

**Presented by Vice Chair Michael Young and Chair David Saperstein**  
**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**  
**Before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus**

April 6, 2000



*Commission Vice Chair Michael Young (r) and Chair David Saperstein (l) testify on religious freedom.*

## **Introduction**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to testify concerning the situation of religious freedom in China.

As you know, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is an independent federal agency of the U.S. government that was created pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, 22 U.S.C. 6401 (note), Pub. L. 105-292, as amended by Pub. L. 106-55. This bipartisan ten-member commission (including the ex officio Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom) is charged with the responsibility of advising the President, the Congress, and the Secretary of State on matters involving international religious freedom. For our first annual report, due May 1, we are focusing primarily on three specific countries--Sudan, China, and Russia--while not excluding other issues. With respect to the People's Republic of China (PRC), two months ago we notified the PRC embassy of our interest in visiting China for the purpose of better understanding religious issues there. The embassy has yet to respond to

our request. We have conducted research and held hearings on limits to religious freedom in China. My comments reflect some of our findings.

Chinese authorities have tightened the already narrow circle within which religious adherents may practice their religions. Protestant house-churches, the underground Catholic church, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims and Falun Gong practitioners have all felt the squeeze.

The year saw: the continued prohibition of religious belief for large sectors of the population; the ongoing harassment of unregistered churches; the assertion of state control over authorized religions; an increase in the number of sects branded &quot;heretical cults;&quot; the continued use of notorious extra-judicial summary trials and the sentencing to re-education through labor camps for so-called &quot;crimes&quot; associated with religion; and credible reports of torture of religious prisoners.

At a time when economic slowdown, increasing unemployment, higher taxes and official corruption threaten to undermine China's primary goal of modernization, Chinese authorities view the ongoing explosion of religious activity as a danger to social stability. In recent months the increasing number, greater organization, expanding national networks, and growing boldness of religious adherents have shaken China's leaders and resulted in tighter control of religious affairs.

## **Continued prohibition of religious belief for large sectors of the population**

The right to freedom of belief is explicitly denied to the 60 million members of the Chinese Communist Party, the three million members of the Chinese military and hundreds of millions of citizens under the age of 18. Several campaigns to purge the Party and military of believers have been waged over the last five years. The state has re-asserted its monopoly over the spiritual education of minors, thus making participation by children in any religious activity subject to discipline.

## **Assertion of state control of authorized religions**

Regulations in the PRC now require that all religious groups register with local units of the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) in the Ministry of Civil Affairs and that they affiliate with one of the five authorized religions: Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, Protestants and Catholics. Churches are required to be self-supporting, locally led, and self propagating. It is in this narrow officially

sanctioned space that people of faith may exercise their religious beliefs--to use a Chinese metaphor, the "cage" in which the bird of religious liberty will be allowed to fly.

While in theory registration requirements need not be onerous, and in fact many congregations operate under RAB auspices with little interference, serious restrictions on freedom of religious expression have been reported in recent years. Many of the limits imposed on registered churches are in violation of accepted international standards of free exercise of religion.

Human Rights Watch reports that registration oversight of these authorized religious groups by these associations entails official scrutiny of membership; ceding some control over selection of clergy, opening financial records to government scrutiny; restricting contacts with other religious institutions; accepting limits on some activities, such as youth or social welfare programs, or building projects; eschewing evangelism; allowing censorship of religious materials and interference with doctrinal thought; and limiting religious activities to religious sites. The state requires that political indoctrination be an important component of religious training for recognized religious groups. This often comes at the expense of religious education as is the case with a recent movement to "reduce the number of years of seminary training of Catholic priests from the normal five to six years to two."

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Authorities limit the building of mosques, monasteries, and churches even for approved groups. They restrict the numbers of students in Christian seminaries, Buddhist monasteries and Islamic schools. They proscribe the teaching of certain doctrines and labeled heretical practices such as exorcism and healing.

Chinese authorities remain deeply suspicious of the involvement of "hostile foreign elements" in Chinese congregations and severely limit association between Chinese and foreign religious groups.

## Ongoing harassment of unregistered churches

The Chinese strategy is to manage religious affairs within a legal and bureaucratic framework that places responsibility for developing religious policy on the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party and the management of religious issues under the direction of the government's Religious Affairs Bureau. All religious groups are now required to register with local RAB officials. The Protestant house-church movement and Catholics loyal to the Vatican are among those groups that have resisted registration on principle or been denied permission to register. While in many areas officials have allowed the unregistered groups to continue without harassment, in others, officials have been zealous to the point of abuse in their campaign to force the registration of places of worship.

Human rights groups report Chinese authorities detained 40 Protestant worshipers in Wugang in October of 1998, at least 70 worshipers in Nanyang in November, and 48 Christians, including Catholics, in Henan in January of 1999. Authorities detained, beat, and fined an unknown number of underground Catholics in Baoding, Hebei in the same month. In April Public Security personnel raided a house church service in Henan. Twenty-five Christians were detained. Seventy-one members of the Disciples Sect were detained in Changying in April. In November of 1999, six leaders of Protestant groups in Henan were sentenced to re-education through labor. Among Protestants, leaders of large house-church networks who, in 1998, challenged the government to a dialogue, have been targeted for arrest. Unauthorized Protestant places of worship have also been destroyed.

Some observers report a concerted effort to "eliminate underground bishops and bring them under the authority of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association." This patriotic association is being introduced into areas in which it never existed before. It is pressing underground bishops for obedience, not just cooperation. Without consultation of church leaders, diocese are being re-organized: some recently divided diocese are being re-united and others have been abolished. On January 6 of this year, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association ordained five bishops without Vatican approval and over the objections of many in the Chinese Catholic church. Plans for further ordinations have come to light.

There are reports of many detentions of Catholic clergy loyal to the Vatican in recent months in an apparent attempt to force their allegiance to the official church. One, the young Father

Weiping, was detained in May of 1999 while performing an unauthorized mass. He was found dead on a Beijing street shortly after being released from detention. An autopsy was not conducted and the cause of death is unknown. The Vatican reports that five churches built without authorization had been razed. 13 were destroyed in the Fuzhou diocese in Fujian.

## **Xinjiang and Tibet**

Some of the most egregious violations of religious freedom occur in Tibet and Xinjiang, where ethnic, political, and economic factors complicate the relationship of the atheist state and large communities of Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims. In these areas Chinese controls on information are especially tight. Reporters and foreign visitors are not allowed independent access to sensitive sites and individuals.

In these sensitive regions, authorities seeking to crush separatist activities infiltrate and attempt to dominate religious institutions which they fear foment opposition to continued Chinese control. Religious freedoms are curtailed and in response, resistance intensifies.

Amnesty International reports that authorities in The Xinjinag Uighur Autonomous Region have closed mosques and Koranic schools, halted the construction of unauthorized mosques, prohibited the use of Arabic script, more tightly controlled Islamic clergy, and required Muslims who are Party members or who work in government offices to abandon the practice of Islam or lose their positions. The Chinese press reported that "rampant activities by splittists" justified the closure of 10 unauthorized mosques, and the arrest of mullahs who it said had preached "illegally" outside their mosques. It further related that public security personnel raided 56 mosques.

While allowing some Muslims to make a religious journey to Mecca, authorities deny that experience to hundreds of Uighurs desiring to do so.

In Tibet, where Chinese authorities fear growing Tibetan nationalism and the political and organizational power of the monasteries, religious institutions are likewise tightly controlled.

In an action denounced by the Dalai Lama, authorities of the Tibet Autonomous Region and the RAB in Beijing approved the selection of a boy as the reincarnation of the sixth Reting

Lama. This is the latest in a campaign to control the future leadership of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1995 the Dalai Lama identified the young boy Gendun Choekyi Nyima as the reincarnate Panchen Lama. The Chinese immediately denounced the Dalai Lama's choice, detained the boy and his family, and pushed the acceptance of their choice, Gyaltzen Norbu. Chinese authorities continue to hold the Panchen Lama at an undisclosed location and refuse all requests to visit him put forward by official and unofficial foreign delegations. Chinese authorities have no more authority to select reincarnated lamas than they do to select Catholic bishops.

Each of Tibet's major monasteries is overseen by a Democratic Management Committee, members of which are vetted by authorities for their political reliability. The Committee regulates religious affairs, finances (90% of which come from private donations), security, and training. It enforces limits on the number of monks and nuns within monasteries and conducts invasive &quot;patriotic&quot; education campaigns that force monks and nuns to denounce the Dalai Lama and accept the Chinese-selected Panchen Lama. Simple administrative actions can have devastating effects on religious institutions. Chinese authorities in Qinghai ordered all Tibetan Buddhist monks over 60 to retire. At one temple, 49 of the 52 monks were over 60. With the monastery reduced to a skeletal staff, young monks were sent back to their villages to attend state-run schools.

Authorities limit the religious festivals Tibetans are allowed to observe, the rituals monks are allowed to perform, and the courses of study monasteries are allowed to teach. In 1995, Chinese authorities asserted that &quot;a sufficient number of monasteries, monks and nuns now exist to &quot;satisfy the daily religious needs of the masses.&quot; The Party Secretariat of the Lhasa City Administration announced that it would not allow more monasteries to be built and that monasteries constructed without permission would be destroyed.

## **Increase in the number of sects branded &quot;heretical cults&quot; and banned**

Article 300 of the Criminal Law, as amended in 1997, and as interpreted by the People's Supreme Court and the National People's Congress, stipulates that central authorities have the right to delegitimize any belief system they deem to be superstitious or a so-called &quot;evil religious organization.&quot; Leaders of these so-called cults are subject to &quot;resolute punishment.&quot; In the absence of a clear definition of terms, Chinese authorities have wide latitude for using the designation &quot;cult.&quot; Even private religious practice is forbidden to members of groups declared by Chinese authorities to be &quot;evil cults.&quot;

Falun Gong, a syncretic meditation and martial arts organization whose spiritual teachings draw on Taoist and Buddhist belief systems, has been the target of a virulent anti cult campaign. On April 25, 1999, 10,000 practitioners staged a peaceful demonstration outside the residential compound for top Party officials in central Beijing. The gathering was prompted by reports of police violence against fellow practitioners in Tianjin and by an official ban on publishing Falun Gong materials. In the months that followed, the group was declared an "evil cult" and by year's end the government acknowledged having detained more than 35,000 adherents. Some detainees were tortured. Zhao Jinhua was reportedly beaten and killed while in Shandong jail. Others have been held in mental institutions for "re-education." In closed trials Falun Gong leaders received prison sentences for from 6 to 18 years. Many of those who have told their stories to outside media have been severely punished.

The law has been used against a number of other religious groups. In January of this year, Zhong Gong, a meditation and exercise sect claiming 20 million practitioners, was added to the list. Also banned are a sect with Buddhist origins, Yi Guan Dao, and at least 10 evangelical Protestant groups including the China Evangelistic Fellowship in Henan province.

## Conclusion

China's policy on religious freedom grows out of an ideology that holds that religion is antithetical to Marxism's "scientific" world view. Eventually, when societal conditions improve, religion will "wither away." Until that time it is tolerated as, they believe, an imperfect component of the "initial stage of socialism" but must also be controlled by the state to serve goals of socialism. Thus China defines and allows a limited range of what authorities consider "normal religious activity." This activity is controlled within a bureaucratic and legal framework true to the ideological roots of the CPC.

And at the end of the day, authorities can and do circumvent the law altogether when they perceive their interests to be at risk. Consequently, "dealing with 'illegal' religious activity according to law" means that freedom of speech, assembly, association, and religious exercise as set forward in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights are routinely denied. As a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, China should show leadership and start living up to them. Thank you.