



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

Congressional-Executive Commission on China Hearing

“Control of Religion in China through Digital Authoritarianism”

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Hart Senate Office Building; Room 216

Good morning, Chairman Merkley, Co-Chair McGovern, and Honorable Members of the Commission. Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, at this important hearing.

I truly appreciate your steadfast leadership and continuing attention to the Chinese government’s religious freedom abuses targeting many ethnic and religious communities across China, including Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, underground Catholic and Protestant house church Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners, to name a few.

For decades, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has placed religion under tight, comprehensive, and coercive control. It exercises control by using arbitrary laws and regulations and implementing them through a complex but sophisticated web of Party and government agencies at all levels, including the CCP’s United Front Work Department, State Administration for Religious Affairs, and China’s Public Security and State Security apparatus.

Anyone suspected of violating the CCP’s religious policies is severely punished. China’s egregious abuses against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims is a case in point and one in which the U.S. government has determined amounts to genocide. Even the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights’ recent Xinjiang report

confirmed that severe violations have occurred and may amount to crimes against humanity.

The crackdown on religion has become increasingly harsh in recent years under the brutal rule of CCP leader Xi Jinping, leading some experts to call his decade-long reign the “bitter winter for religious freedom in China.”

Xi Jinping’s new regulation on religion, the “Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services,” represents a new low for Xi and his government. Its impact cannot be understated, as the regulation imposes new restrictions on religious activities, further constricting the narrow space in which religious groups can operate.

This new regulation has a particularly significant and adverse impact on independent, unregistered religious communities. Due to the government’s severe persecution, many of them rely on online platforms and resources for religious education and training, religious gatherings and worship, and other religious activities. These online platforms and smartphone apps are often the only viable means through which these religious communities can carry out activities and connect with one another, especially during the strict COVID-19 lockdowns.

The negative impact of this regulation is already being felt across China since it went into effect in March 2022. Chinese authorities have recruited hundreds, if not thousands, of auditors to target and censor religious content on the Chinese internet. Christian and Tibetan Buddhist groups have reported that their websites and WeChat virtual groups were shut down and are no longer accessible. USCIRF is concerned that this regulation will lead to more persecution and abuses, especially for groups with foreign connections.

The regulation also imposes tighter restrictions on state-sanctioned religious groups. These groups are required to submit detailed information to authorities to apply for a permit to operate online. In addition, they are required to self-censor their religious materials on the internet. Therefore, even state-sanctioned religious groups are not safe and could be punished if they are found to be non-compliant with the government’s policies.

We are all aware that the Chinese government routinely monitors and censors all kinds of online content, including religious materials. But this new regulation is the first of its kind designed to specifically target religious content on the internet, and it has created a chilling effect for many religious groups and individuals. It is tantamount to a total ban on religious activities, as many groups are no longer able to operate in person or online.

The order to de-religionize the internet came from the highest echelon of the Party, Xi Jinping. At the 2016 China National Conference on Religious Work attended by high-level party and government officials, Xi Jinping expressed a particular displeasure toward the phenomenon of “internet religions.” Five years later at the 2021 China National Conference on Religious Work, Xi again emphasized the need to “strengthen the management of religious affairs on the internet.”

It is important to note that Xi Jinping sees religion as fundamentally connected to national security. As a consequence, he has underscored the need to fight against “foreign infiltration through the use of religion” and “religious extremism,” including on the internet. This new regulation is an integral part of the CCP’s “Sinicization policy” to subjugate and control all ethnic and religious groups, coercing support and loyalty to the CCP rule and its policies, or else face severe consequences.

Mr. Chairman, this new regulation is the latest example of the CCP expanding and refining its techno-authoritarianism toolkit at home, as it tries to intimidate and coerce its own citizens to perpetuate its rule. Ethnic minority regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, in particular, have borne the brunt of the CCP’s technology-enhanced brutality in recent years, as the China Commission has well documented.

The CCP has been exporting its techno-authoritarianism overseas to countries with poor human rights records as well. Oppressive regimes can emulate the “China model” to persecute political dissidents and human rights advocates. The U.S. government and companies must continue to ensure that critical technology is not exported to China and contributing to any religious freedom abuses abroad.

USCIRF also recommends that the U.S. government impose more targeted sanctions on Chinese officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations; especially those within the United Front Work Department, the State Administration for Religious Affairs, as well as China's public security and state security apparatus. These entities are directly involved in the drafting, implementation, and enforcement of the new regulation on internet religious activities.

In closing, I would like to thank the Commission again for the opportunity to testify and for your attention to the plight of all persecuted ethnic and religious groups in China. I look forward to your questions.