



CCP's Growing Threats to Religious Freedom in Hong Kong

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"China's War on Religion: The Threat to Religious Freedom and Why it Matters to the United States"

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Senator Sullivan, Congressman Smith, Commissioners, and all staff of the Commission, thank you for convening this hearing and for your leadership in spotlighting the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) escalating assaults on religious freedom. I appreciate the Commission's invitation to share the recent developments in Hong Kong's religious freedom.

As a Hong Kong native, Catholic, and now an exiled activist, I have witnessed and documented the CCP's growing threats to religious communities in Hong Kong and advocated for the rights and freedom of those persecuted for standing up for justice. Hong Kong has become a testbed for the CCP's growing campaign to export religious repression from China to the world. The developments in Hong Kong urgently demand the full attention of the United States.

For decades, the freedoms of conscience and religious belief were guaranteed under Hong Kong's Basic Law and the Sino-British Joint Declaration after the 1997 handover. These protections allowed Hong Kong to become a diverse, international city where religion flourished. Hong Kong served as a sanctuary for persecuted believers fleeing mainland China's religious repression and functioned as a global hub for faith communities and human rights advocates. Every June 4th, the Catholic Church in Hong Kong organized commemorative Masses in various districts across the city to pray for the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre and for the Church in China.

That legacy, however, has been shattered by the imposition of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020, undermining religious communities' role as defenders of justice and freedom and coercing them into silence and compliance. This trend not only impacts millions of Hong Kongers but signals a deliberate CCP campaign that threatens universal values and democratic systems far beyond Hong Kong.

In my work for the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation, I conducted open-source research and interviews with clergy, scholars, educators, and laypersons from various faiths to assess the CCP's quiet and careful strategy to take control of religious communities in Hong Kong.¹

I. Sinicization of Religion in Hong Kong

¹ Frances Hui, "[Hostile Takeover: The CCP and Hong Kong's Religious Communities](#)," Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation.



In May 2015, CCP's General Secretary Xi Jinping introduced the policy of "Sinicization of religion"—an idea to align religious groups with communist doctrines, customs, and "socialist core values," anchoring the party's ideology within faith. In Hong Kong, Sinicization is promoted through orchestrated cultural exchanges, shamming campaigns, educational indoctrination, and infiltration of theological discourse to serve a range of CCP political and economic goals.

State documents describe Hong Kong's six major religions as playing important roles for the People's Republic of China (PRC) by engaging with the world, given the PRC's "strategic and geopolitical factors." It has particularly targeted Christianity and Islam, which it views as especially susceptible to "foreign influence" and associated with pro-democracy values.

Church leaders in Hong Kong have been meeting their counterparts in China for "cultural and theological exchanges," with Chinese bishops and representatives promoting Xi's Sinicization policy and emphasizing the need to "adhere to the direction of Sinicization in China." Since 2021, Hong Kong's Catholic Diocese has held at least three seminars on the Sinicization of religion with the state-controlled church in China.

This campaign has already had a visible effect. In recent years, religious leaders in Hong Kong have increasingly made remarks that echo the CCP rhetoric and values. Hong Kong's bishop, Cardinal Stephen Chow, for example, has urged Hong Kong Catholics to "love the country" and drawn parallels between the late Pope's "love for humanity" and Xi's goal of a "Community of Common Destiny" for all people.² Most recently, he defended the state of religious freedom in Hong Kong and insisted that there is no religious persecution there at an event in Parramatta, Australia.³

In August 2023, a group of 20 leaders of Hong Kong Islamic organizations was invited to visit Xinjiang. In interviews on China's state television, they dismissed reports of Uyghur forced labor—despite extensive documentation of internment camps designed to torture and brainwash millions of Uyghurs—and claimed that Muslim compatriots are "fully enjoying religious freedom and are well-respected."⁴ Muslim community leaders from Hong Kong have also promoted China's development projects, including the Belt and Road Initiatives, which involve cooperation with dozens of Islamic countries.

Faith groups have been publicly celebrating the PRC's National Day and the anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China, displaying the PRC national flag and parroting the CCP rhetoric in sermons and statements. Since the NSL was imposed, representatives from each group gather every fall to celebrate China's national establishment day, all praising the country's leadership and pledging to cooperate with the CCP's governance.

II. Chilling Effect: Self-Censorship and Institutional Silence

² Jeffie Lam, "['Patriotism Is Everyone's Duty': Hong Kong Bishop Brushes aside 'Politicising Religion' Concerns during Historic Beijing Visit](#)," South China Morning Post, April 21, 2023.

³ Michael Cook, "[Hong Kong faces big challenges, says its cardinal](#)," The Catholic Weekly, September 23, 2025.

⁴ Azizul Rahman Suffiad's interview starts from 0:47-55. "[\[新疆新闻联播\] 香港伊斯兰教团体代表团参访新疆](#)," China Central Television, 2023, video, 2:21.

The NSL's sweeping, ambiguous provisions have spread a climate of fear through Hong Kong's religious life. Arrests of prominent faith-inspired activists—including publisher Jimmy Lai, Cardinal Joseph Zen, and Protestant pastor Gary Pang Moon-yuen—have sent shockwaves through clergy and laity alike. Religious leaders are heeding internal advisories to avoid politically sensitive topics. A survey indicated that church leaders are adjusting the content of their preaching in response to the political environment.⁵

The Hong Kong Catholic Diocese has retreated from its historical role in speaking out on religious persecution in China and on sociopolitical issues in Hong Kong. In October 2020, the Church censored a statement by its Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) by removing a reference to James Su Zhiman, a bishop of Baoding diocese in China, who spent over 25 years in Chinese prison or forced labor camps and has been missing since 1996.⁶ In 2022, the Diocese ended the tradition of hosting annual memorial masses on June 4th to commemorate the lost lives in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre.⁷ Later that year, it rebranded JPC as the “Diocesan Commission on Integral Human Development,” removing historical references to persecution in mainland China and the commission’s work to “advocate and promote human rights” from the commission’s website.⁸

Pastors, teachers, and faith-based educators report pressure to adapt teaching materials, sermons, and curricula to align with national security and patriotic-value requirements. Teachers at Catholic schools told me it was challenging to teach students about the early Christian martyrs, Catholicism’s historical role in social and political affairs, persecutions in the Roman Empire, or even the Beatitudes’ blessing of “those who are persecuted for righteousness.” To avoid crossing unseen red lines, they now avoid any real-life examples that might suggest a moral critique of the CCP.

Ordinary worshipers have also retreated from any form of discussion, fearing reprisal for words or actions deemed “seditious” by authorities. This pervasive self-censorship not only stifles dissent but erodes the conscience role of religious communities in society, reducing faith to a depoliticized ritual divested of moral witness. As one Hong Kong Catholic priest told me, “When the Church cannot speak out and advocate for social justice, and address and confront challenges, when people are suffering in the current social conditions and the church remains silent, the God we preach becomes an irrelevant faith.”

III. Indoctrination in Education

The NSL requires all schools in Hong Kong to implement “national security education,” organize weekly flag-raising ceremonies, and incorporate “value education” into all subjects to promote students’ national identity, obedience, and law-abidingness. While these are morally correct values to teach, within China’s national security framework, they are defined as loyalty to the one-party authoritarian rule, where opposition is not tolerated.

⁵ 梁國全, “[如果宣講沒有了情境……](#),” Christian Times, January 19, 2021.

⁶ Greg Torode, “[Nuns arrested as Beijing turns up heat on Church in Hong Kong](#),” Reuters, December 30, 2020.

⁷ “[連續第二年停辦六四彌撒 教區：一切追憶會於 5 月彌撒中進行](#),” Radio Free Asia, May 11, 2023.

⁸ See the PDF of the pamphlet about the Diocesan Commission on Integral Human Development in Chinese: <https://www.dcihd.org/about/?id=13>.



The majority of Hong Kong schools are run by religious sponsoring bodies, primarily Roman Catholics and other Christian denominations. These faith-based schools usually offer courses in Ethics and Religious Studies (ERS) in addition to the mandatory subjects.

These schools are no exception under the NSL requirement. Under the law, the PRC national flag, which symbolizes atheism, is celebrated and displayed beside sacred symbols. Teachers have been required to submit all of their past and current teaching materials related to China and national security for screening and adjustment, and to specify how they incorporate national security and certain Chinese values into each of their courses, including ERS.

ERS textbooks published by the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese now include prayers and reflections that blend religious language with political messaging, praising and embracing China and Chinese identity:

“Lord, thank you for making me Chinese. I am willing to treat others with harmony.”
(Chapter 1: "God Loves China," Embark on the Starlit Path, 2nd grade.)

“Sharing the same culture makes us sons and daughters of the Chinese nation. Jesus, through His words and actions, teaches us how to love our own nation and culture. Are you willing to follow Jesus?” (Chapter 4: "Treasure Traditional Culture," Embark on the Starlit Path, 3rd grade.)

This subtle indoctrination shapes a new generation of Hong Kongers whose religious identity is inseparable from state-defined loyalty, conditioning them to see conscience, activism, and dissent as threats to national security.

IV. Targeted Persecution and Direct Attack

People in Hong Kong still largely retain the formal freedom to attend worship and practice their faith. However, many religious believers whose faith has led them to pro-democracy activism have been arrested, convicted, and sentenced for their political stance. The most prominent include Jimmy Lai, Benny Tai, Joshua Wong, Cardinal Joseph Zen, Rev. Chu Yiu-ming, and Pastor Gary Pang Moon-yuen.

Jimmy Lai, a devout Catholic, has been imprisoned for nearly five years. He has been denied regular access to Holy Communion and has not been permitted to attend mass since the start of his trial in December 2023.⁹

In October 2022, 50-year-old protestant pastor Gary Pang Moon-yuen was sentenced to a 13-month prison term for sedition and seditious speech after he briefly interrupted the trial of activist Chow Hang-tung in January 2022 and criticized the judge for “threatening to silence” people in a YouTube video.¹⁰ He is the first Christian clergyman to be convicted under the NSL.

State-backed media outlets routinely slander religious communities, scapegoating them for dissent and advocating for tighter regulation reminiscent of the mainland’s Religious Affairs Bureau. These media outlets

⁹ Kris Cheng, “[Jimmy Lai’s time ‘running out,’ son says, as trial draws to close](#),” Nikkei Asia, August 13, 2025.

¹⁰ Anugrah Kumar, “[Protestant pastor is first Christian clergy imprisoned on charges of sedition in Hong Kong](#),” Christian Post, October 30, 2022.



usually serve as Party channels to forecast future actions and promote the party's agenda. Their rhetoric signals the possibility of a future regulatory body on religious affairs in Hong Kong.

Falun Gong, in particular, remains vulnerable to organized campaigns of intimidation, physical attack, and destruction of property. Lawmakers have sought to ban it and freeze the assets. The chilling effect also reaches international religious organizations, as the Vatican and other global faith bodies faced increased pressure to align their policies with the CCP agenda.

V. Conclusion

To be precise, the CCP is waging a quiet but determined war against religious communities in Hong Kong. While it is not as overtly violent as the persecution in mainland China, it has effectively eroded the role of religious communities as a conscience for society.

The CCP recognizes the city's unique position as an international crossroads and a source of soft power for its geopolitical ambition. Religious diversity is now tolerated as part of the Hong Kong government's agenda to uphold its image of an international city that respects civil liberties and human rights. But beneath that façade, the CCP has adopted a careful co-opting strategy to gain control of the religious networks and use them as an outpost of its diplomatic and propaganda machinery to extend its influence beyond China's borders.

We must remember that this is the same authoritarian regime that has committed genocide against millions of Uyghurs, persecuted Tibetans for owning photographs of the Dalai Lama, and arrested leaders and members of underground churches who refuse to take oaths of fidelity to the government.

Hong Kong's religious communities now stand as frontline witnesses in a global contest over fundamental freedom. If Beijing can successfully tame churches, mosques, and temples in a place with a common-law system under the watch of the international community, media, and businesses, it will gain a powerful model for pressuring religious communities elsewhere, including in democratic societies. The erosion of religious freedom in Hong Kong undermines the credibility of international human rights agreements and challenges the U.S. to defend its values abroad. If the U.S. fails to recognize the threats facing Hong Kong's religious communities as part of the CCP's war on religious freedom and fails to hold Beijing accountable, it will embolden Beijing and other authoritarian regimes and weaken confidence in international law and our commitment to religious freedom.

VI. Recommendations

For these reasons, I offer the following recommendations for a robust U.S. response:

- 1. Treat Hong Kong as a Front in China's War on Religion.** The State Department and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should include Hong Kong in all China-related reporting and recommendations on religious freedom. Hong Kong should not be seen as a peripheral issue but a critical part of the CCP's broader strategy.



2. **Use Targeted Sanctions and Visa Restrictions.** Leverage all available policy tools—including the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, the Hong Kong Autonomy Act, and the Global Magnitsky authorities—to impose targeted sanctions and visa bans on Hong Kong and mainland Chinese officials responsible for violations of religious freedom in Hong Kong. This should include officials who advocate tightening control over religious affairs and those involved in the imprisonment and mistreatment of religious believers—including judges, prosecutors, and prison authorities who abuse the law to punish religiously motivated advocacy or deny basic religious rights in detention. Congress should pass the Hong Kong Judicial Sanctions Act (H.R.633/S.1755), which identifies some of these individuals for review by the State Department for sanctions.¹¹
3. **Increase Advocacy and Diplomatic Pressure.** Make the release of religious and pro-democracy detainees a priority in all bilateral and multilateral engagements with Hong Kong and PRC officials. Encourage Congressional Members and USCIRF Commissioners to formally adopt religious prisoners of conscience, raising their profiles and advocating for their immediate release. Such public advocacy amplifies the voices of persecuted individuals and signals the seriousness of U.S. concerns.
4. **Engage Global Religious Authorities.** Coordinate with the Vatican, major Christian denominations, Islamic organizations, and other international religious bodies to resist CCP efforts to co-opt or silence religious leaders and institutions in Hong Kong. Urge the Vatican to reconsider its agreement with Beijing, prevent the terms from extending to Hong Kong, and publicly advocate for religious prisoners of conscience in China and Hong Kong.
5. **Strengthen Protection for Hong Kong Believers at Risk.** Investigate CCP-directed harassment and transnational repression aimed at Hong Kong activists or believers on U.S. soil, including threats against churches, church leaders, or their families. Congress should pass the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Offices (HKETO) Certification Act (H.R.2661), requiring the administration to review the diplomatic privileges and immunities given to these offices that have served as the Hong Kong government's outposts to influence policy on China and conduct espionage and surveillance of pro-democracy activists around the world.¹² Create and expand safe pathways—including refugee or humanitarian routes—for those at risk due to religious belief or faith-based advocacy.

U.S. leadership in shining a light on this issue is crucial. Through policy, advocacy, and international coordination, the U.S. can help defend not only the rights of Hong Kongers but also the universal principle of religious liberty upon which America was built.

¹¹ [H.R.733](#): “To provide for a review of sanctions with respect to Hong Kong,” Congress.gov.

¹² [H.R.2661](#): “Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office (HKETO) Certification Act,” Congress.gov.