



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

July 2023

CHINA'S RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS REPRESSION AND MALIGN INFLUENCE ABROAD

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USCIRF's Mission

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

On December 14, 2022, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on [*China's Religious Freedom Violations: Domestic Repression and Malign Influence Abroad*](#). The hearing explored two interrelated aspects: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government's violations of religious freedom and repression of religious communities, along with the religious freedom implications of its malign foreign influence through lobbying efforts in the United States.

[*Chair Nury Turkel*](#) led the hearing, convening five witnesses who offered expertise on the Chinese government's persecution of various religious groups in China and abroad as well as its malign influence through lobbying efforts in the United States. In his opening remarks, Chair Turkel stated that "the CCP's techno-authoritarianism, transnational repression, and other forms of malign influence abroad represent some of the most troubling aspects of its religious tyranny, impacting Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Catholic and Protestant Christians, and many other religious groups." Furthermore, Chair Turkel called on the U.S. government to "vigorously enforce policies to ensure that our nation's trade policies do not contribute to CCP's religious repression at home" and to "actively counter its malign foreign influences and transnational repression—including here in the U.S. homeland."

[*Vice Chair Abraham Cooper*](#) highlighted "China's technologically sophisticated religious repression and its unique ability to assert malign influence over, and to extend repression into, other countries." He reiterated Chair Turkel's call that the U.S. government should use all legal and policy tools at its disposal to counter the Chinese government's malign foreign influence and transnational repression activities in the United States.

[*Commissioner Frank Wolf*](#) expressed concerns over religious freedom conditions in Hong Kong in relation to the city's draconian National Security Law that have affected the 90-year-old Cardinal Joseph Zen and others who participated in democracy protests, as well as China's malign foreign influence through lobbying efforts in the United States. Additionally, Commissioner Wolf highlighted the case of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church (SHRC), also known as the "Mayflower Church," which at the time was stranded in Thailand and faced risk of repatriation to China.

[*Senator Marco Rubio*](#), in his pre-recorded remarks, stated that the CCP's assault on religious freedom is "more violent and systematic than ever. In Xinjiang, it has even amounted to genocide." He added, "Party agents are also targeting ethnic Chinese believers here in the United States," which presents "a threat to American national security and basic human rights."

[Yaqiu Wang](#), senior China researcher at the Human Rights Watch, explained that the Chinese government’s “sinicization” policy has strengthened state control over religion and that technology-based censorship and surveillance play a central role in religious repression in China. She discussed a list of specific concerns, which included the complicity of American companies in the Chinese government’s religious repression, such as Apple’s removal of VPNs, Bible, and Quran apps from its app store and Thermo Fisher Scientific’s selling of DNA sequencing kits to police in Xinjiang and Tibet; the government’s violation of the China-Vatican agreement on bishop appointment by installing a bishop without Vatican consent; the detention of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims in “re-education” camps; persecution of Falun Gong practitioners; the Chinese government’s pressuring of other governments to repatriate Uyghurs, Christians, and Tibetans who have fled China; and the government’s use of the WeChat app to censor and surveil individuals outside of the country. Wang called on the U.S. government to:

- Ensure religious communities in the United States with ties to China are free from threats, harassment, or persecution by the Chinese government;
- Impose visa bans and targeted sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for religious repression, in accordance with the Global Magnitsky Act. Encourage other governments in the EU, Canada, UK, and other countries, to adopt similar legislation, as sanctions are more effective when pursued collectively. Encourage prosecution of such officials on the basis of universal jurisdiction;
- Scrutinize Chinese apps such as TikTok and WeChat to improve transparency regarding their use of Americans’ data, their engagement in censorship, and their communications with the Chinese government. These Chinese companies should conduct human rights due diligence in order to operate in the United States;
- Escalate actions against American and Chinese companies that are complicit in the Chinese government’s repression of religion; and
- Invest in technologies to help people in China circumvent censorship, as religious freedom requires free information.

[Bhuchung Tsering](#), Interim President of the International Campaign for Tibet, said that the Chinese government under Xi Jinping has shifted its policy from one of “total destruction” to one of “insidious control” in an attempt to

serve its political objectives, including sinicizing Tibetan Buddhism and co-opting the right to determine Buddhist leaders and modes of practice. He provided a list of the Chinese government’s violations of Tibetan Buddhists’ religious freedom that included the use of regulations to control Tibetan monasteries and monastics; interference in the reincarnation or selection process of the next Dalai Lama; extension of control of Tibetan Buddhism in other countries, such as India, Mongolia, and other parts of the world; subjecting Tibetans and Tibetan monasteries to searches of their phones and belongings, with possession of the Dalai Lama’s portrait regarded as a punishable offense; and banning Tibetans from circulating Buddhist texts on social media and messaging platforms. Tsering commended the Biden Administration for sanctioning Wu Yingjie and Zhang Hongbo for abusing Tibetans’ human rights. Tsering called on the U.S. government to:

- Fully implement the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020, to hold the Chinese government accountable for interfering in the reincarnation processes of Tibetan religious leaders, including the Dalai Lama;
- Work multilaterally with like-minded countries and international bodies, including the EU, to adopt coordinated initiatives; and
- Urge the Chinese government to release all political prisoners, particularly the 11th Panchen Lama, who has not been seen since 1995;

[Louisa Greve](#), Director of Global Advocacy at Uyghur Human Rights Project, commended the U.S. government for imposing 107 punitive sanctions against perpetrators who oppress Uyghurs but expressed disappointment that other governments have not sufficiently followed suit. She expressed concerns over religious freedom and human rights issues in Xinjiang, such as forced and incentivized inter-ethnic and inter-faith marriages in Xinjiang and Tibet, which further the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in the Uyghur region, and the detention of religious figures on religion-related charges. She also highlighted the Chinese government’s transnational repression activities, including subversion of the U.N. human rights system; influence operations to prevent the U.S. government and Congress from protecting democratic rights; pressuring foreign governments to deport Uyghurs and other refugees fleeing religious persecution, including in Arab states; and intimidation campaigns in the United States against Uyghur Americans, Tibetans, Christians, and others.

Bob Fu, President and Founder of ChinaAid Association, stated that the Chinese government has steadily increased its oppression and control of Christians, particularly through the use of technology, reaching new extremes under Xi Jinping in his third term as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. The government continued its sinicization policy and introduced a new form of virtual persecution for Christians during the COVID-19 pandemic by introducing a new regulation to ban online religious activities. Under this regulation, groups are punished for violating the new policy on broadly and vaguely defined security charges such as “inciting the state power using religion,” “objecting to the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership,” “obstructing the socialism system,” “damaging national reunification,” or “harming the unity of various ethnic groups and social stability.” Censorship on the Chinese social media platform WeChat is commonplace, with words such as “Christ” banned and deemed in violation of the new regulation. Additionally, the Chinese government is weaponizing technology in its growing transnational repression of Chinese Christians around the world, silencing dissent among diasporas and exiles through illegal deportations, abductions, digital threats, and family intimidation. The persecution of the SHRC—also known as the Mayflower Church—in China and during the escape of its members overseas is illustrative of the Chinese government’s increased persecution of Christians at home and overseas, including through its tools of techno-authoritarianism. Fu called on the U.S. government to immediately consider the 64 credible SHRC asylum seekers for Priority I refugee resettlement and status designation.¹

Zack Smith, Legal Fellow at the Edwin Meese III Center for Legal and Judicial Studies of the Heritage Foundation, stated that the CCP has sought to influence U.S. policy at both federal and local levels. It has deputized American companies such as Apple, Coca-Cola, and Nike to work as lobbyists on its behalf in some key cases, such as to stop the bill aimed at blocking products made by Uyghur forced labor. According to Smith, Congress can prohibit lobbying by the CCP but not without limitations. He then discussed deficiencies and loopholes in the disclosure-based Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and the Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA). He argued that there is no constitutional prohibition against banning the lobbying by agents of foreign governments and nationals, adding that Congress should be able to regulate contacts between foreign governments and American public officials. According to Smith, if Congress does not want to completely halt lobbying efforts by the Chinese Communist Party and government, it could take lesser action such as requiring notification to the State Department of any communications by those lobbying on behalf of foreign governments and/or allowing State Department personnel to attend any such in-person or virtual meetings to ensure that no such contacts go unnoticed and unobserved.

USCIRF Chair Turkel closed the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.

¹ The SHRC congregation was granted asylum by the U.S. government and arrived safely in the United States in April 2023. See <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/mayflower-church-thailand-04112023132119.html>.



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