutrality in the region. However, following the capture of a British cargo ship by Japanese troops in Macau waters in 1943, Japan introduced a group of government counsellors instead of deploying military forces. Macau experienced minimal military activity throughout the war, except for in 1945 when the United States conducted air raids on the territory after learning of plans by the colonial government to provide aviation fuel to Japan.²

04/20/1941 Continuation Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal, Right-Wing Autocracy]: Under the governance of Gabriel Maurício Teixeira and local elite Pedro José Lobo, Portuguese Macau functioned as a de facto protectorate of Imperial Japan. They endeavored to navigate a delicate equilibrium between the expectations of the Japanese consul Yasumitsu Fukui and the requirements of the Macanese populace, which had swelled in size owing to the influx of refugees from Mainland China and Hong Kong.³ During the peak of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, discontented residents staged riots in the 1966 12-3 incident, resulting in the deaths of 8 individuals and injuries to over 200. Subsequently, Portugal relinquished full control over the colony, opting to collaborate with the Chinese Communist Party in exchange for retaining administrative authority over Macau.⁴

01/01/1973 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal] /Start Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal]: On this day, the Decree No. 546/72, dated 12/22/1972 came into effect, establishing the Political-Administrative Statute of Macau that created a Legislative Assembly and Provincial Consultative Board with limited local legislative and financial powers, marking the start of indirect colonial rule. This decree implemented the Organic Law of the Overseas, which was supposed to give more autonomy to the overseas territories and had been adopted by the Portuguese Parliament on 05/02/1972, for Macau specifically.⁵ In March 1973 elections to a Legislative Assembly with 13 members were held.⁶ After the 1974 Carnation Revolution, Portugal officially renounced its claim over Macau as an overseas province and recognized it as a Chinese territory administered by Portugal. Subsequently, following China's initial agreements with the United Kingdom regarding Hong Kong's future, negotiations between China and Portugal commenced regarding Macau in 1986. These negotiations culminated in the signing of the 1987 Joint Declaration on the Question of Macau. Under this agreement, Portugal consented to the transfer of the colony to China in 1999, while China pledged to uphold Macau's political and economic systems for a period of 50 years following the handover. Subsequently, on 12/20/1999, at midnight, Macau was formally handed over to China, marking the end of 442 years of Portuguese rule over the territory.⁷

12/20/1999 End Indirect Rule Colonial Regime [of Portugal]/Start Electoral Autocracy [as Protectorate of China, Communist Ideocracy]: Macau operates as a special administrative region of China, with executive, legislative, and judicial powers devolved from the national government. The Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration ensured continuity in economic and administrative affairs during the handover, maintaining an executive-led governing system inherited from its colonial past. Governed by the Basic Law of Macao, which serves as its regional constitution, Macau operates under the principle of „one country, two systems.“⁸ Negotiations for the Joint Declaration and Basic Law occurred after transitional arrangements for Hong Kong were established, resulting in a government structure similar to Hong Kong's. We code this regime change event as a negotiated transition in the frame of the Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration on the Question of Macau. In Macau, Chinese national law generally does not apply, as it operates as a separate jurisdiction. Its legal system, rooted in Portuguese civil law from colonial times, remains in place. However, ultimate authority over the Basic Law and state acts lies with the central government, making regional courts subordinate to mainland China's legal system. Decisions by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress can override local judicial processes. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. In 2021, similar to actions in Hong Kong, 21 election candidates in Macau were disqualified for allegedly not supporting the Basic Law, though no specific violations were specified by the electoral commission.⁹ Per FH's evaluation for the years 2000 to 2003, the territory scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. Macau has not been covered by FH since 2003. LIED and V-Dem do not take Macau into account in their dataset.

Electoral Autocracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Macedonia see North Macedonia

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sino-Portuguese_Treaty_of_Peking

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macau>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collaboration_with_Imperial_Japan#Macau

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macau>

⁵ <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto/546-1972-423022>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1973_Macanese_legislative_election

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macau>

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macau>

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macau>