

Congressional-Executive Commission on China

Hearing
on
Control of Religion in China through Digital Authoritarianism

Tuesday, September 13, 2022 – 10:00am
Virtual via Cisco Webex

Statement of Senator Jeff Merkley
Chair
Congressional-Executive Commission on China

- Good morning. Today’s hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China on “Control of Religion in China through Digital Authoritarianism” will come to order.
- Before we turn to the subject of this hearing, I’d like to take a moment to acknowledge and thank President Biden for his recent appointment of five executive branch commissioners to this Commission. This marks the first time in nearly six years that the Commission includes executive branch commissioners. Their appointment will bolster our ability to bring the expertise and perspective of the various branches of government in our work monitoring human rights and the rule of law in China. As we develop recommendations for legislative, executive, and international action, dialogue to coordinate our efforts will be critical, as it has been in recent years in implementing legislation this Commission spearheaded such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, and more. I look forward to working closely with our new commissioners. Those commissioners are:
 - Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink;
 - Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade Marisa Lago;
 - Undersecretary of Labor for International Affairs Thea Lee;
 - Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Lisa Peterson; and
 - Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya.
- Welcome to our new commissioners. We are absolutely delighted to have you.
- Today, our hearing focuses on the freedom of religion, particularly recent developments in Chinese authorities’ use of technology to crack down on the free exercise of religion. While

many of our hearings explore violations of religious freedom – in Xinjiang, Tibet, and elsewhere – this is our first hearing dedicated to this topic since 2018.

- Recent Chinese Communist Party steps to use digital repression to strengthen control of religion make this an especially timely hearing. As more religious activity and resources move online, especially in response to COVID, Chinese officials have expanded use of digital tools to surveil and suppress online religious expression. Invasive surveillance technologies and mass biometric data collection track and monitor religious groups that authorities deem to be a threat. In March of this year, new Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services went into effect, which require a government-issued permit to post religious content online and ban the online broadcasting of religious ceremonies, rites, and services, among a host of other restrictions infringing on Chinese citizens' freedom of religion.
- These measures control how individuals and communities worship, with the aim of “sinicizing” religion to conform with Party priorities. As we will hear today, those priorities are political and social control. To achieve that control, Chinese authorities cite objectives like combating control and countering so-called “religious extremism” as they undermine fundamental human rights. The recent UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Xinjiang report calls this what it is: a pretext that conflates personal religious choice with extremism and leads to severe human rights abuses.
- Our first witness today is one of the most powerful voices in the world when it comes to exposing these abuses and advocating for those who simply wish to exercise their basic rights, and so I'm honored that Nury Turkel is here with us. After we hear his perspective, our second panel of eminent experts will help us understand the tools of digital surveillance and repression, the risks of this model of authoritarian management of religion spreading to other countries, and recommendations for how defenders of religious freedom can respond. I look forward to our witnesses' testimony.