



Religious Freedom in China:

The History, Current Challenges, and Proper Response to a Human Rights Crisis

2023 Edition

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Key Points

The People's Republic of China restricts religious practice and oppresses religious minorities on a sweeping scale. More than ever before, China's power and influence are expanding in a way that affects the entire world. What happens there has a global impact.

At least 2,649 Chinese citizens were imprisoned in 2022 for practicing their faith, not including the hundreds of thousands who are arbitrarily detained in Xinjiang internment camps.

Ultimately, the CCP demands that residents find their identity in being Party members, not religious believers.

The Chinese government must not be allowed to shamelessly commit human rights and religious freedom violations without consequences from the international community.

Summary

The People's Republic of China (PRC) restricts religious practice and oppresses religious minorities on a sweeping scale.

This religious persecution targets those of every faith. Christians, Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners, and others are all victims of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) effort to suppress any set of beliefs that might compete with the Party's ideology. This campaign against religion has had and continues to have devastating consequences for those who simply wish to live according to their conscience.

The CCP's consistent human rights abuses prove it cannot be treated just like any other government. Human rights and religious freedom must be addressed in the United States' trade and diplomatic dealings with China.¹

This report can be read online at frc.org/China

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Introduction

A strong case can now be made that the People's Republic of China has become one of the most totalitarian states in human history. China is distinct because it has the technological tools of a modern, information-based society, which enhance its iron grip on its people. No other state has had China's capacity to control the thoughts, words, and actions of its own people.

One of the most infamous ways China has interfered in the lives of its citizens was the "One Child Policy," which prevented more than 400 million births over 36 years, according to Chinese state media. Women who were found to be in noncompliance with the policy could be forced to abort and then sterilized. The policy was discontinued in 2015; however, intrusive bureaucracy still exists to regulate family size.² The government allows married couples to have up to three children as of 2021.³

Now, with the rise of modern digital surveillance capabilities (including ubiquitous high-definition street cameras, facial recognition software, and Internet device intrusion), some Chinese people are being given "social credit" scores.⁴ Even minor infractions can lower one's score and prevent participation in key life activities like traveling on trains or planes. While seeking to exercise such total control of its people, the Chinese government feels threatened when its people hold to any higher authority—including God. To the severe detriment of Chinese residents, the current Chinese president has reinforced Mao-era religious suppression policies, often by the most brutal means imaginable.

Today, freedom of religion in China is rapidly deteriorating, and religious practice is tightly restricted. Even religious institutions that closely follow applicable regulations are subject to surveillance and intimidation by the state.

The severity of religious persecution in China is staggering. The U.S. State Department's 2022 report on international religious freedom cites the Chinese government imprisoned 2,649 citizens for exercising their beliefs.⁵ This number is likely the tip of the iceberg, considering the extent of widespread extralegal detentions.⁶ As of September 2022, estimates suggest over one million Muslims, the majority of them Uyghurs—a Turkic, mostly Muslim ethnic group—remain forcibly detained in what the Chinese government calls “re-education” camps.⁷ Such numbers are difficult to comprehend, and they point to a terrifying situation for religious minorities in China.

China currently has the world's largest population, and its global, economic, and cultural influence is increasing. What happens in that country matters—both for those in China and around the world, and it is something that U.S. citizens and political leaders should not ignore. As China seeks to engage the United States and other countries economically, diplomatically, and otherwise, there is an opportunity for the U.S. government to address China's human rights concerns. Given the scale of the religious freedom violations in that country, this is an opportunity we cannot afford to waste.

How We Got Here: A Brief History of Religious Persecution in China

Religion has long been a part of Chinese life. However, the current Chinese government—established by CCP leader Mao Zedong in 1949 near the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War—has a long track record of persecuting religious believers. Under Mao's leadership, the CCP started a campaign to stamp out religion that climaxed during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s. Churches, mosques, and monasteries were destroyed, and religious believers were imprisoned, tortured, and killed. With the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, CCP leaders eased Cultural Revolution-era policies meant to eliminate religion. Beijing started to regulate religion rather than seeking to eradicate it from society completely.⁸

In 2013, the current president, Xi Jinping, assumed office. Under his leadership, China has once again “seen a strong reduction in freedom in all sectors of society,”⁹ and the CCP has grown increasingly totalitarian and imperialistic. The Chinese government not only restricts the freedom of its people at home but actively seeks to export systems of control to other countries.¹⁰

Xi has made the crackdown on religious belief a priority for Beijing. He has taken unprecedented steps to harass and intimidate religious believers, using facial recognition technology, mass incarceration, and indoctrination to shape the beliefs of Chinese residents and reinforce the authority of the CCP.

In addition to these new measures, Xi started to enforce old laws that were previously neglected, including a ban on foreign-based religious organizations proselytizing in China.¹¹ These actions led U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback to label Beijing’s efforts a “war with faith” in 2019.¹²

In a move that observers argued “represents the end of China’s 40-year-long reform era” following Mao’s death in 1976, Chinese lawmakers amended the constitution in 2018 to abolish presidential term limits, allowing Xi to stay in power past the end of his second term in 2023.¹³ The constitution was also amended to include an ideology that is officially called “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” Essentially, “Xi Jinping Thought” is a plan to strengthen power at three levels: the nation, the Party, and the president.¹⁴

The ideology of today’s CCP features a “Marxist-Leninist intolerance of pluralism.”¹⁵ The Chinese government is an openly atheistic regime in which only five religions are legally recognized: Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, and Daoism.¹⁶ However, even state-sanctioned religious institutions are subject to state supervision and government surveillance.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of China promises in Article 36 that citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief.” Yet, the constitution includes an important caveat by indicating that this freedom applies only to “normal religious activities,” a term that is not defined.¹⁷ The constitutional declaration that Chinese citizens enjoy freedom of religious belief has never provided any real protections for those of faith. The U.S. Department of State has designated China a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) on religious freedom every year since 1999 as part of a designation system set up by the International Religious Freedom Act.¹⁸

What Is Happening Now: Current-Day Religious Persecution in China

Christianity

Open Doors, an organization that supports persecuted Christians, estimates that there are approximately 97 million Christians in China, making up approximately seven percent of the population.¹⁹ The CCP has a long history of suppressing the full expression of Christianity.

Protestant Churches

China allows legal status for Protestant churches that are part of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the government-run China Christian Council (CCC). However, state-sanctioned churches that submit to these authorities still experience a high degree of government interference.

In 2018, President Xi issued new regulations for religious affairs and gave the officially atheist CCP the power to enforce them.²⁰ The United Front Work Department (UFD) was restructured to oversee China’s religious affairs more effectively and “Sinicize” organized religion.²¹ The “Five-Year Plan for the Sinicization of Christianity” began in 2018 and continues to function as the ideal framework for

religious practices in China. Chinese officials call this effort a “thought reform” campaign intended to promote “Chinese Christianity.” The plan includes “retranslating and annotating” the Bible to find similarities with socialism,²² with the main goal of “[strengthening] the ideological and political guidance for religious communities.”²³ Churches and believers who refuse to compromise their faith by accepting the Sinicization of Christianity will likely face punishment. In March 2022, Wang Zuo’an of the State Administration of Religious Affairs and the UFWD called on pastors of state-approved churches to uphold the most recent Sinicization directives.²⁴ Xi advocated these directives in a speech to the CCP’s National Conference on Work Related to Religious Affairs in 2021. Xi’s hopes for the updated Sinicization plan suggest religions should adopt a “religious theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics” to remain grounded in Marxist religious ideology.²⁵

The Chinese government’s crackdown on Christianity has had visible consequences within the church. In the Zhejiang province alone, the government removed crosses from 1,200 to 1,700 Christian churches from 2015-16.²⁶ Efforts to remove crosses continued into the COVID-19 era.²⁷ At times, officials have replaced the crosses with Chinese flags.²⁸ In the provinces of Jiangxi and Henan, portraits of Jesus have been forbidden, even in private homes. Chinese authorities have also forcibly removed door plaques on Christian homes that convey religious themes with sayings such as “God loves the world” and “The Lord gives peace.”²⁹ Churches have been shut down for failing to comply with this instruction. The government has also started to install surveillance cameras in churches to monitor the content of sermons.³⁰

Pastor Chen Fengsheng is thought to have resigned from Sicheng Church on July 1, 2023, due to constant political intervention and pressure to abandon the tenets of his faith. Sicheng Church is registered with the Chinese government, making it a legal house of worship in China. Yet, official registration requires the church to continue supporting the CCP’s ideology, which explains Sicheng’s vocal advocacy of the 19th Asian Games and the Sinicization of Christianity.³¹ While not fully banning

the ability to practice religion, China persists in restricting religious freedom by elevating state ideology over the doctrine of any faith.

China's restrictions on churches are not conducive to fostering a sincere faith, and the volume of restrictions makes it difficult to live within the law. For example, minors and college students are barred from entering all churches.³² Bibles cannot be sold online.³³ There are reports that the Chinese government has even falsely accused Christian leaders of high-level crimes, resulting in wrongful imprisonment. On June 28, 2023, Mu En and Enoch Wang were sentenced to three and half years and three years in jail, respectively, over claims of fraudulently collecting over \$200,000 from Christian group members.³⁴ In truth, government investigators forced members to claim Mu and Enoch stole these funds from them, which were actually voluntarily given in tithes.

House Churches

Beijing is fine with allowing Christianity as long as it can be used as a platform to advance the CCP. Churches and individual Christians who refuse to let their faith be used as a platform to promote government-sponsored propaganda can face real danger. What have come to be known as "house churches" (whether they meet in a house or not) lack government approval. The house church movement started during the Mao regime when Christians were forced to worship secretly in homes or face persecution.³⁵ House churches were especially important during the Cultural Revolution.³⁶ Today, some house churches have hundreds of members. Some estimate that two-thirds of Chinese Christians attend a house church.³⁷ When discovered by the government, house churches are often completely shut down.³⁸ After rural churches have been forced to close, their members have occasionally been sent to labor camps.³⁹ In 2020, ChinaAid found that residents reporting suspected illegal house church activity can earn rewards of up to 5,000 RMB (or 700 USD).⁴⁰

Provincial religious affairs departments have subjected house churches to intense investigations and inspections. Beijing's Chaoyang district required communities to investigate house churches in their jurisdiction through home visits. In the city of Wenzhou, schools have started to collect information on students' religious beliefs, identify students whose parents are Christian, collect Christian parents' information, and visit Christian parents at their homes to request that they give up their religious beliefs.⁴¹

Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church has been in prison since December 2018. He pastored a house church with hundreds of members and was outspoken about freedom of religion and conscience. Consequently, Chinese authorities charged him with "inciting to subvert state power."⁴² Yet, this wasn't entirely unexpected for Wang, who gave his congregants his "Declaration of Faithful Disobedience" to be released upon his imprisonment—a declaration stating, "no one in this world can force me to renounce my faith."⁴³ The church continues to face persecution as police raid church gatherings, detain and interrogate church members, and engage in surveillance. Restrictions and shutdowns became particularly intense leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting Chinese-born Pastor Jian Zhu to proclaim that Chinese house churches in 2020 had not experienced such strong persecution since 1979. According to Zhu, the government encouraged its citizens to spy on their neighbors, pressured educational professors to "denounce their faith," and substituted crosses in church buildings for pictures of President Xi Jinping.⁴⁴

Religious restrictions apply not just to Chinese Christians but also to foreign missionaries and foreign persons living in China. According to a 2019 report by ChinaAid, a "work plan" created by the Chinese government sought to "resolutely destroy" the activities of foreign missions groups, cracking down on supposed "international religious infiltration."⁴⁵ Recent government regulations banned overseas organizations or overseas individuals with China-based organizations from engaging in any religious

information activity on the Internet.⁴⁶ Chinese Christians saw this as a direct crackdown on foreign missionaries or missionary organizations.

Despite Beijing's efforts to control religious belief and diminish the influence of churches that refuse to comply with the CCP's agenda, Christianity has flourished in China. Although proselytizing is illegal, Christianity has rapidly expanded in China since 1980. Researchers estimate that China will have more Christians than any other country by 2030.⁴⁷

The Catholic Church

It is not just Protestant churches that feel the burden of government restrictions and control. On September 22, 2018, the Chinese government and the Vatican reached a "provisional agreement" on the appointment of bishops. This issue had strained Vatican-China relations for decades.⁴⁸ Before 2018, the Catholic Church in China, which remained loyal to the Vatican, was dubbed the "Underground Catholic Church."⁴⁹ Two state-run institutions, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CPCA) and the Council of Chinese Bishops, oversee the bishops who are recognized by both the Vatican and the Chinese government.⁵⁰ Following the Vatican-China Deal of 2018, the Vatican considered the CPCA and the underground Catholic Church as the unified Chinese Catholic Church.⁵¹ The text of the deal was never disclosed, yet it reportedly allows the Chinese government to nominate bishops, while the Pope has the power to veto nominees.⁵²

Under Chinese law, priests and bishops must register with the state and sign a document agreeing to the principles of independence, autonomy, and self-administration of the Church in China.⁵³ Some priests and bishops have declined to join the CPCA for conscience reasons, and the Vatican has requested that the CCP respect such conscientious objectors.⁵⁴ While the Vatican and the Chinese government are cooperating more now than in the past several decades, critics question why the

atheistic Chinese regime should have a role in choosing bishops. The two-year deal was renewed in October 2020⁵⁵ and renewed a second time with an expiration date set for 2024,⁵⁶ despite the Vatican reporting that China had broken the agreement in November 2022.⁵⁷

Ultimately, the CCP demands that residents find their identity in being Party members, not religious believers. And so, the Chinese government finds itself at odds with all faiths, including Catholicism, unless believers are willing to make the tenets of Chinese communist ideology central to their faith. Churches that act out of line with the CCP are subject to persecution. An underground Catholic church in Shijiazhuang was completely “demolished” after disobeying regulations from the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Voice of the Martyrs reported such religious restriction “is always about control” for the CCP.⁵⁸ Believers’ submission to their own faith tenets over those of the CCP creates the grounds for a threatened Chinese government aiming to elevate its influence in all areas of daily life, largely by suppressing deviant thought. The freedom to practice a religion that demands state-imposed doctrine is no religious freedom at all.

Hong Kong

Another serious threat to religious freedom is Beijing’s encroaching influence over Hong Kong, which had thrived with a relatively high degree of autonomy since the city was returned from British to Chinese rule in 1997 under the “one country, two systems” policy. Religious freedom was respected in Hong Kong, and unlike in mainland China, churches in Hong Kong have experienced similar levels of religious freedom experienced in the West.⁵⁹

Those freedoms have now been all but crushed since the passage of Beijing’s new national security law imposed on Hong Kong on June 30, 2020, which targets citizens involved in “secession, subversion of state power, terrorism, or collusion with foreign forces.”⁶⁰ Catholics and Protestants make up over 10

percent of Hong Kong's population, and Christian leaders in Hong Kong fear that under the national security law, they could be extradited for dissent and punished in the mainland. In fact, Article 38 of the new law states that it applies to anyone, anywhere in the world, extending Beijing's reach far beyond its borders.⁶¹ Christian activists, including Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow, and Jimmy Lai, were at the forefront of the 2019 pro-democracy protests.⁶²

In May 2022, Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium, a well-known advocate for the pro-democracy movement and religious freedom in China, was arrested for "colluding with foreign forces."⁶³ A guilty sentence could put Zen in prison for the rest of his life. This erosion of the "one country, two systems" policy poses a direct threat to outspoken citizens like Zen, as more may soon face more religious restrictions, just as Christians in mainland China do.

Social Credit System

The Chinese government is developing a social credit system meant to raise "the honest mentality and credit levels of the entire society," contributing to the harmony the CCP supposedly values.⁶⁴ It entails nationwide efforts to encourage what the state deems to be "trustworthy conduct"⁶⁵ while simultaneously punishing actions that the CCP disapproves of through the collection of citizens' "credit records."⁶⁶ Measures are implemented to punish those who fail to meet these rigid behavioral requirements, demanding that noncompliant citizens receive restrictions in marketplace activity. Aspects of the system are already underway; in 2018, over 17 million airline and five million train tickets were denied to citizens who failed to pay their taxes in full.⁶⁷

Although the government states that the social credit score system is intended to promote higher standards in economic, political, and social spheres, the system proves incredibly dangerous to religious freedom, especially because the CCP is not interested in promoting religious belief. The measures give

the CCP, which is already hostile towards religion, the sole authority in determining what is considered trustworthy behavior. This places Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uyghur Muslims, Falun Gong adherents, and other persecuted minorities in danger of a diminished credit score due to their religious practices.

Uyghur Muslims

Uyghurs—a Turkic ethnic group that is largely Muslim, concentrated in the Northwest region of China, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)—find themselves in the midst of the greatest mass persecution of our time.⁶⁸ China claims its aggressive actions to crack down on Uyghurs are counter-terrorism measures needed to suppress “separatism.”⁶⁹ A terrorist attack in 1997 was the first to be blamed on a group of Uyghurs; other notable attacks occurred in the Uyghur region in 2014.⁷⁰ While these incidents were of concern, the scale and brutality of Beijing’s crackdown on the Uyghur community cannot be hidden behind the terminology of “counter-terrorism.” There is little evidence of any cohesive separatist movement to validate Beijing’s paranoia.⁷¹

Xinjiang is home to about 11 million Uyghur Muslims.⁷² It is estimated that at least 1.8 million Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities are currently forcibly detained in what Chinese officials call “re-education” facilities.⁷³ In reality, these are massive camps where detainees are subjected to inhumane living conditions and torture,⁷⁴ forced to abandon their religious and cultural practices,⁷⁵ and indoctrinated with CCP propaganda.⁷⁶ Testimonies of those who have been detained detail accounts of detainees being raped or used for medical experiments.⁷⁷ Many women recount incidents involving an “[organized] system of mass rape, sexual abuse and torture” within Uyghur internment camps.⁷⁸

Tursunay Ziawudun was held for nine months in these camps. She recalls how the women were led away each night during her imprisonment by Chinese men to be sexually abused.⁷⁹ Other women report how they were forced to aid in the abuse by cleaning the camp rooms and performing other degrading tasks. Reports have also surfaced of beatings, solitary confinement, and other harsh punishments for detainees who fail to follow orders.⁸⁰ The children of detained Uyghurs are sent to mass boarding schools to be raised by the state, where they are taught communist propaganda.⁸¹

Authorities continue to claim they are providing “free vocational training” to combat extremist thought.⁸² However, this fails to explain why most Uyghurs are sent to the camps, such as Gulshan Abbas, a retired medical doctor who “disappeared” without warning in 2018, days after her sister, Rushan Abbas, spoke at a human rights event in Washington, D.C.⁸³ Reports suggest the conditions of the camps are dire and have led to the death of some detainees during or following their detainment.⁸⁴

Mounting evidence points to numerous factories in Xinjiang using detainees from the camps as forced labor.⁸⁵ The supply chains for many international companies can be traced directly back to these factories. Goods tainted by forced labor, including computers, designer shoes, and face masks, saturate the global market.⁸⁶ Reports also convey China’s coercion attempts to diminish Muslim influence in society, such as requiring detainees to renounce the tenets of their faith before they can be released from these internment camps.⁸⁷

China has turned the entire Uyghur region into what some have called an “open-air” prison. As technology has evolved, it has provided the Chinese government with more tools to harass this community. China has started to use facial recognition technology to track Uyghurs throughout Xinjiang as they go about their daily lives. Facial recognition devices are fixed to the entrances of supermarkets, malls, hospitals, and at police checkpoints every few hundred feet. China has also taken

to monitoring social media apps. Uyghurs are often arrested for information found on their phones, including being caught with religious content on their phones.⁸⁸

Recent reports indicate that Uyghur women are often forced to undergo abortion or sterilization. Following compulsory pregnancy tests that come back positive, Uyghur women who have met the limit of two children can be subjected to forced abortions or injections that leave them sterile.⁸⁹ One study reports the Uyghur birth rate in Xinjiang was down 24 percent in 2019, compared to four percent nationwide.⁹⁰ The enormous effort to prevent Uyghur births suggests an attempt by the Chinese government to diminish Uyghur population size and influence. Uyghur parents caught skirting these regulations may be sent to “re-education” camps as punishment for having too many children.⁹¹

On January 19, 2021, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a determination that the Chinese government was guilty of both genocide and crimes against humanity. In his statement about the determination, Secretary Pompeo stated:

The United States calls upon the PRC immediately to release all arbitrarily detained persons and abolish its system of internment, detention camps, house arrest and forced labor; cease coercive population control measures, including forced sterilizations, forced abortion, forced birth control, and the removal of children from their families; end all torture and abuse in places of detention; end the persecution of Uyghurs and other members of religious and ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China, and afford Uyghurs and other persecuted minorities the freedom to travel and emigrate.⁹²

Tibetan Buddhists

Shortly after Mao came to power, Chinese troops invaded Tibet in 1950 in pursuit of a long-held Chinese claim of sovereignty. This has been a cause of unrest in Tibet, where the population, who mostly adhere to a unique confluence of Buddhism and indigenous traditions, remains loyal to their now-exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 70s, Beijing set out to eliminate what it saw as the old, superstitious belief system of Tibetan Buddhism that was standing in the way of a monolithic socialist China. The Chinese military destroyed over 6,000 monasteries and killed and imprisoned many Tibetan clergy, reducing Tibet's monastic population by 93 percent.⁹³

Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership in the 1980s, the crackdown on Tibet eased. Renewed demonstrations in 1987 resulted in a security crackdown from Beijing that indicated a gradual return to a policy of suppression, where religious practices and beliefs were forced to conform in order to be more acceptable to the CCP.⁹⁴ These policies are still in effect today. The Buddhist Association of China closely supervises officially recognized Buddhist institutions.⁹⁵ In its 2023 Annual Report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reported how "the Chinese government repeatedly stated its intent to interfere in the Dalai Lama's reincarnation, claiming it has the ultimate authority to appoint his successor."⁹⁶ Chen Quanguo is a Chinese official credited with successfully suppressing unrest in Tibet through intense security crackdowns. The success of his program led Beijing to put Chen in charge of the Uyghur region, where he has now installed many of the measures he used in Tibet.⁹⁷

Beijing's actions in Tibet further demonstrate its intolerance for any religion or culture not centered around the CCP. To reinforce China's authority in Tibet, the government even started to offer cash payments to impoverished Tibetan families who displayed portraits of Chinese President Xi Jinping in

their homes.⁹⁸ USCIRF found that China has been further tightening its grip on Tibetan Buddhism in recent years. Government authorities have “restricted Tibetans’ access to religious sites, banned religious gatherings, destroyed sites and symbols of religious significance, and subjected Tibetan monks and nuns to political indoctrination” in re-education facilities throughout the previous year.⁹⁹ In Tibet, as in every region under Chinese rule, Beijing seeks to secure its own power and enforce Party loyalty and ideology above all else.

Falun Gong

Falun Gong (also known as Falun Dafa) is not a formal religion but a spiritual discipline based on a set of meditation exercises and texts that preach the virtues of truth, benevolence, and forbearance.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, this rapidly growing practice raised the ire of the Chinese government in the late 1990s when it reached between 70 and 100 million adherents, thereby surpassing the number of CCP members at the time (63 million).¹⁰¹ In the wake of a decades-long effort to suppress traditional Chinese beliefs, the rising interest in spirituality was seen as a threat to the CCP.

July 1999 marked the beginning of the government’s drive to eradicate the belief in Falun Gong. This effort included mass arrests, imprisonment in labor camps, brainwashing, and torture for anyone who refused to renounce their Falun Gong beliefs and practices.¹⁰² Authorities tortured practitioners as they tried to force them to renounce their faith and stop practicing—something that continues today.¹⁰³

The most horrifying form of persecution against the Falun Gong (and, at times, other religious minorities¹⁰⁴) is forced organ harvesting. This is the act of forcibly removing organs from prisoners of conscience and selling the organs. A team of researchers has proven that patients in China (including those who travel from abroad) are promised matching organs for transplant within a few days—an unbelievably short time compared to the wait in Western countries, which ranges from a few months to

a few years.¹⁰⁵ Such a quick turnaround for receiving organs is only possible with China's forced procedures that take the lives of blameless Falun Gong believers.

On June 17, 2019, the Independent Tribunal into Forced Organ Harvesting of Prisoners of Conscience in China concluded with certainty that Falun Gong adherents have been used as a primary source of forced organ harvesting.¹⁰⁶ Human rights lawyers estimate that at least 65,000 Falun Gong practitioners have been killed for their organs since 2001.¹⁰⁷ The Chinese government is making a substantial profit from organ trafficking. Global Rights Compliance suggests China gains at least 840 million USD each year from these endeavors, while some estimate profits are as high as 1.7 billion USD.¹⁰⁸ Evidence suggests that patients from over 20 countries have traveled to China for transplants in what is now known as "transplant tourism."¹⁰⁹

It is suspected that some Uyghurs also suffer the same fate. The government forces Uyghurs across Xinjiang to undergo medical exams that include DNA sampling. Uyghur residents claim their information was stored in computers during the exam, but they were never given the testing results. According to reports by China's state media, examinations were conducted on more than 90 percent of the population of Xinjiang. Chinese authorities claim that the DNA database is intended to help solve crimes and identify bodies.¹¹⁰ However, the great expense of the program and the forced nature of the exams are cause for suspicion. China's attempt to profit from its human rights abuses against Falun Gong practitioners and Uyghurs approaches a scale and brutality not seen since the atrocities of the Second World War.

How We Can Respond: Policy Recommendations

Although it may feel like China is a world away, its power and influence are growing rapidly. This growth is having a tangible impact around the world through its massive Belt and Road Initiative and

other projects.¹¹¹ The scale of Chinese influence should motivate U.S. lawmakers to address China's religious freedom violations through all available means, including those authorized by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Passed in 1998, IRFA outlined and authorized methods through which the U.S. government could advance religious freedom abroad and created mechanisms like the Country of Particular Concern designation to help do so. IRFA also set up and authorized structures to advance international religious freedom within the U.S. government, including creating USCIRF to monitor and make recommendations to the U.S. government on religious freedom policy abroad. IRFA also set up an Office of International Religious Freedom at the U.S. State Department, headed by the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, in order to advance religious freedom through foreign policy.¹¹²

Through these mechanisms and others, the United States should utilize all applicable methods of addressing foreign countries responsible for committing religious freedom violations, including continuing to label China a CPC. Other relevant actions the United States might take include applying targeted visa restrictions and financial sanctions on individuals responsible for human rights violations and preventing U.S. agencies from issuing licenses to export goods or technology to the specific Chinese agencies or government officials responsible for human rights violations.¹¹³

The following are a few policy options for U.S. lawmakers and diplomats to consider as they address the religious freedom situation in China and hold the Chinese government accountable for its religious freedom violations.

Publicly Condemn Religious Freedom Violations

Chinese leaders are exceedingly sensitive to embarrassment on the world stage. When the governments of other powerful countries publicly speak out about Beijing's religious freedom violations, they take

note. The U.S. government should continue publicly calling attention to China's religious freedom abuses and form a coalition of like-minded governments to join us in this effort. As China seeks to influence the world with its authoritarian way of governing and intimidate other countries into affirming them, it is critical the United States present an alternative political philosophy to the world—one that respects basic freedoms, including religious freedom. To that end, American officials should:

1. Take every appropriate opportunity at public speeches and private diplomatic meetings with Chinese officials to assert that freedom of religion is the right of every human being and that religious freedom violations will not be silently tolerated.¹¹⁴
2. Urge other free countries to join the United States in promoting religious freedom and human rights in China. Make use of the newly established International Religious Freedom Alliance to work with other countries to highlight religious freedom concerns in China.

Apply Sanctions for Religious Freedom Violations

Targeted U.S. sanctions against foreign individuals responsible for religious freedom violations have proven effective in other countries.¹¹⁵ The U.S. Treasury Department should use the authority provided by the Global Magnitsky Act to sanction, as appropriate, the United Front's Religious Work Bureau for religious freedom violations against Christians and others. The Treasury Department should also continue to target Chinese officials responsible for the systematic use of Uyghur forced labor in Xinjiang, as well as other leaders responsible for large-scale human rights violations.

Implement Recent U.S. Legislation to Advance Human Rights in China

U.S. laws adopted to address religious freedom and human rights violations in China include the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-76),¹¹⁶ the Uyghur Forced Labor

Prevention Act (Public Law 117–78),¹¹⁷ and the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 (P.L. 116–145).¹¹⁸ These laws empower the government to sanction Chinese officials and entities over human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, respectively. The administration should seek to fully implement these laws to maximize their impact.

Address Religious Freedom in Trade Negotiations

China’s treatment of its religious minorities must be part of the litmus test to determine what future economic ties between the United States and China look like. Behind-closed-doors trade negotiations between the United States and China can be a platform to raise human rights concerns and advance religious freedom for the benefit of oppressed communities.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the reason why the People’s Republic of China has no tolerance for any faith is because the Chinese Communist Party wishes to replace the human need to worship with a substitute religion centered around the Party. To be a good citizen of China, you may not find your identity in anything other than the CCP. In China, the CCP is god, and “Xi Jinping Thought” reigns over all.

The Chinese government’s effort to maintain this status quo calls for the suppression of any belief system “that can challenge the CCP’s monopoly on ideology.”¹¹⁹ “Xi Jinping Thought” teaches that the CCP must maintain control over the state in order to achieve a “powerful, unified China.”¹²⁰

Consequently, the only religious institutions that the Chinese government will legally allow must reinforce this China-centered identity and support for the Party. To the CCP, adherence to faith tenets robs the Party of full allegiance, thereby putting its legitimacy and influence at risk. Faith must rest in the principles of Marxism, which is “basically indistinguishable from Xi Jinping Thought.”¹²¹ With an

ideology like this driving Chinese government policy, it is no surprise that even the Three-Self Churches are being forced to remove their crosses to make room for Chinese flags and replace copies of the Ten Commandments with quotes from the Chinese president. An invisible church lends more power to the ever-visible Communist Party.

More than ever before, China's power and influence are expanding in a way that affects the entire world. How the international community responds to China's aggressive religious freedom violations will act as a model for how other countries might behave without diplomatic or economic repercussions. In the face of Chinese atrocities, U.S. politicians and citizens should enunciate the human rights standard for religious freedom articulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and hold China and everyone else to abide by it.¹²²

It is essential to affirm that everyone has the right to freedom of religion, change their religion or belief, and practice and live out their faith. China must adhere to this standard expected of the world's leading countries and not be allowed to shamelessly commit human rights and religious freedom violations without consequences from the international community. In the end, we must remember that the freedom to exercise religion as dictated by the state is no freedom at all.

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