

Freedom House Statement for the Record

Congressional-Executive Commission on China
Hearing: Control of Religion in China through Digital Authoritarianism
September 13, 2022

The People’s Republic of China is One of the Worst Violators of Religious Freedom in the World

Freedom House research has tracked 16 straight years of decline in freedom and democracy around the world, with 2021 seeing the fewest number of countries with net improvements during that period. Nearly 42 percent of the world’s population now live in countries that faced a deterioration in rights in 2021. Unfortunately, worsening conditions for religious freedom are a component of this deepening democratic recession, with the global average score for our religious freedom indicator declining by 5.4 percent over the last 16 years. State repression of religious minorities and attacks by nonstate actors were the most common driver of the decline in religious freedom, trends born out in the types of attacks we see in the emergency support we provide to individuals under threat for their religious views.¹

The Chinese Communist Party is one of the worst violators of religious freedom today. Controls over religion in China have increased since 2012, seeping into new areas of daily life and triggering growing resistance from believers. A 2017 report published by Freedom House found that at least 100 million people—nearly one-third of estimated believers in China—belonged to religious groups facing “high” or “very high” levels of persecution (Protestant Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uyghur Muslims, and Falun Gong).² Most of these communities face as bad, or worse, persecution today than they did five years ago. Religious believers and activists on behalf of the rights of ethnic minorities continue to be key targets for high-tech surveillance and prosecution for what they write on applications like WeChat. Freedom House has documented multiple cases of Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Falun Gong practitioners who have been sentenced to prison for writing about issues related to their culture or faith on that app.

Conditions for religious believers in China occur within a broader context of increased authoritarianism and declining freedom in China. Over the past decade, repression in China has gone from bad to worse. Since Xi Jinping took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, the authorities have intensified many of their restrictions, resulting in an overall increase in religious persecution. In 2014, China had a Freedom in the World score of 17; by 2022, that had dropped to nine. China ranks 193rd out of 210 countries and territories. Tibet ties for dead last. In 2011, China, the world’s largest surveillance state, had a *Freedom on the Net* score of 17; this year, it’s a 10, making it the lowest scoring country in our net freedom index for the seventh year in a row. These are dramatic rates of decline for that period of time—nearly 50 percent.

China’s Persecution of Religious Communities

Most well-known in a long list of violations are the widespread crimes against humanity and acts of genocide that have been committed against Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur

¹ Annie Boyajian USCIRF Testimony “Leveraging Targeted [Sanctions](#) in Defense of Religious Freedom”, 10/21/2021.

² *Ibid.*

Autonomous Region and forced labor facilities, which reportedly detain more than one million men, women, and children at any given time. The abuses being perpetrated against the Uyghurs are, unfortunately, only part of the story. Some officials now working in the Uyghur region fine-tuned their tactics by first targeting Tibetans and Falun Gong practitioners,³ and, for decades religious believers including Christians have suffered torture and abuse.

As China experiences a spiritual revival across a wide range of faiths, the Chinese government's religious controls have taken different forms for different localities, ethnicities, and denominations. Over the past five years and especially during the pandemic, in addition to the worsening atrocities committed against Turkic Muslims, communities in other parts of China like Falun Gong practitioners, have faced intensified repression, reversing a slight lull in the aggressiveness of the CCP's campaign against the group in the early years of Xi Jinping's leadership. Falun Gong believers across China, including some with relatives in the United States, face large-scale arbitrary detention, torture, and at times, deaths from abuse in custody. Catholics who refuse worship outside of state-sanctioned parameters continue to face reprisals and pressure from Chinese security forces, despite a 2018 agreement on the appointment of bishops between the Vatican and Beijing.

One trend that deserves greater attention is the precarious situation for religious freedom in Hong Kong. Following adoption of the National Security Law two years ago, we have seen a wide range of rights suppressed, resulting in dozens of prosecutions. Now and over the coming year, the authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing may be turning their sights on religious communities.

The Chinese Communist Party's Use of the Internet to Oppress Believers

Conditions for internet users in China remain profoundly oppressive, confirmed by the country's status as the world's worst abuser of internet freedom for the seventh consecutive year. Ordinary users continue to face severe legal repercussions for activities like sharing news stories, talking about their religious beliefs, or communicating with family members and others overseas. The CCP has tightened its control over the state bureaucracy, the media, online speech, religious groups, and civil society associations.⁴

The regime frequently censors cultural and religious content that it deems undesirable. Content related to marginalized ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups is restricted. Keywords related to Falun Gong consistently appear on leaked lists of prohibited terms. Reference to the banned Church of the Almighty God are also reportedly marked as politically sensitive by censors employed by mobile phone services, with users facing account deactivation for sharing religious information. Following the coronavirus outbreak in January 2020, reports emerged of Christian congregations being prevented from conducting live-streamed meetings and of individual parishioners being compelled to delete religious imagery from their social media accounts. However, censorship is not reciprocal. Amid the human rights crisis in Xinjiang, Uyghur-language content

³ <https://jamestown.org/program/the-learning-curve-how-communist-party-officials-are-applying-lessons-from-prior-transformation-campaigns-to-repression-in-xinjiang/>

⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2021/global-drive-control-big-tech>

and relevant news reporting have been heavily censored and many ordinary Uyghur users detained, while Islamophobic commentary is permitted to circulate widely.

In March 2020, new rules called the Provisions on the Governance of the Online Information Content Ecosystem came into effect. These provisions place online content in three categories: encouraged positive content, discouraged negative content, and illegal content. The illegal category includes terrorist and obscene content, as well as information “harming the nation's honor and interests,” “subverting” the CCP regime, or challenging the government’s social, ethnic, religious, or economic policies. New regulations jointly released by five state organs on December 21 banned the transmission of religious content online in China without a government license. Authorities in Qinghai province (where a fifth of the population is Tibetan) have banned Tibetan social media groups tied to religion. The new regulations call for the “Sinicization” of religion, in which the Party leads all religious communities and controls religious-based content.⁵

Members of persecuted religious and ethnic minority groups also tend to face especially harsh punishment for their online activities. Prominent rights defenders and members of ethnic minorities or banned religious groups have received the longest sentences, often exceeding 10 years. A leaked Chinese government document with details of dozens of Uyghurs and other Muslims jailed or taken away for reeducation in Xinjiang that was made public in February 2020 included in its list someone who was friends on WeChat with a Uyghur in Turkey, an individual who accidentally clicked on an overseas website on their phone, and a woman sentenced in August 2017 to 15 years in prison for making contact online with Uyghurs outside the country. Also that month, four Tibetan monks⁶ were sentenced to up to 20 years in prison after police discovered a phone containing records of communication with fellow monks in Nepal and donations for earthquake relief. These are harsher punishments than a defendant might receive for violent crimes like sexual assault or manslaughter in some countries.⁷

These prosecutions are facilitated by the Chinese regime’s extensive and sophisticated surveillance systems. Direct surveillance of internet and mobile phone communications is pervasive, and privacy protections under Chinese law are minimal. In recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly moved toward big-data integration with the help of private companies, essentially consolidating in various databases a wide array of information on individuals, including their internet and mobile phone activities, with known members of ethnic and religious minorities being a high priority target.⁸ Residents of Xinjiang are subject to severely invasive surveillance tactics and both Uyghurs and Tibetans face heightened monitoring even when traveling in other parts of China.

China’s Role in Suppressing Religious Freedom Abroad

The Chinese government’s violations of religious freedom are also not contained within its borders. According to Freedom House’s research, the authoritarian regime in China conducts the world’s most

⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/china-media-bulletin>

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/06/china-tibetan-monks-harshly-sentenced>

⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net>

⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/21/china-xinjiang-surveillance-state-police-targets/>

sophisticated, comprehensive, and far-reaching campaign of transnational repression in the world.⁹ It was responsible for 229 of the 735 incidents of physical transnational repression that Freedom House recorded between 2014 and 2021, targeting people on every inhabited continent and in at least 36 countries. Mirroring the patterns of its repression at home, the CCP has targeted individual dissidents, their family members, and entire ethnic, and religious groups, including Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongolians, and Falun Gong practitioners. The CCP has also abused Interpol's systems to have false notices issued for believers, resulting in their detention or even deportation.

Recommendations

As democracies around the world, including the United States, grapple with how to address the threats and challenges undemocratic rulers pose to global rights and freedoms, it is important that attention be given to how to better protect freedom of religion or belief. Steps to better protect against China's repression of religious freedom, both at home and abroad include:

1. **In all meetings with Chinese officials, raise human rights and religious freedom issues, including the names of political and religious prisoners.** Request information or specific action related to their medical condition and treatment. This should include both prisoners who are a priority nationally, as well as prisoners detained within the geographic boundaries or for subjects that fall within the thematic responsibility of the Chinese official with whom you are meeting. This is especially relevant on travel to China, when dealing with state or CCP officials at the provincial or municipal level or those in policy areas like education or ethnic minorities. Make this routine practice for STAFDELS and CODELS, and press the executive branch to have US officials across all agencies at all levels raise these issues, including the president.
2. **Strategically expand targeted sanctions geographically and higher up the CCP hierarchy, including on officials who have committed or been complicit in the abuse, torture, or persecution of religious believers.** Freedom House commends the U.S. government for the targeted sanctions applied to Chinese and Hong Kong officials to date. Penalizing violators of human rights and religious freedom through the blocking of visas and freezing of US-based assets is an effective way to deter future abuses and ensure that these individuals face some measure of justice. Targeted sanctions should be applied to violators of religious freedom as impactfully as possible and should be part of a robust, comprehensive strategy that employs a full range of coordinated diplomatic and policy actions. As part of this comprehensive strategy, policymakers should seek to avoid unintended consequences for religious minorities in the implementation of foreign policy initiatives.
3. **Ensure robust implementation and enforcement of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFPLA) and urge other countries to adopt similar measures.** The UFPLA prohibited the importation of products made in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—where forced labor is notorious and rampant—unless the importer can prove that forced labor was not used in the creation of their products. It also required the imposition of sanctions on those involved in human rights abuses related to forced labor and the creation of a strategy to ensure that goods made with forced

⁹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/united-states>

labor in China do not enter the United States. Congress should work with the executive branch to ensure sufficient funding for these efforts, timely creation and implementation of the strategy, and robust enforcement of the provisions related to sanctions and import bans.