

CHINA

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report

Bottom Line: Poor religious freedom conditions in China deteriorated significantly, particularly for Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims. To stem the growth of independent Catholic and Protestant groups, the government detained and arrested leaders, forcibly closed churches, and selected Catholic bishops without the approval of the Vatican. The Falun Gong, and other groups deemed “evil cults,” face long-term imprisonments, forced renunciations of faith, and torture in detention.

While the Chinese Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, it protects only “normal” religious activities and does not explicitly protect the right of individuals to manifest their beliefs without state interference. Religious groups and individuals believed to pose a threat to national security or social harmony, or whose practices are deemed superstitious, cult-like, or beyond the vague legal definition of “normal religious activities,” face severe restrictions, harassment, detention, imprisonment, and other abuses. Religious freedom conditions for Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims remain particularly poor, as the government broadened its efforts to discredit and imprison religious leaders, control the selection of clergy and the distribution of religious literature, and ban certain religious gatherings. The government also detained hundreds of unregistered Protestants in the past year and stepped up efforts to shutter “illegal” meeting points and public worship activities. Dozens of unregistered Catholic clergy remain in detention or have disappeared, and relations between the Vatican and Beijing declined in the past year. Falun Gong adherents continue to be targeted by extralegal security forces and are routinely tortured and mistreated in detention. The Chinese government also continues to harass, detain, intimidate, disbar, and disappear attorneys who defend vulnerable religious groups. USCIRF recommends in 2012 that China again be designated as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). The State Department has designated China as a CPC since 1999.

Background

Millions of Chinese manifest their beliefs openly and senior government officials have praised religious communities’ positive role in society and urged approved religious groups to promote “economic and social development” and “socialist principles.” New directives were issued last year to allow approved religious groups to conduct some charitable activities. These are positive developments that were unthinkable just two decades ago. Nevertheless, the government continues to see the growth of religious communities who resist its oversight as potential threats to social “harmony” or to its “core interests.” Peaceful public protest or worship activities are criminalized and both Christian and Muslim missionary activities are curtailed. Government authorities praise religious groups who resist “foreign infiltration,” prohibit religious affiliation among Communist Party members and some government employees, and restrict the amount of religious materials available. The Chinese government also restricts online access to religious information and the authority of religious communities to choose their own leadership and parents to teach their children religion, particularly in Uighur and Tibetan areas.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Tibetan Buddhist and Uighur Muslim Areas: The religious freedom conditions in Tibetan Buddhist and Uighur Muslim areas of China are worse now than at any time over the past decade. The restriction of religious activity causes deep resentment in Tibetan and Uighur communities. Since the 2008 and 2009 protests in Tibetan and Uighur areas, the Chinese government has intensified efforts to discredit religious leaders, issued new measures to increase government oversight of monasteries and mosques, and implemented new “education” programs to ensure the political loyalty of Buddhist monks and “weaken the religious consciousness” of Uighur Muslims. There are hundreds of Tibetans and Uighurs in prison for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy.

Since May 2011, there have been 112 self-immolations, including 52 monks, nuns, and former nuns. 88 people have died and others remain detained. In the past year, the number of self-immolations, mostly involving laypeople, has increased. The self-immolations are also spreading to other Tibetan areas. The Dalai Lama has called the self-immolations “desperate acts by people seeking justice and freedom.” Chinese authorities have not acknowledged that their policies of repression have contributed to the self-immolations, instead calling them “terrorist acts” that are orchestrated with the “instigation and support” of the Dalai Lama.

During the past year, police raids on independent Muslim religious schools led to at least a dozen injuries and arrests and the death of one child in police custody. In June 2012, in the city of Hoten, a dozen children were injured when a tear gas canister exploded during a police raid.

Protestants and Catholics: Protestants and Catholics who refuse to join the state-sanctioned religious organizations face severe restrictions, including efforts to undermine and harass their leaders, arrest and detention, and property destruction. The head of China’s State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) recently called on government officials to renew efforts to “guide” unregistered Protestants and Catholics to join the state-sanctioned churches. He also urged efforts to “break” large Protestant house churches into small groups. Chinese security forces detained more than 900 unregistered Protestants in the past year and 18 Protestant leaders were sentenced to prison terms over one year.

SARA and various security bureaus issued new directives in the past year, including a ten-year plan to “eradicate” churches that refuse to affiliate with the government-approved Protestant group and orders to limit missionary activity among university students in order to “resist foreign influence.”

Relations between Beijing and the Vatican also deteriorated in the past year as China continued to ordain bishops without Vatican approval and to promote them to positions of Church oversight and governance. Dozens of “unregistered” Catholic clergy, including three Bishops, remain in detention, in home confinement, or “disappeared.” In July 2012, Bishop Ma Daqin, during his ordination ceremony as bishop of Shanghai, quit the government-approved Catholic Patriotic Association. Bishop Ma is currently in detention.

Falun Gong: The Chinese government continued its fourteen-year campaign to eradicate Falun Gong activity and pressure practitioners to renounce their beliefs. China maintains an extrajudicial security apparatus, the 6-10 office, to stamp out Falun Gong activities and created specialized facilities known as “transformation through reeducation centers” to force practitioners to relinquish their faith. An estimated 2,000 individuals were detained in the extralegal “re-education centers” over the past two years and there are 486 known Falun Gong practitioners currently serving prison sentences. Practitioners who do not renounce their beliefs in detention are subject to torture, including credible reports of deaths in custody and the use of psychiatric experiments.

Human Rights Defenders: More than 100 human rights defenders were forcibly disappeared, tortured, detained, stripped of legal licenses, or sentenced to prison terms in 2011, as authorities tried to pre-empt any political unrest similar to the popular uprisings in the Arab world. The systematic targeting of human rights lawyers and activists belonging to the *wei quan* (rights defense) movement predates the previous year’s persecution.

Repatriation of North Korean Asylum-Seekers: China continues to repatriate North Korean asylum-seekers in violation of its obligations under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol. Beijing considers North Koreans to be economic migrants rather than refugees fleeing persecution, limits UNHCR access to North Korean asylum-seekers, and prohibits UNHCR from operating in the border region with North Korea.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Religious freedom and related human rights should be an important part of the Administration’s “pivot” toward Asia. A stable China committed to protecting and advancing its citizens’ fundamental rights and religious freedoms is in the interests of the United States: religious freedom directly relates to expanding the rule of law,

developing civil society, aiding stability in ethnic minority areas, expanding the freedoms of expression and association, and bringing China firmly within the international system through assisted implementation of universal human rights obligations. The U.S. government should use the tools available with the CPC designation to impose travel bans and other financial penalties that target officials or state agencies which perpetrate religious freedom abuses as well as provinces in which there are the highest numbers of religious freedom abuses. In addition to continuing to designate China as a CPC, the U.S. government should:

- Initiate a “whole-of-government” approach to human rights diplomacy in which the State Department and National Security Staff (NSS) develop a human rights action plan and coordinate its implementation across all U.S. government agencies and entities, including developing targeted talking points and prisoner lists, and providing staffing and support for all U.S. delegations visiting China;
- Issue travel restrictions and financial penalties for Chinese authorities who engage in human rights abuses, including officials from provinces with the worst religious freedom conditions and those working for state agencies shown to perpetrate religious freedom and related rights abuses;
- Urge the Chinese government to allow a U.S. government presence, such as consulates in Lhasa, Tibet, and Urumqi, Xinjiang which could monitor religious freedom and other human rights;
- Increase the number of staff dedicated to supporting U.S. human rights diplomacy and the rule of law, including the promotion of religious freedom, at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and U.S. consulates in China;
- Reinvigorate multilateral cooperation on human rights and technical assistance programs with allies who conduct bilateral human rights dialogues with China; and
- Urge China to uphold its international obligations to protect asylum seekers by: working with UNHCR to provide such protection; permit safe transport to countries of final asylum; provide UNHCR with unrestricted access to interview North Korean nationals in China; and ensure that the return of any migrants pursuant to any bilateral agreement does not violate China’s obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol or under Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture.

Please see USCIRF’s 2013 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on China.