

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in China continued to deteriorate. The Chinese government has created a [high-tech surveillance state](#), utilizing facial recognition and artificial intelligence to monitor religious minorities. On April 1, a new regulation requiring religious venues to have legal representatives and professional accountants went into effect. Some smaller religious venues, especially in rural areas, found these requirements impossible to fulfill.

[Independent experts](#) estimate that between 900,000 and 1.8 million Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Muslims have been detained in more than 1,300 concentration camps in Xinjiang—an estimate revised upward since the previous reporting period. Individuals have been sent to the camps for wearing long beards, refusing alcohol, or other behaviors authorities deem to be signs of “religious extremism.” Former detainees report that they suffered torture, rape, sterilization, and other abuses. In addition, nearly half a million Muslim children [have been separated](#) from their families and placed in boarding schools. During 2019, the camps increasingly transitioned from reeducation to [forced labor](#) as detainees were forced to work in cotton and textile factories. Outside the camps, the government continued to deploy officials to live with Muslim families and to report on any signs of “extremist” religious behavior. Meanwhile, authorities in Xinjiang and other parts of China have [destroyed or damaged](#) thousands of mosques and [removed](#) Arabic-language signs from Muslim businesses.

The Chinese government continued to pursue a strategy of forced assimilation and suppression of Tibetan Buddhism, as demonstrated by the laws designed to control the next reincarnation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and those of other Tibetan eminent lamas. Monks and nuns who refused to denounce the Dalai Lama have been expelled from their monasteries, imprisoned, and tortured. During the summer of 2019, authorities [demolished](#) thousands of residences at the Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist center in

Sichuan Province, displacing as many as 6,000 monks and nuns. In April, authorities [closed](#) the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy to new enrollment. Authorities also intensified a crackdown on possessing or displaying photos of the Dalai Lama, continued to monitor religious festivals, and, in some areas, [banned students](#) from attending festivals during their school holidays. In protest of repressive government policies, at least 156 Tibetans have self-immolated since February 2009.

Chinese authorities raided or closed down hundreds of Protestant house churches in 2019, including [Rock Church](#) in Henan Province and [Shouwang Church](#) in Beijing. The government released some of the Early Rain Covenant Church congregants who had been arrested in December 2018, but in December 2019 a court charged [Pastor Wang Yi](#) with “subversion of state power” and [sentenced](#) him to nine years imprisonment. Local authorities continued to harass and detain bishops, including [Guo Xijin](#) and [Cui Tai](#), who refused to join the state-affiliated Catholic association. Several local governments, including Guangzhou city, [offered cash bounties](#) for individuals who informed on underground churches. In addition, authorities across the country have removed crosses from churches, banned youth under the age of 18 from participating in religious services, and [replaced images](#) of Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary with pictures of President Xi Jinping.

According to [reports](#), thousands of Falun Gong practitioners were arrested during 2019 for practicing the movement’s meditation exercises or distributing literature about their beliefs. Human rights advocates and scientists [presented evidence](#) that the practice of harvesting organs from prisoners—many of whom are believed to be Falun Gong practitioners—continued on a significant scale. In addition, there were widespread reports that authorities across China demolished Mahayana Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian statues they claimed were “unauthorized.”

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate China as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Chinese government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom—particularly Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Chen Quanguo and former Political and Legal Affairs Commission Chief Zhu Hailun—by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Publicly express concerns about Beijing hosting the 2022 Winter Olympic Games and state that U.S. government officials will not attend the games if the Chinese government’s crackdown on religious freedom continues; and
- Continue and intensify efforts to counter Chinese government influence operations in the United States that are designed to suppress information about or advocacy in response to violations of religious freedom in China.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2019 ([H.R.4331/S.2539](#)) and other legislation designed to promote religious freedom in China; and
- Support the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act ([H.R.6210/S.3471](#)), which would prohibit the importation to the United States of textiles, cotton, and other goods from Xinjiang.

Background

According to the [CIA World Factbook](#), of China's estimated 1.4 billion people, approximately 18 percent are Buddhist, including Tibetan Buddhists; 5 percent are Christian; and 2 percent are Muslim. Most of the country's estimated 70 million Christians refuse to join the state-run churches—the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association—and instead worship in underground house churches. Other significant religious traditions include the Falun Gong, Daoism, and traditional folk practices.

Although the Communist Party has a long history of restricting religious freedom, in recent years it has become increasingly hostile toward religion and initiated campaigns to “sinicize” Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity to rid them of what it deems “foreign” influences. The 2018 [Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs](#) effectively ban “unauthorized” religious teaching and expand the role of local authorities in controlling religious activities. Under article 300 of the [Chinese Criminal Code](#), belonging to certain religious movements, such as the Falun Gong, is punishable with three to seven years' imprisonment.

Hong Kong

In June 2019, more than one million Hong Kong residents marched in protest against a bill that would have allowed authorities to extradite criminal defendants to mainland China. Although the protests were not primarily about religious freedom issues, some church leaders joined the protests and religious freedom activists expressed concern that the bill would have undermined their ability to advocate without fear of retaliation. The city government withdrew the bill in October, but protests continued through the end of the reporting period.

International Reactions and Advocacy

Throughout 2019, China's suppression of religious freedom received widespread international attention. In July, a group of 22 European countries, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan signed a [letter](#) to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) condemning the persecution of Uighur and other Muslims. In October, those countries, as well as the United States, submitted a [statement](#) about Xinjiang to the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). In November, a panel of UN experts [warned](#) that “disproportionate emphasis placed by the authorities on the repression of rights of minorities risks worsening any security risk” in Xinjiang. Also in November, the World Bank [reduced](#) a \$50 million project for vocational training in Xinjiang due to allegations that some funds were used to purchase police batons and tear gas launchers. However, the Chinese government reportedly used its economic and diplomatic leverage to dissuade some governments from criticizing its record. It presented [letters](#) signed by nearly 50 governments to both the HRC and CERD defending its record. In March, the Organization of Islamic

Cooperation issued a [resolution](#) “commending” China for taking care of its Muslim population.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2019, relations between the United States and China remained tense due to the trade war and Chinese security threats to U.S. interests. Senior U.S. government officials [continued to condemn](#) deteriorating religious freedom conditions in China. The State Department added a separate section about Xinjiang in its [2018 Report on International Religious Freedom](#). In May, U.S. Ambassador to China Terry Branstad [visited](#) Tibet and urged Chinese leaders to open “substantive dialogue” with the Dalai Lama. On July 17, as part of the second [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#), President Donald J. Trump [met](#) with [victims](#) of religious persecution from China. In October, the U.S. Department of Commerce [imposed restrictions](#) on exports to 28 Chinese companies and organizations and the State Department [announced visa restrictions](#) on Chinese officials implicated in the mass internment of Uighur Muslims. In addition, U.S. Customs and Border Protection [issued](#) orders to seize garment imports produced by Hetian Taida Apparel Co. due to concerns that they were made using forced labor in Xinjiang. Throughout 2019, the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and other government agencies continued to [provide funding](#) to civil society organizations that promote religious freedom in China. On December 18, the State Department [redesignated](#) China as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action ongoing restrictions on exports of certain equipment to China under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act (FY 1990 and 1991).

Members of Congress continued to criticize China's crackdown on religious freedom in 2019. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China's [2019 Annual Report](#) noted that the mass internment of Uighur and other Muslims might constitute “crimes against humanity.” In December, the House of Representatives and the Senate both passed—but had not fully reconciled—different versions of the Uighur Intervention and Global Humanitarian Unified Response Act ([S.178](#)), which would require the administration to impose targeted sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for serious abuses in Xinjiang. In September, legislators in both chambers introduced the Tibetan Policy and Support Act ([H.R.4331/S.2539](#)), which would authorize the U.S. government to impose targeted sanctions on Chinese officials who interfere in the process of recognizing a successor to the Dalai Lama. In January 2020, outside the reporting period, the House passed the bill. In July, Representative Vicky Hartzler (R-MO) introduced a resolution condemning the persecution of Christians in China ([H.Res.493](#)). In addition, legislators introduced a bill directing the U.S. government to oppose World Bank loans to China ([S.3018](#)), citing its religious freedom violations. The measure did not receive a vote before the end of the reporting period.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in China's High-Tech Surveillance State](#)
- **Webinar Series:** [Webinar #4: China](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [Fighting Religious Persecution in China One Violator at a Time](#) (in *The Hill*)

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER TENZIN DORJEE

China is the classic example of a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, when it comes to religious freedom violations. Millions of Uighurs are kept in concentration camps and according to the latest Freedom House Report, Tibet is second only to Syria in terms of religious freedom and human rights violations. The situation in Tibet is worse than in North Korea according to the report and no international media has access to Tibet. To enslave Uighurs and Tibetans, China uses state of the art surveillance technology to collect DNA and sociodemographic information to restrict religious freedom and human rights. Even children are not allowed to learn their native languages and religions. I applaud bipartisan efforts in the U.S. Congress to address religious and human rights violations in China. China’s forced disappearance of the Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima for over 25 years and its most serious interference into the recognition of His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s next reincarnation for a political agenda deserve stern condemnation and counter measures. Thank you to the U.S. Congress for passing the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Support Act (RATSA). I urge the administration to implement the RATSA and urgently appoint a Tibet Coordinator to advance Sino-Tibetan dialogues for resolving issues based on mutually beneficial nonviolence and the Middle Way policy proposed by the Central Tibetan Administration and supported by the United States, European Parliament, and others. The time is now for serious multilateral government and global policy actions to end “systematic, ongoing, and egregious” religious freedom and human rights violations in China, including in Tibet and Xinjiang.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

There is no question that China is the world’s foremost violator of human rights and religious freedom. It cannot be compared to any other country in the world not only because of its inexcusable actions, but because of the way it aids and abets similar actions by other countries all around the world. Meanwhile, the international order, in pursuit of self-interest, continues to let China play by its own rules, and especially at the United Nations. This is absolutely inexcusable, and those nations around the world who ignore China’s malevolence may eventually find themselves subservient to it. It is past time for our world bodies, and our liberal democracies, to demand more from China.