



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### FACTSHEET **CHINA**

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*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

## The 2019 Regulation for Religious Groups in China

*By Dominic J. Nardi, Policy Analyst*

In December 2019, the Chinese state-run news agency *Xinhua* [published](#) the Administrative Measures for Religious Groups. The regulation, which went into effect on February 1, 2020, requires religious groups to obtain government permission for nearly every aspect of their operations. In addition, religious groups must accept and propagate the principles of the Chinese Communist Party. This factsheet provides a brief overview of the new regulation and explains why it marks a significant escalation in the Chinese government's ongoing crackdown on religious freedom.

### The 2019 Administrative Measures for Religious Groups

The new Administrative Measures for Religious Groups increases the pressure on religious communities in China by expanding the scope of activities for which they must seek official permission. Article 3 of the regulation bans any religious activity by unregistered religious organizations without prior approval. Article 25 grants the religious affairs department significant supervisory authority to review the charter and annual work plans of religious organizations, as well as to monitor their compliance with national and local laws. In addition, religious organizations are required to report for review and approval any leadership personnel changes, important conferences or meetings, and major expenditures or construction projects.

In addition to making routine operations more burdensome, the 2019 Administrative Measures for Religious Groups also amounts to a significant invasion of religious organizations' privacy and autonomy. The reporting requirements could provide Chinese authorities access to sensitive financial, personnel, or other information. As written, the regulation gives local authorities broad authority to deny even routine requests. Given the systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations in the country, some observers fear that Chinese officials will use this authority to target religious groups that Beijing deems to be subject to "foreign" influence, including Islam and Christianity. The breadth of the reporting requirements also increases the risk that Chinese religious organizations will violate the law—either intentionally or inadvertently—by not reporting an activity mentioned in the regulation, thus giving Chinese authorities an excuse to take legal action.

Other sections of the regulation effectively require religious organizations to actively support the Communist Party and socialist values. According to Article 22, religious organizations must participate in the ongoing “sinification” campaign by providing interpretations of religious doctrines and canons that comply with the government’s version of “traditional Chinese culture” and socialist values, manifested most notably in the government’s insistence on choosing the next reincarnation of the 14th Dalai Lama. In addition, the regulation requires religious organizations to instruct clergy and congregants to support the Communist Party and socialist values. These requirements go far beyond a prohibition against opposing or criticizing the government; now, religious organizations are legally obligated to effectively act as surrogates for the Communist Party.

Although the regulation does not specify how religious groups will be expected to implement these mandates, all of the reporting and approval requirements provide government officials frequent opportunities to monitor the activities of religious organizations and determine if their “support” for the Communist Party is sufficiently zealous. As one Chinese Catholic priest told the Catholic news agency *Asia News*, “In practice, your religion no longer matters, if you are Buddhist, or Taoist, or Muslim or Christian: the only religion allowed is faith in the Chinese Communist Party.”

### **Key Provisions of the 2019 Administrative Measures for Religious Groups**

*(translations provided by Bitter Winter)*

#### **Article 3**

“Without the approval of the religious affairs department of the people’s government, or registration with the civil affairs department of the people’s government, no religious activities in the name of religious organizations are allowed.”

#### **Article 5**

“Religious organizations must support the leadership of the Communist Party of China, abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations, rules and policies, adhere to the principles of self-support and self-governance, adhere to the direction of Sinicization of religions in China, embody the core values of socialism, and maintain national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony and social stability.”

#### **Article 17**

“Religious organizations should publicize the guidelines and policies of the Communist Party of China, national laws, regulations, and rules to the clergy and religious citizens, in order to instruct and direct the clergy and religious citizens to support the rule of the Communist Party of China, support the socialist system, follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics....”

#### **Article 22**

“Religious organizations ... should provide interpretations for doctrines and canons that meet the requirements of the development and progress of modern China, and in accordance with the glorious traditional Chinese culture.”

#### **Article 25**

“The religious affairs department of the people’s government shall perform the duties as the administrative unit, direct and manage the following affairs of religious organizations in accordance with national laws, regulations, and rules: (1) to review the application to establish, reform, or unregister a religious organization, to review the conducts of a religious organization before approving its charters, to review the annual work reports of religious organizations, and to join with other government departments to direct the unregistering and liquidation process of religious organizations; (2) to supervise and direct religious organizations to carry out activities and perform their duties according to laws and regulations, and to handle according to law religious organizations which have violated laws, regulations, rules, policies and their own charters; ....”



## Religious Freedom in China

The new Administrative Measures for Religious Groups come amidst an ongoing crackdown against all religious communities in China. As noted in the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) [2019 Annual Report](#), Chinese President Xi Jinping and other Communist Party officials regularly deliver speeches warning against foreign influences on religion and promoting the “sinification” of Islam, Christianity, and Tibetan Buddhism. The 2017 New Regulation on Religious Affairs—which went into effect on February 1, 2018—requires religious organizations to register with the government and report donations that exceed 100,000 yuan (approximately \$15,900). In addition, it bans “unauthorized” religious teaching. The regulation effectively eliminated the legal gray area that had existed for independent religious activity since the 1980s.

Chinese authorities across the country have become more aggressive against religious groups that do not conform to the government's vision of “sinification.” During the

past few years, for example, the government has raided hundreds of Protestant house churches and removed crosses from churches. In Xinjiang and other parts of China, authorities have [destroyed](#) or damaged thousands of mosques and removed Arabic-language signs from Muslim businesses. The Tibetan regional government recently [passed](#) a law mandating “ethnic unity” in Tibet starting on May 1, 2020 by requiring equal participation by non-Tibetan ethnic groups at all levels of government and imposing stricter management of Tibetan religious centers. The Chinese government is currently conducting an evaluation of religious texts—including the Bible and the Qur'an—and could amend passages deemed incompatible with “socialist values.”

For more information about religious freedom conditions in China, see USCIRF's April 2019 [Annual Report chapter](#) and September 2019 Country Update [Religious Freedom in China's High-Tech Surveillance State](#).

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