



Clamp Down on Religious Freedom in China

Religious freedom conditions in China have continued to deteriorate over the years. Officially an atheist state, the Chinese constitution grants its citizens “freedom of religious belief,” but in reality, that freedom is conditioned by what the government deems permissible. China recognizes five religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism) but insists that these religions be “sinicized,” meaning that their teachings and doctrines should conform to and support those of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

As a result, China has imposed a number of regulations governing all religious activity, requiring religious teachers to support the leadership of the CCP and isolating religion in China from foreign influence, both in terms of exchanges or funding. In March 2022, China began regulating online activities of religious organizations or individuals, requiring approval by provincial officials that online religious content would “not incite subversion of state power, oppose the Chinese communist party leadership, undermine national unity, or violate the principle of independence and self-management in religious undertakings.” The decree explicitly says religious groups “must not utilize the internet to induce minors to become religious.” This reinforced existing regulations preventing any Chinese under 18 years from entering a religious site, whether church, mosque, temple, or other place of worship.

Since 1999 and the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act, China has been designated a “Country of Particular Concern (CPC)” in annual reports on religious freedom prepared by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. That CPC designation is for countries deemed to have engaged in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

China’s brutal treatment of Uyghur Muslims has been much publicized and with good reason. It is estimated that over 1 million Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region of China have been detained in what the Chinese call “re-education” camps but are basically prison camps. Human rights groups have found credible evidence of Uyghurs being tortured, placed in solitary confinement, and subjected to forced labor. For those not in the camps, the CCP uses extensive electronic surveillance (facial recognition, voice pattern sampling) and armed checkpoints to limit the movement of Uyghurs. There is systematic suppression of

Uyghur language, culture, and religion so that rituals associated with Islamic holy days are prohibited.

But the growing restrictions apply to all religions. Tibetan Buddhists have been detained for listening to the Dalai Lama's teachings or possessing his portrait. Buddhist monks and nuns must attend indoctrination sessions and access to temples is severely restricted. Thousands of Uyghur and Tibetan Buddhist children have been separated from their parents and sent to live in state-run boarding schools in an effort to erase their religious identity.

Christian institutions and clergy/religious have also come under increased pressure to register with state-sanctioned religious bodies. Protestants who refuse to join the official Three-Self Patriotic Movement, such as pastors of the Early Rain Covenant Church or Church of the Almighty God, have been harassed and imprisoned, their churches destroyed. Credible sources have reported that practitioners of Falun Gong, a meditative spiritual movement, have had their organs harvested for China's burgeoning transplant operations.

There are an estimated 12 million Catholics in China, with half being part of the official Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). CCPA registered congregations are led by bishops selected with the approval of the Chinese Communist Party, the rest being members of the "underground" church who adhere to the authority of Rome. In 2007, Pope Benedict wrote to Catholics in China, saying "the clandestine condition is not a normal feature of the Church's life" and expressed the hope that these "underground" pastors would be recognized by the CCPA.

In September 2018, the Vatican and China signed a provisional agreement concerning the appointment of bishops with the CCPA recommending candidates for bishops and the Pope having the final say. While the text of this agreement has not been made public, it was intended to pave the way for the unification of the underground and CCPA sanctioned Catholic communities. There are 100 bishops in China, about 70 of whom are recognized by both the CCPA and the Holy See, including seven CCPA bishops recognized by the Vatican as a result of the 2018 agreement. But China has reportedly only recognized three of the estimated 30 "underground" bishops. Six new bishops were appointed with the approval of both China and the Vatican. The 2018 agreement was renewed in October 2020 and October 2022, despite opposition from within and outside the Church from those who deemed that China's continued crackdown on human rights and religion did not warrant the extension.

Notably, one of the May 2021 "Measures for the Administration of Religious Teaching Staff" specifically focused on the process of approving a new Catholic bishop but made no mention of the Vatican's involvement. According to some experts, the vague wording does not necessarily mean that the Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement on the selection of

bishops has been abrogated. Since many current bishops are rather old and as many as 30 dioceses lack a bishop, cooperation between China and the Vatican on filling these vacancies will be important as Fall 2024 approaches when presumably the 2022 Sino-Vatican provisional agreement expires.

The Vatican has defended the agreement as a “point of departure for a more concrete and fruitful dialogue for both sides” and acknowledges the many problems of the life of the Catholic Church in China. Cardinal Pietro Parolin has identified three major issues in Sino-Vatican dialogue: the episcopal conference, the communication of the Chinese bishops with the pope, and evangelization. Perhaps as an indication of China’s willingness to continue the dialogue, two Chinese bishops attended the first two weeks of the October 2023 Synod on Synodality. And on May 21, 2024, the Holy See held a conference on “The 100 Years of the Plenary Council of China: Between History and the Present,” attended by several senior Chinese officials and Bishop Joseph Shen Bin of Shanghai. Bishop Shen is recognized by both the Holy See and the CCPA but his appointment to the Shanghai diocese was a unilateral decision by the Chinese.

It remains to be seen whether the Vatican’s hope of building trust and friendship through dialogue will bear fruit in improvements in religious freedom, not only for Catholics, but for all who want to exercise their “right to live in the truth of one’s faith and in conformity with one’s transcendent dignity as a person.”