

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC of CHINA

The government of China continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Unregistered religious groups or those deemed by the Chinese government to threaten national security or social harmony continue to face severe restrictions, although the government tolerates some religious activity within approved organizations. Religious freedom conditions for Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims remain particularly acute. While a growing number of Chinese citizens are legally allowed to practice their religion, the government strictly controls all religious practice and represses religious activity outside state-approved organizations. USCIRF recommends in 2011 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

The Chinese constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but protects only “normal” religious activities and does not explicitly protect the right of individuals to manifest their beliefs without state interference. Religious activity in China is governed by the National Regulations on Religious Affairs (NRR) which requires all religious groups and venues to affiliate with one of seven government-approved associations and allows the government to control every aspect of religious practice and related activities. The NRR contains vague national security provisions that can justify the suppression of unregistered religious activity, the activities of organizations deemed to be “cults”, and the peaceful religious activity of Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists.

In January 2011, the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) issued a document outlining measures that would maintain extensive government control over religious communities. The document calls on authorities to “guide” unregistered Protestants to worship in state-sanctioned churches, continues policies to deny Catholics in China the freedom to accept the authority of the Holy See to make bishop appointments, and expands rules that impose political requirements on Muslims who wish to make overseas pilgrimages. If implemented as written, the SARA document would continue to restrict freedom of religion for Chinese citizens and further submit religious communities to the intrusive supervision and control of the Party and government.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

Chinese officials are increasingly adept at employing the language of human rights and the rule of law to justify the repression of religious communities, citing purported national security concerns. While the number of religious adherents continues to grow in China, the government actively restricts, harasses, detains, and imprisons: groups that are not registered, or will not register, for political or theological reasons; individuals who publicly organize legal, media, or popular defense of religious freedom; and groups or leaders deemed to threaten the Communist Party.

Tibetan Buddhism: China’s focus on controlling Tibetan Buddhism has led to religious freedom abuses and nurtured deep resentments among Tibetans. In 2007, SARA issued regulations allowing government officials to interfere with the selection of reincarnated lamas, an essential element of Tibetan Buddhism. Since the 2008 protests, a security presence has remained at some places of worship, and local officials have escalated their campaigns requiring monks and nuns to sign statements denouncing the Dalai Lama. Monks and nuns who refuse to denounce the Dalai Lama or pledge loyalty to Beijing have been expelled from their monasteries, imprisoned, and tortured. At least 443 Tibetan Buddhist monks, nuns, and *trulkus* (living Buddhas) currently are imprisoned.

Uighur Muslims: In the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and other areas of the Xinjiang province, religious freedom conditions continue to deteriorate. China’s campaigns to curtail “religious extremism,” secessionism, and terrorist activity are a major source of Uighur resentment and may lead directly to the very type of extremism that the government is trying to forestall. In Uighur areas, all imams are required to undergo annual political training seminars to retain their licenses, and local security forces monitor religious leaders. The XUAR government limits access to mosques and spiritual pilgrimages. Religious leaders, academics, and human rights advocates who attempt to publicize human rights abuses in the XUAR have received prolonged prison terms on charges such as “separatism” and “endangering social order.”

Catholics: China continues to meddle in the religious activities of Chinese Catholics and harass clergy in the officially-sanctioned Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) who were secretly recognized by the Vatican and clergy members of the Catholic community who refuse to affiliate with the CPA. The government prohibits Catholic clergy from communicating with the Vatican, but despite this, the Vatican has secretly ordained an estimated 90 percent of CPA bishops and priests. Reportedly, at least 40 Roman Catholic bishops remain imprisoned, detained, or disappeared.

Protestants: China also restricts the religious activities of Protestants who worship in the government-approved church and harasses unregistered Protestants, labeling some unregistered Protestant groups as “cults.” The government encourages government-sanctioned Protestant religious leaders to emphasize “theological reconstruction” in their teachings, doctrines which purge elements of the faith that the Communist Party regards as incompatible with its policies.

Falun Gong: China considers the Falun Gong spiritual movement, which it banned in 1999, an “evil cult” and maintains an extrajudicial security apparatus, the 6-10 office, designed to stamp out Falun Gong activities. The government engages in long-term and arbitrary arrests, forced renunciations of faith, psychiatric experimentation, and torture in detention, including possible incidences of death as a result of such torture. The State Department has reported that Falun Gong adherents constituted at least half of the 250,000 officially recorded inmates in re-education through labor camps.

Human Rights Activists: China has systematically targeted human rights activists belonging to the *wei quan* (rights defense) movement for harassment and continues its efforts to revoke the licenses of lawyers and shut down law firms that take on political cases.

North Korean Refugees: China also fails to protect North Korean refugees. While China is a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, no law protects asylum seekers. North Korean asylum-seekers continue to face hardship, including discrimination, trafficking, and repatriation. North Koreans who are forcibly repatriated, particularly those suspected of having religious belief affiliations, face torture, imprisonment in penal labor camps, and possible execution.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Human rights concerns have not been fully integrated into the U.S.-China bilateral agenda. During President Obama’s 2009 visit to China, however, the two countries agreed to re-establish a regular Human Rights Dialogue, which was later held in May 2010. In addition to continuing to designate China as a CPC, the U.S. Government should:

- Impose new sanctions targeting the officials or state agencies that perpetuate religious freedom abuses or provinces where religious freedom abuses are most egregious;
- Develop an inter-agency U.S. government human rights action plan and coordinate its implementation across all government agencies and entities, including developing targeted talking points and prisoner lists and providing staffing and support for all U.S. delegations visiting China;
- Prioritize religious freedom and related human rights in the Strategic Dialogue agenda;
- 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;
- Urge the Chinese government to end its crackdown on religious and spiritual groups, including harassment, surveillance, arrest, and detention of persons on account of their religion or belief; torture and ill-treatment of persons in prisons, labor camps, psychiatric facilities, and other places of confinement; and coercion of individuals to renounce or condemn any religion or belief;
- Work with allies to articulate a clear message about China’s need to protect North Korean refugees; and
- Use appropriated Internet freedom funds to develop free and secure email and web access for use in China, to facilitate the dissemination of high-speed Internet access via satellite, and to distribute immediately proven and field-tested counter-censorship programs.

Please see USCIRF’s 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on China.