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The Battle for China's Spirit

Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping



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ON THE COVER

Chinese soldiers amass outside of Labrang Monastery in Gansu Province to prevent protests during Losar, the Tibetan lunar New Year festival, in February 2016 (Christophe Boisvieux/Getty Images).

Freedom House

Executive Summary

The Battle for China's Spirit

A Taoist disciple joins the order without knowing when he will be admitted to priesthood. Dozens of Christians are barred from celebrating Christmas together. Tibetan monks are forced to learn reinterpretations of Buddhist doctrine during a "patriotic reeducation" session. A Uighur Muslim farmer is sentenced to nine years in prison for praying in a field. And a 45-year-old father in northeastern China dies in custody days after being detained for practicing Falun Gong.

These are a small sample of the obstacles that Chinese believers encounter when they seek to peacefully practice their faith—products of the ruling Communist Party's multifaceted apparatus of control. Combining both violent and nonviolent methods, the party's policies are designed to curb the rapid growth of religious communities and eliminate certain beliefs and practices, while also harnessing aspects of religion that could serve the regime's political and economic interests.

Since Xi Jinping took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, the authorities have intensified many of their restrictions, resulting in an overall increase in religious persecution. But believers have responded with a surprising degree of resistance, including in faith communities that have generally enjoyed cooperative relationships with state and party officials.

This escalating cycle of repression and pushback illustrates a fundamental failure of the Chinese authorities' religious policies. Rather than checking religion's natural expansion and keeping it under political control, the CCP's rigid constraints have essentially created an enormous black market, forcing many believers to operate outside the law and to view the regime as unreasonable, unjust, or illegitimate.

The present study is a detailed examination of the dynamics of religious revival, repression, and resistance in China today, as well as their recent evolution and broader implications. The report focuses on seven communities that together account for over 350 million believers: the country's officially recognized religions—Buddhism (Chinese and Tibetan), Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam—as well as Falun Gong, the largest of several banned *qigong* practices, new religious movements, and quasi-Christian sects.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, religious persecution in China has increased overall.

As China experiences a spiritual revival across a wide range of faiths, the Chinese government's religious controls have taken different forms for different localities, ethnicities, and denominations. In many parts of China, ordinary believers do not necessarily feel constrained in their ability to practice their faith, and state authorities even offer active support for certain activities.

At the other extreme, Chinese officials have banned holiday celebrations, desecrated places of worship, and employed lethal violence. Security forces across the country detain, torture, or kill believers from various faiths on a daily basis. How a group or individual is

treated depends in large part on the level of perceived threat or benefit to party interests, as well as the discretion of local officials.

Nonviolent forms of control are more prevalent, but they are also deeply offensive to many believers, directly intruding on the internal functions of religious organizations. They include vetting religious leaders for political reliability, placing limits on the number of new monastics or priests, and manipulating religious doctrine according to party priorities. Extensive surveillance, "reeducation" campaigns, and restrictions on private worship affect the spiritual lives of millions of people. And increasingly, economic reprisals and exploitation have become a source of tension and a catalyst for protests.

The Communist Party's efforts to impose its will on a wide spectrum of religious practice and thought are failing in important ways.

Under Xi, many of these practices have expanded. New legal mechanisms have codified previously informal restrictions. Crackdowns on unregistered and even state-sanctioned places of worship and religious leaders have increased, with several clerics receiving long prison terms. Constraints on children's ability to participate in religious life have multiplied. Four communities examined in this study have experienced an increase in persecution: Protestant Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, and both Uighur and Hui Muslims.

Yet there have also been a number of positive developments in unexpected quarters. Sino-Vatican relations have warmed, raising the possibility of an agreement on the appointment of Catholic bishops. Such a pact would remove a major source of division in the Chinese church. Falun Gong practitioners, though still subject to severe abuses, are experiencing reduced persecution in many locales, as top officials driving the campaign have been purged in intraparty struggles, and years of grassroots outreach by adherents and their supporters have won over some lower-level authorities.

Indeed, members of all faith communities have responded to official controls with creativity and with courage, at times scoring significant victories. Whatever the outcome of each contestation, it is clear that the CCP's efforts to impose its will on a wide spectrum of religious practice and thought are falling short or backfiring in important ways.

Religious groups, beliefs, and practices that the CCP has devoted tremendous resources to extinguishing have survived or spread, representing a remarkable failure of the party's repressive capacity. Meanwhile, official actions are generating resentment, assertiveness, and activism among populations that might previously have been apolitical and largely content with CCP rule.

The impact of these dynamics reaches far beyond the realm of religious policy alone, deeply affecting China's overall legal, social, political, and economic environment. Looking toward the future, Xi and his colleagues face a critical choice: Do they recognize their errors and loosen religious controls, or do they press ahead with a spiraling pattern of repression and resistance that might threaten the regime's long-term legitimacy and stability? Their decision will be critical in determining the ultimate cost of the ongoing battle for China's spirit.

Overview

Marxist Materialism Confronts Religious Reality

Religion and spirituality have been deeply embedded in Chinese culture and identity for millennia. This fact posed a challenge for the avowedly atheist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) when it came to power in 1949, and its strategies for dealing with religiosity in Chinese society have fluctuated in the decades since.

Under Mao Zedong—and particularly during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76)—the party took extreme measures to stamp out religion. Thousands of monasteries, churches, and mosques were destroyed, monks were disrobed, and untold numbers of religious leaders and believers were imprisoned, tortured, and killed.

In 1982, after Mao's death, the CCP Central Committee under Deng Xiaoping rejected the Cultural Revolution–era policy of eradicating religion.[3] Instead it favored a more regulatory approach, seeking to manage religion, harness its influence to achieve other party goals, and suppress any threat it may present to the party's authority. In the background was the Marxist assumption that with further economic development, "feudal" religious beliefs would inevitably fade.

Yet 35 years later, party leaders face a conundrum: Such Marxist predictions have proven remarkably inaccurate. Although the Chinese economy and per capita incomes have grown exponentially since the early 1980s, religiosity in Chinese society has not dissipated. On the contrary, it is undergoing a period of extraordinary revival and expansion across multiple faiths. Today, China is home to at least 350 million religious believers and tens of millions of others who engage in various spiritual meditation practices and folk-religious rituals. Many believers report that they seek divine comfort

"[Communist Party cadres must be] unyielding Marxist atheists.... We should guide and educate the religious circle and their followers."

—Xi Jinping, April 2016[1]

"The world is won by those who let it go. But when you try and try, the world is beyond winning."

—Lao Tzu, founder of Taoism[2]



A banner at a Buddhist temple and scenic park in Jiangsu Province: "Study, propagate, and implement religious regulations, maintain harmony in religion, promote social harmony.

Credit: Kuei-min Chang

and guidance specifically to cope with life in the new environment of hypermaterialistic modernity.

Each generation of CCP leaders has responded to this predicament with a combination of regulations, accommodation, and repression. The current Politburo Standing Committee led by Xi Jinping, which took power in November 2012, is no different. In fact, in his words and actions, Xi has elevated the prominence and importance of "religious work" on the party's agenda.[4]

The present study takes stock of these dynamics, which are critical to understanding today's China. It assesses the current state of religious revival, the regime's multifaceted system for controlling religious practice, and the various responses mounted by religious communities. The report places a particular emphasis on the first four years of Xi Jinping's rule and on seven major religious groups—Chinese Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Falun Gong—while seeking to shed light on the following questions:[5]

- What are the main obstacles and opportunities that spiritual leaders and believers encounter in China today?
- What have been the main changes in the party-state's religious policies, methods of control, and patterns of implementation since November 2012?
- What factors are driving these changes, and to what extent has the CCP been effective at achieving its aims for each religious community?
- What are the implications of these dynamics for broader political, economic, and social developments in China?

In preparing this report, Freedom House analysts examined hundreds of official documents and speeches, judicial verdicts, media accounts, and research studies by scholars, think tanks, and human rights groups in Chinese and English. The report also draws on roughly 30 interviews with lawyers, religious leaders, monastics, grassroots activists, commentators, and scholars both inside and outside China, as well as observations from fieldwork conducted in China by contributing researchers and academic advisers.[6]

The pillars of the CCP's religious policy

As CCP leaders have come to terms with the enduring existence and apparent expansion of religion in Chinese society, they have pursued a complex policy designed to maximize the benefits to party rule while minimizing the risks. Four key pillars of the strategy are evident in its implementation:

- **Opportunistic exploitation:** Harnessing the benefits of religion to advance broader CCP economic, political, cultural, and foreign policy goals
- **'Rule by law':** Developing legal and bureaucratic instruments to control religious practice and institutions
- **Selective eradication:** Fiercely suppressing religious groups, beliefs, and individuals deemed to threaten party rule or policy priorities, often via extralegal means
- **Long-term asphyxiation:** Adopting measures to curb religion's expansion and accelerate its extinction among future generations

Party authorities have combined these basic elements to create a diversity of conditions for different faith groups and subgroups, leading to seemingly contradictory government actions. On the one hand, party leaders regularly cite the constructive role that religion can play in society, encourage charity work, and fund renovations of important pilgrimage sites, tourist attractions, and international conferences. On the other hand, a multibillion-dollar bureaucratic and security apparatus monitors and suppresses—sometimes with brute force—a wide range of religious practices that would be considered benign and routine in other parts of the world.

Each new set of CCP leaders has followed this general pattern, with certain shifts in emphasis and implementation. Jiang Zemin stressed in his speeches the poten-

tially "positive" contributions of religions in achieving the party's social and economic goals. But in 1999, he initiated what one scholar termed "the worst instance of religious persecution since the Cultural Revolution"[7]—a massive campaign to eradicate the popular Falun Gong meditation and spiritual practice.

Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, saw state-sanctioned religion as a means of promoting a "harmonious society." During his tenure the government began funding the World Buddhist Forum to promote Chinese "soft power," while construction of new churches and Hui mosques flourished as many local officials took a lenient approach or sought to reap economic benefits from religious expansion. But Hu also oversaw the adoption of restrictive national regulations on religious affairs, a pre-Olympic crackdown on thousands of believers, and a significant uptick in religious repression in Tibet and Xinjiang following major protests.

Trajectory under Xi: Intensified restrictions, unexpected improvements

Since November 2012, Xi Jinping and his colleagues have largely maintained the CCP's stance on religion and continued specific policies initiated by their predecessors. Nevertheless, certain distinctions and points of emphasis have emerged.

Rhetorically, Xi has been even more vocal than Hu in his effort to harness China's religious and cultural traditions to shore up CCP legitimacy, linking them to his own signature concepts of the "China Dream" and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. At the same time, in the context of a broader ideological campaign to limit the influence of so-called Western values, Xi has warned against foreign infiltration of the religious sphere. Together, these two messages have reinforced the perception that the CCP favors Asian religions like Buddhism and Taoism, particularly if their expansion might help contain the spread of faiths like Christianity and Islam, of which the party has traditionally been more wary.

Xi has also presided over the general closure of civic space in China, and religious groups have not escaped the increased repression. Indeed, one of the main findings of this study is that religious persecution has increased overall, with four communities in particular experiencing a downturn in conditions—Protestant Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, and both Hui and Uighur Muslims.

Religious policy under Xi can be distinguished from that of the Hu Jintao era in four key ways:

- **More restrictive legal environment:** A series of new, largely restrictive legal instruments have been introduced at both the national and local levels, in some cases codifying what were previously informal political directives. These include items directly linked to religious policy, such as an update to national religious affairs regulations, harsher penalties in a key provision of the criminal code, local rules banning religious attire in Xinjiang, and judicial guidelines regarding self-immolations in Tibet. New laws on national security and counterterrorism have also incorporated provisions that are could be used to justify suppression of peaceful religious practice.

Party leaders have pursued a complex policy designed to maximize religion's benefits to party rule while minimizing the risks.

- **Expanding targets of repression:** The targets of religious persecution have broadened compared with the Hu period, affecting previously tolerated activities and individuals. Most notably, state-sanctioned religious leaders and places of worship have faced penalties—including long prison sentences and demolitions—that are typically reserved for unregistered or banned groups. Routine acts of religious expression like praying in a field or hospital, lighting incense, or viewing a religious video have drawn harsh punishments. Repression has also intensified in certain geographical areas where it had once been rare, or against those who aid persecuted religious believers, such as human rights lawyers and family members.

- **Increased state intrusion in daily religious life:** The state's controlling presence is felt in aspects of religious practice and identity from which it was previously absent. Party cadres and security forces—including armed police—are more directly involved in the daily management of monasteries, mosques, and churches in certain parts of the country, with some positioned permanently in places of worship. For lay believers, popular festivals have been banned, children's religious education and participation are constrained, and deeply personal decisions like wearing a headscarf, growing a



A police van with surveillance equipment stationed outside a mosque in Urumqi, Xinjiang, in 2012.

Credit: Graham Adams

beard, or fasting are dictated by state authorities.

- **Adaptation to new technological environment:** Various modes of electronic surveillance—from video cameras and drones to monitoring of online activity—have expanded dramatically at sites of worship and public spaces frequented by believers, supplementing a vast network of human informants. As the use of smartphones and social media applications has increased, authorities have responded with localized blocks on particular apps, imprisonment of users for sharing religious content on platforms like QQ or WeChat, and prosecution of believers for merely downloading or consuming unofficial religious content or information about violations of religious rights.

Despite an overall trajectory of tightening controls, some developments have spurred optimism in unexpected quarters.

Despite this overall trajectory of tightening controls, a number of developments have spurred optimism among certain faith communities, reflecting the complexity of China's political environment. Some Buddhist scholars have welcomed Xi's rhetoric about the importance of traditional Chinese culture and his specific references to Buddhism. Beijing's relations with the Vatican have warmed considerably since Pope Francis assumed his position within days of Xi's installation as state president. As of late 2016, the two sides appeared to be very close to reaching an agreement on the appointment of bishops, although some prominent figures in the church remained skeptical about how much such a deal would reduce repression of underground Catholics.

More surprising given the party's ongoing 17-year campaign to eradicate Falun Gong, repression of the group appears to have declined in practice in some locales. Xi has offered no explicit signal that he plans to reverse the CCP's policy toward Falun Gong, but cracks in the party apparatus appear to have given lower-level officials leeway to choose not to persecute local Falun Gong residents. Incidents that would have been unimaginable a few years ago—the release of a practitioner after only a few days' detention, police permitting adherents to meditate in custody, or officers actively protecting individuals from punishment—have occurred across the country and do not appear to be isolated.

Factors driving change

A constellation of factors appear to be driving these changes, for better or worse, at both the national and local levels. Religious groups have been swept up in a **broader tightening of CCP control** over civil society and an increasingly anti-Western ideological bent under Xi Jinping. The party is essentially bracing itself for the potential political impact of an economic downturn while seeking new sources of legitimacy. The new religious restrictions bear markers of Xi's particular mode of governance, including the "rule by law" emphasis on legislation, an expansion of party-state representation in various social entities, and dedicated efforts to rein in social media activity.

At the same time, certain government initiatives appear to be **responses to developments in particular religious communities**. Judicial guidelines and collective punishment tactics have been introduced to suppress Tibetan self-immolations, a particularly desperate form of protest that peaked in 2012 after other avenues of redress or escape were blocked. Restrictions on Hui and Uighur Muslims seem motivated by concerns over increased violent attacks and the spread of Salafism, an ultraconservative form of Islam, as well as rising anti-Muslim sentiment among the Chinese public. As Falun Gong practitioners devise new means of disseminating information about the group and the abuses they have suffered, security forces have tried to adapt by increasing electronic surveillance and deploying geolocation capabilities to find and arrest them.

In the case of Christianity, the traits and priorities of

Figure 1. Spectrum of Religious Persecution

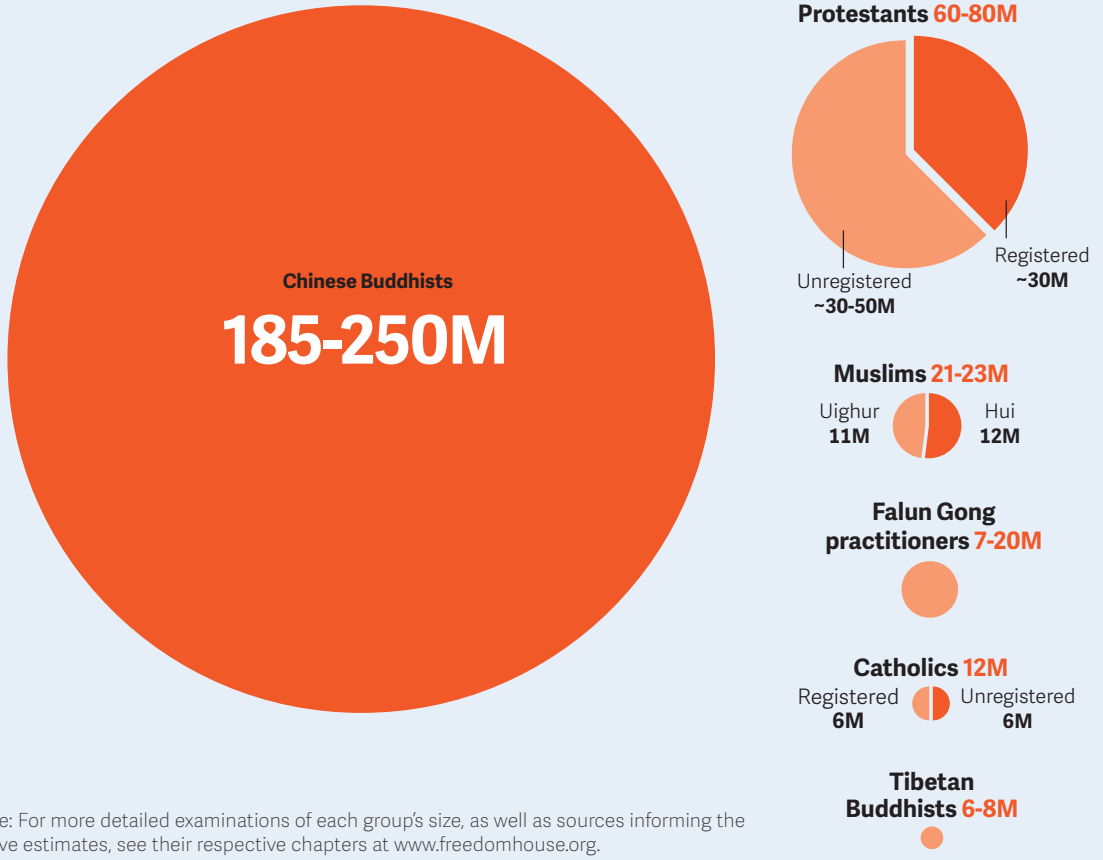
Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
Taoists	Chinese Buddhists Hui Muslims	Catholics	Protestants	Tibetan Buddhists Uighur Muslims Falun Gong

Note: Freedom House researchers and academic advisers assigned these designations based on the situations described in the chapters devoted to each group, as well as the breakdown provided in the Key Religious Controls chart on page 18.

Figure 2. China's Religious Communities

China is home to over 350 million religious believers and hundreds of millions more who follow various folk traditions. Determining the precise size of religious communities in China is notoriously difficult, even for officially recognized groups. Government statistics exclude those who worship at unregistered temples or churches and believers under the age of 18, and many Chinese engage in a mixture of religious and folk practices. Official figures for Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists are based on ethnicity, embedding the assumption that all members of an ethnic group adhere to a particular religion. And for banned groups like Falun Gong, no contemporary official figures exist.

Nevertheless, having some sense of the overall and relative size of these communities is important for understanding the nature of religious revival, repression, and resistance. The following are informed estimates for the communities examined in this study (with the exception of Taoism, for which no figures were available), drawing on official figures, public opinion surveys, academic studies, media reports, and religious groups' own reporting.



Note: For more detailed examinations of each group's size, as well as sources informing the above estimates, see their respective chapters at www.freedomhouse.org.

individual officials seem to have been especially influential. The party secretary of Zhejiang Province, who had worked closely with Xi in the past and reportedly has a strong aversion to the public display of Christian symbols, has overseen a cross-removal campaign that has affected over 1,500 churches in the region. Separately, serendipitous attributes of the new pope—his developing country origins and Jesuit roots, for example—may make him a more palatable interlocutor for the CCP and help clear the way for an agreement on bishop appointments. From the Vatican's perspective, the unprecedented number of bishop vacancies in China may be motivating Pope Francis to make his own exceptional overtures to Xi.

The human cost of the party's religious controls and abuses is overwhelming.

Internal party struggles add another layer of complexity. As cadres pushing for a more assimilationist ethnic policy edge out those favoring relative cultural autonomy, restrictions on Tibetan Buddhism and Islam have increased. More positively, after former security czar Zhou Yongkang and other officials overseeing the anti–Falun Gong effort were purged and imprisoned as part of Xi's anticorruption campaign, the crackdown on the spiritual group suffered from a bureaucratic leadership gap, opening space for sympathetic local officials to adopt a more lenient approach. Local leaders have displayed tolerance toward other faith groups as well, often after forging a cooperative relationship with the head of a local monastery, church, or mosque, contributing to an uneven landscape of policy implementation.

Nevertheless, several **long-standing attributes of the CCP's authoritarian rule** influence the cost-benefit calculations that officials make when considering how to handle religious affairs or respond to a particular incident. The resulting tendency is to rely on repressive rather than progressive policy options. The party remains deeply anxious about religious believers who could form an allegiance to an authority outside its control. When a particular faith or institution becomes especially popular, this often triggers an official backlash, as demonstrated by growing restrictions on Protestant churches and demolitions taking place at the influential Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist academy. Intraparty incentives—such as formal criteria for promotions and de facto impunity for violence against perceived party foes—generally reward repressive actions and empower parts of the party-state apparatus that engage in violations of religious freedom. Finally, the party has long mobilized its security forces around politically sensitive anniversaries or international events hosted in China, leading to extreme measures aimed at preventing outbursts of religious expression that might be perceived as damaging the CCP's reputation.

The impact and limits of CCP policies

The party's apparatus of religious controls and its repressive actions since late 2012 have been effective in many ways. Tibetan self-immolations have been stifled. Crosses on churches in Zhejiang Province are much less visible. Harassed house churches have been forced to disperse. And many fewer Uighurs are appearing in public with headscarves or long beards.

More broadly, a corps of politically loyal religious leaders has been established, and a new generation is being trained at official seminaries and Buddhist academies. A sizable contingent of religious believers feel that they can practice their faith largely unhindered. In a coup for the government's "soft power" initiatives, China hosted the general conference of a long-standing international Buddhist organization for the first time in 2014.

But even as varied controls and intensifying repression have achieved some concrete results, the CCP is facing serious policy failures and constraints on the effectiveness of its strategy. Billions of dollars and an untold number of ruined lives later, the party's concerted efforts to change people's actual beliefs have largely proven futile.

Many Tibetans continue to deeply revere the Dalai Lama. Uighur Muslims very much want to fast during Ramadan, teach their children to recite the Quran, and go on the Hajj pilgrimage. Christians continue to worship at underground "house churches" across the country. And millions of Chinese still practice Falun Gong, including hundreds of thousands who have reportedly rescinded denunciations made under torture.

In fact, the problem with CCP religious policies goes beyond simple inefficacy. Government actions—like intentional bottlenecks in official clergy training, intrusive bans on benign expressions of piety, increased harassment of state-sanctioned church leaders, and punishment of Tibetan monastics who try to take a conciliatory approach—appear to be counterproductive, driving more worshippers to unofficial congre-

gations and signaling that a cooperative relationship with officials is not a viable tactic. Apolitical believers are forced to practice their faith outside the law, leading many to conclude that both the government and its regulations are unjust and even illegitimate.

In this environment, religious leaders and believers have sought to take advantage of cracks in the system to expand the space for religious practice, defy official bans, or actively oppose restrictive policies.

Millions of believers **defy official restrictions in their daily lives**, some openly and others with great secrecy. Staff and volunteers at religious charities incorporate religious symbols and spiritual meaning into activities that take place outside formal sites of worship. Uighur Muslims blacken their curtains to avoid detection when eating before sunrise during Ramadan. Tibetans pray for the Dalai Lama's long life. Falun Gong practitioners meditate at home in the dark with headphones. Christians interested in leadership training find help via a Hong Kong radio program or private mountainside workshops. And a wide range of believers access or disseminate unofficial spiritual texts via the internet, mobile phones, underground publications, homemade DVDs, and satellite dishes.

An increasingly common form of resistance is **nonparticipation in official initiatives**. Monks in a Tibetan monastery have refused to attend "patriotic reeducation" sessions or fled into the mountains. Other attendees at political trainings feign participation while reading their own materials during sessions. Catholic seminarians boycotted their own graduation ceremony to avoid Mass with an illegitimate, CCP-backed bishop. Uighurs have treated some government documents or sponsored celebrations as *haram* (forbidden in Islam). Such actions risk punishment, but many believers engage in them nonetheless.

For some groups and issue areas, **advocating for change through the existing political-legal system** is an option. Taoist groups recently won a lawsuit over the commodification of a sacred deity, and Hui Muslims attempted to advance legislation governing halal foods. In other cases, religious leaders and believers have gained the cooperation or tacit approval of local officials via various means. Leaders of Buddhist temples have successfully employed a variety of arguments, points of leverage, and public pressure to negotiate with local government actors to secure open temple access, lower admission fees, a halt to demolitions, or greater priestly control over management of venues.



Standing in front of a prison in Hebei Province in March 2014, Bian Xiaohui holds a banner reading "I want to see my father," who was detained for practicing Falun Gong. Bian, who does not practice, was sentenced to three years in prison after the photo circulated on social media.

Credit: Epoch Times

Some unregistered church leaders have made a point of alerting local authorities about upcoming meetings or showing kindness to local police tasked with monitoring them. As a result, officials have given de facto approval to "house churches" in their jurisdictions, and police have warned unofficial church leaders of coming raids. Falun Gong practitioners inside and outside China have contacted hundreds of thousands of judges, prosecutors, and security agents in a concerted effort to debunk CCP propaganda and encourage them not to participate in the persecution of innocent people. Over time, this massive effort has borne fruit, with some local police refusing to detain adherents and a judge, in 2015, granting the first-known de facto acquittal in a Falun Gong case.

In a sign of growing assertiveness and resentment of official policies among a wide range of believers, members of nearly every group examined in this study—including leaders in "patriotic" associations—have engaged in some form of **direct protest**. On several occasions, Chinese Buddhist monks have closed the doors of their monastery to visitors in a last-ditch attempt to foil a new government commodification project. Protestant and Catholic leaders from state-sanctioned churches in Zhejiang Province have published open letters urging an end to cross removals and demolitions, while their congregants have held sit-ins or created "human walls" in an effort to physically bar the desecration of their church.



A woman sings hymns with fellow congregants from Beijing's unofficial Shouwang church, who were meeting outdoors in 2009 after being evicted from their place of worship. By 2016, years of official harassment had led to the congregation's dispersal.

Credit: Beijing resident

In Tibet, solitary protesters have marched through marketplaces displaying images of the Dalai Lama, and hundreds of people defied a government ban to mourn a prominent lama who died in prison. Large numbers of Falun Gong torture survivors have taken advantage of a change in judicial guidelines to directly file criminal complaints inside China naming Jiang Zemin as the one responsible for their suffering.

The survival of groups and beliefs that the party has invested tremendous resources to crush reflects its difficulty confronting citizens who are willing to make sacrifices for higher principles.

Some of these efforts have yielded government concessions or other real-world changes, even as many of those engaging in active protests or dissemination of banned information have been severely punished. Demolitions have been prevented, religious detainees have been allowed to go home, and vilifying propaganda has been debunked.

But perhaps the greatest achievement of these collective efforts is the spiritual resilience they demonstrate. The mere survival of groups, beliefs, and specific manifestations of faith that the CCP has invested tremendous resources to crush is incredibly impressive. It reflects the particular difficulties the party faces when confronting citizens who are willing to make sacrifices for higher principles and spiritual salvation.

Political, economic, and social implications

The human cost of the CCP's controls and abuses is overwhelming. Religious prisoners form the largest contingent of prisoners of conscience in China. With each passing day, more Chinese citizens are swept into the party-state's repressive apparatus for engaging in peaceful spiritual practice. Families are torn apart, injuries and psychological damage are inflicted, and lives are lost. In some parts of the country—like Xinjiang, Zhejiang, and Heilongjiang, for example—high levels of persecution cut across multiple groups, with police officers and judges potentially being asked to target members of several faiths.

Given the size, geographic dispersion, and socioeconomic diversity of the population directly affected, these human rights violations generate significant ripple effects on surrounding communities, Chinese society at large, and the CCP itself. These manifest in a number of ways:

- **Accelerating systemic corrosion:** Large-scale religious persecution reinforces the worst tendencies of China's legal-security apparatus—torture, impunity, corruption, and politicization of the judiciary—and undermines any efforts to establish genuine rule of law. It also strengthens hard-line elements within the apparatus, guarantees them resources, and provides opportunities for refining tactics of persuasion, censorship, "reeducation," and abuse that are then deployed against other religious and secular activists.

- **Exacerbating threats to social stability:** The intrusion of religious controls into routine and benign spiritual practices is generating growing resentment and risks radicalizing believers. It could result in more people engaging in direct protests, joining unofficial congregations, or sharing banned information. Some may even turn to violence against symbols of state authority—including government-affiliated religious leaders—or civilians, as has already occurred in Xinjiang. In either case, these dynamics undermine both the party's stated goals regarding religious affairs and its broader priority of preserving social stability.

- **Lost spiritual and economic opportunities:** The suppression of religious groups, individual leaders, and inspirational ideas, including efforts to strip officially recognized religions of significant theological meaning, deprives Chinese people and the world of valuable cultural and spiritual resources while harming China's ability to reach its full "soft power" potential. More concretely, the billions of dollars in taxpayer money that is currently wasted on futile or counterproductive religious persecution could be used instead for purposes that would benefit Chinese society, ranging from elderly care to environmental protection.

- **Undermining CCP legitimacy:** As the scope of religious repression expands, encompassing more members of state-sanctioned groups, these people's trust in the government appears to decline. And when nonbelievers have an opportunity to see through deceptive propaganda that underpins suppressive policies, their own faith in the party is fundamentally shaken. Some individuals within the party-state apparatus appear increasingly uncomfortable with their own participation in abuses against obviously innocent people, leading to internal resistance and aid to targeted believers.

These points highlight the degree to which the CCP's religious policies, as measured against the party's own goals and priorities, have failed in key ways even as they have succeeded in others. At the root of this failure is a more fundamental problem: China's rigid, anachronistic political system is ill-equipped, both structurally and ideologically, to govern a rapidly modernizing and diverse society and to address that society's challenges in a productive and humane way. Instead, the regime falls back on familiar repressive tools, perpetuating a vicious circle of violence and resistance.

Future outlook

Xi Jinping and other party leaders have numerous options if they wish to extricate themselves from their policy failures. They could loosen registration rules to bring more believers into a realistic legal framework, though that may mean allowing registered groups to operate outside the confines of the "patriotic" associations. They could reverse past arbitrary decisions that have generated significant backlash from believers and damaged party legitimacy, such as prohibiting veneration of the Dalai Lama, banning Falun Gong, and removing crosses from state-sanctioned churches. And they could begin to distinguish between peaceful religious practice and acts of violence when prosecuting Uighur Muslims. Such steps would generate significant goodwill among multiple faith communities and would not infringe significantly on the party's ability to protect other core interests.

It would appear that in the long-term battle for China's spirit, an unreformed Communist Party will ultimately lose.

Unfortunately, these choices seem unlikely in the current political and economic climate. The findings of this report suggest that comprehensive, top-down liberalization will not be forthcoming in the next several years, though some groups may find themselves enjoying more favorable conditions for other reasons. The report underscores the pivotal role that bottom-up forces and geographic diversity play in protecting religious believers' lives, expanding the space for practice, and facilitating productive state-religion relations at the local level.

Given the trend of religious revival and evidence of believers' own perseverance, it would appear that in the long-term battle for China's spirit, an unreformed CCP will ultimately lose.

Evolving mechanisms of religious control and persecution

Despite the diversity of the Chinese government's approaches to management of different faiths, certain methods of control are evident across multiple groups examined in this study. Four dimensions of the party-state's apparatus—and their recent evolution—are particularly notable for their profound impact on the lives of ordinary people in China and the insight they provide into how the Chinese authorities interact with believers:

1. Expanding controls over religious leaders and places of worship

The corporatist "patriotic" associations affiliated with each of the five officially recognized religions form the foundation of the CCP's institutional controls. These entities are closely supervised and directed by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) and the party's United Front Work Department. Through the five associations—the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), the Chinese Taoist Association (CTA), the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), and the Islamic Association of China (IAC)—as well as Religious Affairs Bureaus (RABs) at every administrative level, the party-state tries to exercise control over the full range of religious activities. Places of worship are registered, religious leaders are monitored, theological content is managed, and annual festivals or pilgrimages like the Muslim Hajj are organized under official auspices. As the number of religious believers in China has grown, these entities are experiencing difficulties in exercising the desired degree of control, sometimes due to self-imposed limitations. This results in even more intrusive bureaucratic interventions.

The authorities have not made sufficient adjustments to the regulatory framework to meet growing public demand.

One of the key functions of the patriotic associations is overseeing the selection, training, monitoring, and continuing education of politically loyal clerics. According to official speeches, the party hopes that by controlling the leaders of a religious group and guiding believers toward politically loyal preachers, it will ensure that religious teachings do not undermine CCP legitimacy or policy priorities. Religious leaders affiliated with the patriotic associations are often called upon to serve as spokespeople for the party's policies or even assist in legitimizing persecutory campaigns against other believers.

However, the authorities have not made sufficient adjustments to the regulatory framework to meet growing public demand for religious leadership, even among seemingly favored faiths like Chinese Buddhism and Taoism. The Chinese authorities continue to place strict numerical limits on religious training—authorizing extremely few Taoist ordinations, setting caps on how many monks can study at specific monasteries, and offering an inadequate number of Christian seminary openings. As a result, there are inevitably large numbers of believers who pursue further study extralegally.

Meanwhile, not all state-sanctioned clergy can be regarded as party mouthpieces. Some are respected by believers as knowledgeable religious practitioners who have tried to work within the system to defend the interests of their constituents. There are also numerous instances in which leaders whom the party sought to cultivate as loyal "models" subsequently

"defected," as their spiritual training or repressive government actions led them to conclude that they could no longer play the desired role in good conscience. In such cases, the authorities have responded by dismissing and sometimes imprisoning state-sanctioned leaders, as occurred in recent years with Catholic bishop Ma Deqin and Protestant pastor Gu Yuese.

There are signs that the party-state is moving past religious intermediaries and taking matters into its own hands. Party cadres, RAB officials, or security forces are being dispatched to directly manage Tibetan monasteries, explain party policies from church pulpits, and closely monitor those who enter Uighur and even Hui mosques. A new government-run database confirms who is a "certified" reincarnated lama. And the upper echelons of the BAC are increasingly staffed with former government officials.

The government's effort to control registration of places of worship faces obstacles similar to those pertaining to clergy management. Registration of religious groups is not uncommon internationally, even in democratic societies, but the intrusiveness that accompanies it in China goes well beyond what is acceptable under international standards for religious freedom. Moreover, registration requirements and related procedures, such as financial reporting and accounting rules, are highly complex and burdensome, and may require paperwork that was destroyed in past political campaigns. As a result, small temples and churches that might be willing to register are unable to do so.

Other impediments of the authorities' own creation also discourage registration. Competing interests with nearby "patriotic" churches make it difficult for some "house churches" to register, but the state refuses to accept registration without TSPM or CPA affiliation. Church leaders are reluctant to report the names of congregation members as required, for fear that the members will be vulnerable to surveillance. And the recent trend of harassment against state-sanctioned churches suggests that registration will not bring relief from such interference, weakening one of the main incentives for unofficial churches to apply.

The result is a large, unofficial, and extralegal space of religious practice, encompassing not only the well-known phenomenon of "underground" churches, but also thousands of unregistered Buddhist and Taoist temples. In many locales, low-level officials may turn a blind eye to such activities, but during periods of political sensitivity or campaigns led by more senior officials, unregistered places of worship are at high risk of harassment, raids, and destruction of property. Authorities routinely try to hinder the operation of unregistered sites and direct believers elsewhere, for instance by placing plaques to indicate registration status, barring donations, or threatening worshippers with fines if they do not shift attendance to a state-approved counterpart.

2. 'Thought reform': Doctrinal manipulation and 'reeducation'

Despite the CCP's atheist roots on the one hand and its pledges to respect freedom of religious belief on the other, the regime devotes significant attention, resources, and coercive force to influencing the content of religious teachings, texts, and individual believers' thoughts. And in a reflection of the ideological underpinnings and Maoist remnants of the party's religious policies, these initiatives often require believers to renounce or actively violate core religious tenets.

In several instances, government-affiliated religious organizations or scholars have embarked on state-funded initiatives to parse theological teachings, identify elements deemed compatible with CCP ideology, and produce publications and guidance for dissemination and promotion among religious clergy and lay believers.

The result is a large, unofficial, and extralegal space of religious practice.

For Protestant Christians, a Theological Construction Movement has focused on weakening the traditional doctrine of "justification by faith," thereby encouraging Chinese Protestants to place party-state authority above religious authority. For Muslims, a decade-old effort to analyze Sharia and dictate the content of sermons has produced a series of leaflets that are disseminated to state-approved imams across the country. And a new Uighur translation of the Quran reportedly features updates designed to emphasize loyalty to the state. A project launched in 2011 has reinterpreted Tibetan Buddhist doctrines, yielding pamphlets that are reportedly required reading in monasteries.

Such doctrinal manipulation seems likely to gain momentum in the coming years, as Xi Jinping has emphasized the need to "Sinicize" religions with foreign roots and specifically mentioned the importance of creed in party "religious work."

Various forms of "patriotic reeducation" with religious components are integral to the vetting and training of religious leaders, the provision of permits for pilgrimage or foreign travel, and the receipt of government jobs or funding. Campaigns in Tibetan areas have expanded over the past decade and increasingly target not only monastics but also ordinary Tibetans. Such "reeducation" sessions typically include a requirement to denounce the Dalai Lama. In some areas of Xinjiang, Muslims who wish to receive welfare benefits or retain a government job must sign pledges not to don a veil or fast during Ramadan. Catholic leaders have been forced to attend ceremonies lead by bishops who were appointed without papal approval.

Various forms of "patriotic reeducation" with religious components are integral to the vetting and training of religious leaders.

In the case of Falun Gong, the party's stated goal is total eradication of the group and its adherents' beliefs, and official action has focused on "transformation." This process of ideological reeducation employs any means necessary—including physical torture, psychological manipulation, and repeated writing of "thought reports"—to compel adherents to recant their beliefs and promise to cease practicing.

Party-state demands to violate core religious tenets, enforced by potentially violent reprisals, present a heart-wrenching dilemma for religious leaders, monastics, and lay believers throughout China. Even when their actions are fully justified by self-preservation, many of those who have been forced to comply with such demands report a profound psychological impact, a sense that they have betrayed deeply held personal beliefs, their own identity, a revered spiritual leader, or a divinity. The scars of the experience last long after completion of reeducation sessions or release from custody. As a result, large numbers of believers have later renounced statements extracted under coercive conditions, decided to flee the country to avoid similar encounters in the future, or prayed for forgiveness.

3. Harsh penalties and deadly violence

The punishments meted out to religious leaders and believers who evade or refuse to comply with official restrictions are among the harshest for any form of dissent in China. Legal provisions allow for sentences of up to life imprisonment, and judges regularly hand down terms of more than five years for clearly nonviolent acts, including in circumstances that would not have triggered such harsh repression several years ago.

Cases documented in this report include a Christian pastor from a state-sanctioned church who was sentenced to 14 years in prison for opposing the provincial government's cross-removal campaign. A Uighur teenager was punished with a 15-year prison sentence for watching a religious video on his smartphone.[8] A senior Tibetan monk received 18 years in prison after police found images and recorded teachings of the Dalai Lama during a raid on his monastery. And a Falun Gong practitioner was given a 12-year sentence for hanging banners affirming the practice's core values with phrases like "truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance are good."[9] Other benign expressions of religious faith or dissent that have drawn long prison sentences since Xi Jinping took power in November 2012 include disseminating leaflets, praying in public, opposing demolition of a place of worship, and growing a beard.

Religious prisoners in China form a significant proportion of the country's prisoners of conscience, likely numbering in the tens of thousands. Freedom House researchers were able to identify at least 1,400 cases of Chinese citizens sentenced to prison since November 2012 for exercising their right to religious freedom or rights like free expression, association, and information in connection with their faith. This figure includes a Chinese Buddhist monk, several dozen Protestant Christians, at least 75 Tibetans, over 400 members of banned quasi-Christian sects, and more than 900 Falun Gong practitioners. Even this total—based on media reports, human rights groups' documentation, and Chinese court verdicts—is likely the tip of the iceberg given the scale of extralegal detentions and disappearances. Moreover, isolating the number of Uighur detainees sentenced for nonviolent religious violations from among the thousands tried since 2012 on security and social-disturbance charges is nearly impossible due to the lack of transparency surrounding official statistics, but they probably number at least several hundred. The vast majority of these individuals remain anonymous internationally, leaving them at particular risk of torture and death.

Indeed, Chinese security forces systematically use violence with impunity against religious believers in custody and protesters in public, including deadly force. Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and Falun Gong

Figure 3. Trajectory of Religious Persecution in China across Faith Communities



Religious community *Trajectory of persecution (Nov 2012–Nov 2016)*	**Trend explanation**
Protestant Christians *Increase*	Since early 2014, local authorities have intensified efforts to stem the spread of Christianity amid official rhetoric about the threat of "Western" values and the need to "Sinicize" religions. As the larger of the two main Christian denominations in China, Protestants have been particularly affected by cross-removal and church-demolition campaigns, punishment of state-sanctioned leaders, and the arrest of human rights lawyers who take up Christians' cases.
Uighur Muslims *Increase*	Controls on religion have deepened and expanded in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, where a majority of Uighur Muslims reside. Previously informal or local restrictions in Xinjiang—on issues such as religious dress—have been codified at the regional and national levels. Authorities have launched new campaigns to more closely monitor smartphone usage and force businesses to sell alcohol, while incidents of security forces opening fire on Uighur civilians have become more common.
Hui Muslims *Minor increase*	Amid growing official and public anxiety about the spread of Islam and the threat of Islamist-inspired violence, Hui Muslims have experienced some intensified restrictions and Islamophobia since November 2012. In several provinces, bans on children's religious study have been more strictly enforced, displays of halal signs restricted, and a crackdown on Salafi Hui Muslims launched.
Tibetan Buddhists *Minor increase*	President Xi Jinping has largely continued the repressive policies and campaigns of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, while deepening and expanding certain controls. New measures include punishing assistance to self-immolators, canceling previously permitted festivals, increasing intrusive restrictions on private religious practice, and more proactively manipulating Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and the selection of religious leaders.
Chinese Buddhists *Consistent*	President Xi has continued Hu-era policies, creating an environment of relatively low persecution for Chinese Buddhist practice. His actions and rhetoric portray Chinese Buddhism as an increasingly important channel for realizing the party's political and economic goals at home and abroad. In a rare occurrence, a Chinese Buddhist monk was sentenced to prison in 2016 on politically motivated charges.
Taoists *Consistent*	CCP leaders continue to view Taoism, an indigenous Chinese religion, as an attractive tool for building regime legitimacy on the basis of traditional Chinese culture and for improving relations with Taoist believers in Taiwan.
Catholics *Minor decrease*	Although some Catholic churches have been subjected to forced cross removals, relations between Beijing and the Vatican have warmed since March 2013. The two sides appear to be on the verge of a breakthrough agreement governing the appointment of bishops in China at a time when more than 40 vacancies have opened. Nevertheless, some prominent figures in the church remain skeptical about how much any deal would reduce repression of underground Catholics.
Falun Gong practitioners *Minor decrease*	Falun Gong practitioners across China continue to be subject to widespread and severe human rights violations. Nevertheless, repression appears to have declined in some locales. President Xi has offered no explicit indication of a plan to reverse the CCP's policy toward Falun Gong. But the imprisonment of former security czar Zhou Yongkang and other officials associated with the campaign as part of Xi's anticorruption drive, together with Falun Gong adherents' efforts to educate and discourage police from persecuting them, have had an impact.

practitioners are the most likely to face such treatment, with dozens of deaths in custody reported each year. Former prisoners who were interviewed for this report offered detailed accounts of beatings, long-term shackling, electric baton shocks, and injection with unknown drugs. These and other testimonies point to remarkable similarities in the repressive tactics administered across different populations and geographic regions, including taking victims to secret extralegal torture centers and "outsourcing" abuse to criminal inmates.

Religious prisoners in China form a significant proportion of the country's prisoners of conscience, likely numbering in the tens of thousands.

Outside custody, hundreds of Christians have been beaten by riot police over the past few years, particularly when trying to prevent church demolitions and cross removals, and one pastor's wife was buried alive by a bulldozer. In Tibet and Xinjiang, police and other security personnel have opened fire in altercations with residents who were spontaneously opposing official efforts to restrict inter-village worship, pilgrimage, or religious appearance. These incidents have resulted in the death or injury of young children and elderly women, among other casualties.

4. Economic punishment, commodification, and exploitation

Given the increased consumerism in Chinese society and the role that economic development plays in Chinese officials' prospects for promotion, it is perhaps not surprising that various monetary incentives linked to religion emerged as a recurring theme in this study. At times they serve as a catalyst for state-religion cooperation, but more often they are a source of tension, punishment, and severe violations of believers' rights.

Almost as soon as the harsh suppression of the Cultural Revolution ended, local officials began to view religious sites as a source of revenue—a development encouraged by the slogan, "Build the religious stage to sing the economic opera."[10] With incomes rising in tandem with public interest in spiritual matters, domestic tourists have joined foreign visitors as an attractive economic asset for locales with a prominent religious site, be it a historic temple, a major church, or a Muslim mausoleum. The result is a multibillion-dollar industry of renovations, new constructions, entrance fees, scenic parks, souvenir stalls, and tour guides, which at times encroaches on spaces that were previously the domain of monks and local religious believers.

In extreme cases of commodification, some Buddhist and Taoist temples or a newly built mosque in a cultural park are wholly devoted to their role as a tourist destination and house no religious clergy or ceremonies. It is more common, however, for a site to serve as both a tourist destination and a place for religious and monastic practice.

In some instances, religious leaders have successfully negotiated with local officials for beneficial terms, shared revenue, or open access, preserving their autonomy and reducing tensions. Examples can be found even in some ethnic minority areas, like a city in a Tibetan prefecture of Yunnan Province that was officially renamed "Shangri-la," an allusion to the fictional paradise on earth.
However, efforts by local officials to impose commercial mechanisms on a site, such as the enclosure of a temple in a new scenic park with high entrance fees, have repeatedly fueled tensions and occasional protests, even from otherwise politically compliant communities like Chinese Buddhist and Taoist monastics. Tourism-related transformations have also generated complaints from senior monks, local Muslim shrine visitors, Tibetan pilgrims, and others on the grounds that they hindered access for ordinary believers, infringed on monastic autonomy, and disrupted sacred religious rituals.

Monetary incentives also play a direct role in the enforcement of restrictions on religious practice. The authorities have offered lucrative rewards (up to $30,000) to citizens who inform on fellow residents engaged in peaceful, private religious practices that are designated as problematic, from donning a Muslim veil or lighting incense for the Dalai Lama to performing Falun Gong meditation exercises. Within the party-state system, promotions and bonuses are available to officers who effectively crack down on targeted religious groups and behaviors.

On the punitive side, believers who try to skirt or oppose religious restrictions have been subjected to fines that amount to more than the average monthly income, threatened with loss of job or educational opportunities, penalized with withdrawal of welfare benefits, or banned from accessing vital sources of income like the caterpillar fungus harvest in Tibetan areas. In an atmosphere of impunity surrounding

persecuted populations, local police have often taken advantage of raids on underground Christian churches or arrests of Falun Gong practitioners to extort money from families or steal private property. Other victims have suffered an indirect cost, as many of the dozens of churches demolished in recent years were built with donations from local congregants, in some cases amounting to millions of dollars.

The authorities have also combined revenue generation with punishment by systematically exploiting religious prisoners for economic purposes. Untold numbers of religious prisoners across China—Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and Falun Gong practitioners—have over the past decade been a key source of forced labor while in custody, manufacturing products for both domestic consumption and foreign export under oppressive, unsanitary conditions. Even after the abolition of the country's notorious "reeducation through labor" (RTL) camp system in 2013, large numbers of religious detainees have been redirected via the judicial system to formal prison facilities, where forced labor remains routine, sometimes on a scale even larger than that of an RTL camp.

Lastly, there is evidence suggesting that religious prisoners have been killed extrajudicially to provide organs for China's booming organ transplant industry. Numerous circumstantial facts, expert analyses, and eyewitness accounts point to the victimization of Falun Gong practitioners in particular.[11] Large numbers of transplants continue to be performed with short waiting times, despite a shrinking number of judicial executions and a still miniscule number of voluntary donors. In this context, the large-scale disappearance of young Uighur men, accounts of routine blood-testing of Uighur political prisoners, and reports of mysterious deaths of Tibetans and Uighurs in custody should raise alarm that these populations may also be victims of involuntary organ harvesting.[12]

NOTES

1. "China Focus: Xi calls for improved religious work," Xinhua, April 23, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-04/23/c_135306131.htm.
2. Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*, ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).
3. Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, "Zhonggongzhongyang Guanyu Yinfa 'Guanyu Woguo Shehuizhuyi Shiqi Zongjiao Wenti De Jiben Guangdian He Jiben Zhengce' De Tongzhi" [Notification from Central Committee of the Communist Party of China about distributing 'The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period'], State Administration of Religious Affairs of PRC, March 31, 1982, http://www.sara.gov.cn/zcfg/zc/497.htm. An English translation is available here: Donald MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 8–26, https://www.purdue.edu/crcs/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Document_no._19_1982.pdf.
4. "China Focus: Xi calls for improved religious work," Xinhua.
5. The study does not cover Confucianism, which has experienced a resurgence in recent years but is typically viewed more as a system of social and ethical philosophy than as a religious faith. Also excluded are smaller religious communities like Jews, Baha'i, or Jehovah's Witnesses, who periodically encounter restrictions in China.
6. The findings presented in this essay and the following section on evolving mechanisms of religious control are based on detailed research in five chapters that examine the seven listed religious communities. Notes are included here for clarity, quotations, or points not addressed in the other portions of the report. The complete report and supporting citations are available at www.freedomhouse.org.
7. André Laliberté, "The Politicization of Religion by the CCP: A Selective Retrieval," *Asiatische Studien-Études Asiatiques* 69, no. 1 (2015): 185–211, https://www.degruyter.com/abstract/j/asia.2015.69.issue-1/asia-2015-0010/asia-2015-0010.xml.
8. Eset Sulaiman, "Police Increase Checks of Uighur Smartphone Users in Xinjiang," Radio Free Asia, January 8, 2016, http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/police-increase-checks-of-smartphone-users-in-xinjiang-01082016133532.html.
9. Heilongjiang Province Fangzheng County People's Court, "Li Chang'an Liyong Xiejiao Zuzhi Pohuai Falv Shishi Yishen Xingshi Panjueshu" [Judgment of the first trial of Li Chang'an for undermining the practice of law by using a heretical organization], *China Judgements Online*, November 23, 2015, http://wenshu.court.gov.cn/content/content?DocID=a0fe2131-e19f-4d13-914f-629771e8686d.
10. Chunyu Hua, "Guojia Zongjiao Ju: Chuli Hao Cujin Jingji Fazhan He Weihu Zongjiao Jie Quanyi De Guanxi" [State Administration of Religious Affairs: Handle Well the Relationship between Economic Development and Defence the Interests of Religions], Xinhua, October 24, 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-10/24/c_113484955.htm.
11. For an examination of available evidence, see the Falun Gong chapter of this report at www.freedomhouse.org.
12. For example, a Uighur Muslim released from an Urumqi prison in 2011 gave Freedom House a detailed account of monthly blood tests administered to Uighur political and religious prisoners and not to Chinese criminal inmates. He and two Tibetan interviewees cited reports of mysterious deaths of fellow believers in custody. Interview with Uighur refugee now living in Turkey who wished to remain anonymous, October 2016.

Key Religious Controls (November 2012–November 2016)

#	Control	Chinese Buddhism/ Taoism	Christianity (Protestants + Catholics)[a]	Tibetan Buddhism	Islam (Uighurs)[b]	Falun Gong[c]
Total		**8/24 (33%)**	**18/24 (75%)**	**22/24 (92%)**	**21/22 (95%)**	**18/18 (100%)**
1	Oversight by "patriotic association"	●	●	●	●	n/a
2	Control over religious leader recruitment/training	●	●	●	●	n/a
3	Numerical limits on ordination/training	●	●	●	●	n/a
4	Closure/destruction of place of worship	●	●	●	●	n/a
5	Imprisonment of state-approved religious leader/monastic	●	●	●	●	n/a
6	Imprisonment of unofficial religious leader/monastic		●			n/a
7	Doctrinal interference/ manipulation		●	●	●	●
8	Ban on core religious tenet		●	●	●	●
9	Study of religious scriptures punished		●	●	●	●
10	Religious celebration restricted or punished		●	●	●	●
11	Imprisonment of lay believer	●	●	●	●	●
12	Imprisonment of 50+ believers		●	●	n/a	●
13	Imprisonment of 500+ believers				n/a	●
14	Detention for religious engagement online		●	●	●	●
15	Restrictions on children's participation	●	●	●	●	●
16	Political "reeducation" campaigns		●	●	●	●
17	Widespread torture			●	●	●
18	Extrajudicial killing		●	●	●	●
19	10+ extrajudicial deaths			●	●	●
20	New restrictive legal change			●	●	●
21	Restrictions on movement / passport allocation			●	●	●
22	Vilification in state media		●	●	●	●
23	Economic exploitation	●	●	●	●	●
24	Online censorship of religious communication			●	●	●

Notes:
a. Imprisonment figures for Christians also include individuals held for belonging to banned quasi-Christian sects.
b. Due to insufficiently clear data, treatment of Hui Muslims is not included here, and no assessment is made on whether 50+ or 500+ Uighurs were detained.
c. Several forms of control are not applicable to Falun Gong because it is neither a formally organized religion nor officially recognized and therefore lacks ordained clergy, places of worship, and state-sanctioned leaders.

Religious Persecution by Province

Many religious controls in China are imposed nationwide, and instances of persecution have been recorded in every one of China's 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and province-level municipalities since November 2012. Still, the degree of persecution and the primary groups targeted vary from region to region.



Note: Several sources informed the provincial ratings for this map, including data on incidents of persecution and detention available from Chinese court documents, the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China's Political Prisoner Database, and reports by Human Rights Watch and China Aid.

I: Chinese Buddhism and Taoism

Degree of persecution:

Chinese Buddhism

LOW

Taoism

VERY LOW

Trajectory of persecution:

Chinese Buddhism



Consistent

Taoism



Consistent

Key findings

1. **Revival:** Chinese Buddhism and Taoism have revived significantly over the past 30 years from near extinction, but their scale and influence pale in comparison to the pre–Chinese Communist Party (CCP) era. With an estimated 185 to 250 million believers, Chinese Buddhism is the largest institutionalized religion in China.

2. **Intrusive controls:** A large body of regulations and bureaucratic controls ensure political compliance, but unfairly restrict religious practices that are routine in other countries. Unrealistic temple registration requirements, infrequent ordination approvals, and official intervention in temple administration are among the controls that most seriously obstruct grassroots monastics and lay believers.

3. **Under Xi Jinping:** President Xi Jinping has essentially continued the policies of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, with some rhetorical adjustments. For CCP leaders, Chinese Buddhism and Taoism are seen as increasingly important channels for realizing the party's political and economic goals at home and abroad. In a rare occurrence, a Chinese Buddhist monk was sentenced to prison in 2016 on politically motivated charges.

4. **Commodification:** Economic exploitation of temples for tourism purposes—a multibillion-dollar industry—has emerged as a key point of contention among the state, clergy, and lay believers.

5. **Community response:** Religious leaders and monks are becoming increasingly assertive in trying to negotiate free or relatively inexpensive access to temples, and are pushing back against commercial encroachment, often with success.



Visitors walk past the statue of a bodhisattva in a scenic park in Zhejiang Province. Such parks, which encircle temples and charge entrance fees, are a growing source of tension between local Buddhist religious leaders and government authorities.

Credit: Kuei-min Chang

"The values of Buddhist ideals and the China Dream agree and understand [each other].... Together they achieve the ideological foundation of the struggle and the dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

—Fang Litian, professor of Buddhist philosophy, Renmin University, 2013[1]

"Many local governments look at temples as a source of revenue. The prefectural government developed the surrounding areas as an attempt to encircle the temple so they could collect an admission fee. But the Master will never agree. He says that the moment we have to collect an entrance fee to survive is the moment we close the temple."

—Monk at a temple in Jiangsu Province[2]

II: Christianity

Degree of persecution:

Catholicism

MODERATE

Protestantism

HIGH

Trajectory of persecution:

Catholicism



Minor Decrease

Protestantism



Increase

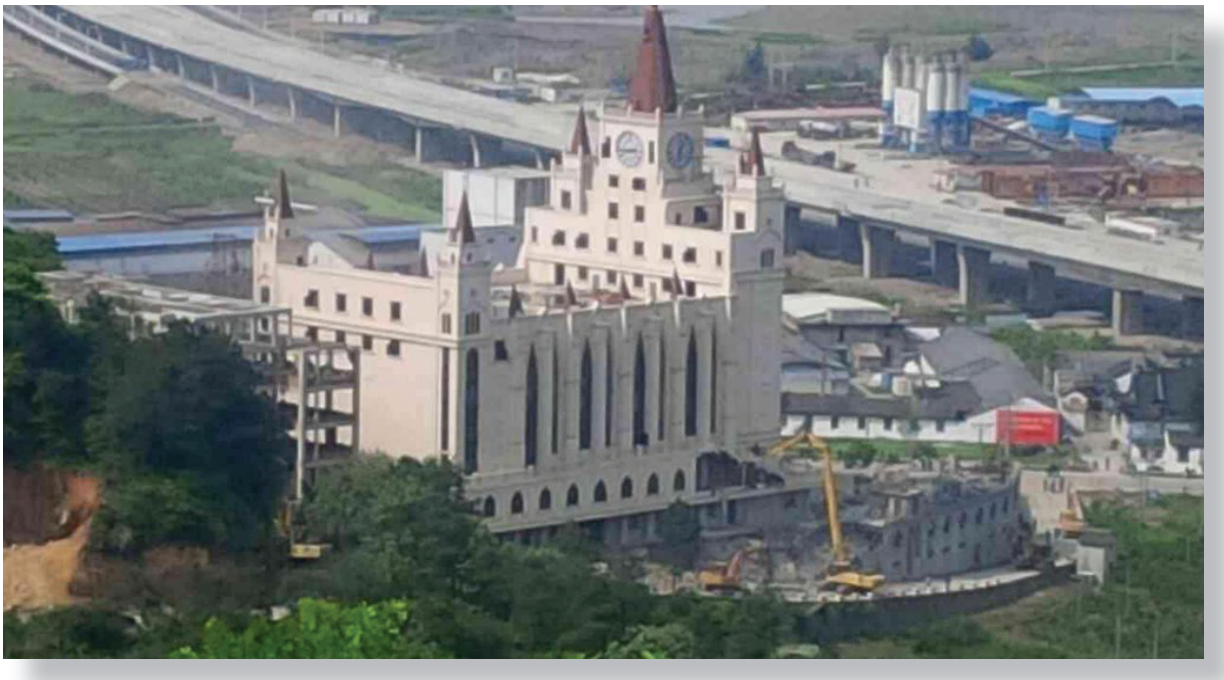
Key findings

1. **Revival:** Christianity in China has expanded rapidly since 1980, reaching an estimated population of 58 million Protestants and 12 million Catholics as of 2014, split evenly between registered and unregistered churches. Growth has been evident among urban educated professionals and wealthy entrepreneurs.

2. **Key political controls:** The Chinese authorities seek to monitor and control Christians by encouraging them—sometimes forcefully—to join state-sanctioned churches that are affiliated with "patriotic" associations and led by politically vetted clergy. Religious leaders and congregants who refuse to register for theological or practical reasons risk having their place of worship shuttered and face detention, beatings, dismissal from employment, or imprisonment.

3. **Under Xi Jinping:** Since early 2014, local authorities have increased efforts to stem the spread of Christianity amid official rhetoric on the threat of "Western" values and the need to "Sinicize" religions. They have resorted to forms of repression that were previously rare, such as targeting state-sanctioned churches and leaders, arresting human rights lawyers who take up Christians' cases, and obstructing Christmas celebrations. A renewed crackdown on quasi-Christian groups designated as "heterodox religions" has resulted in the imprisonment of over 400 religious leaders and lay believers.

4. **Catholicism at a crossroads:** Relations between Beijing and the Vatican appear on the verge of a positive breakthrough. The two sides are reportedly working toward an agreement on the appointment of bishops acceptable to both the papacy and the Communist Party at a time when more than 40 vacancies have opened.



Sanjiang Cathedral, which belonged to an officially recognized church, in Zhejiang Province before and after its demolition in April 2015.

Credits: Shanghaiist/ China—in His image (blogs)



5 **Response and resistance:** Increased repression has triggered a correspondingly assertive response from church leaders and believers, including influential members of the official "patriotic" associations. Christians have published joint letters, boycotted ceremonies, worshipped outdoors, asserted their legal rights, and physically blocked demolitions or cross removals. Many Christians also employ more subtle tactics to reduce the impact of state controls, such as incorporating religious outreach into charity work, attending private mountainside trainings, or cultivating cooperative relations with local officials to reduce the likelihood of persecution.

"We must resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means."

—President Xi Jinping, April 2016 speech[3]

"We hereby request that you [the provincial government]... immediately cease this mistaken policy of removing crosses that is tearing the Party and the masses apart."

—Open letter from the state-affiliated Christian Council of Zhejiang Province, July 2015[4]

III: Islam

Degree of persecution:

Hui Muslims

LOW

Uighur Muslims

VERY HIGH

Trajectory of persecution:

Hui Muslims

Minor Increase

Uighur Muslims

Increase

Key findings

1. **Revival and growth:** Islam, with about 21 million believers in China, has experienced visible expansion over the past decade. Hui Muslim communities have constructed thousands of new mosques, while many Uighurs are adopting religious practice in part to assert an independent identity from the Han Chinese majority. The influence of the ultraconservative Salafi strand of Islam has also expanded, even attracting a small number of Han converts.

2. **Bifurcated controls:** Chinese government treatment of Muslims differs significantly across ethnic and geographic lines. Hui Muslims have much greater leeway than Uighurs to practice core elements of the Islamic faith like praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, going on the Hajj pilgrimage, or donning a headscarf. Uighurs who engage in such acts increasingly face job dismissal, fines, and imprisonment.

3. **Under Xi:** Both Hui and Uighur Muslims have experienced intensified restrictions and Islamophobia since Xi Jinping became leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, with controls deepening and expanding in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region especially. Previously informal or local restrictions in Xinjiang—on issues such as religious dress or children's education—have been codified at the regional and national levels, and authorities have launched new campaigns to more closely monitor smartphone usage and force businesses to sell alcohol.

4. **Increased violence:** Restrictions on religious practice and their intrusive implementation have been linked to a growing number of violent clashes or premeditated attacks by some Uighurs against police, pro-Beijing religious leaders,



A Hui mosque in Linxia, Gansu Province, also known as "Little Mecca," where restrictions on Islam are more lax than in Xinjiang.

Credit: Wikimedia

and civilians. Central authorities have prioritized "maintaining stability," launched a "strike hard" campaign, armed more police, and meted out harsh punishments even for peaceful religious practice. Incidents of security forces opening fire on Uighur civilians have become more common.

5 **Economic incentives:** The economic priorities of the Chinese government have contributed to greater repression in some circumstances, but have also encouraged government actors to invest funds in projects that promote Islam or the export of related goods. Authorities in Xinjiang make extensive use of economic rewards and punishments when enforcing controls on religion.

6 **Adaptation and resistance:** Hui Muslims have traditionally adapted their religious practice to Chinese thought and worked through the existing political system to influence policymaking. Many Uighurs, facing more restrictive conditions, have chosen to secretly circumvent official controls, access unapproved religious publications, privately affirm their faith, or refuse to participate in official celebrations. Others have acted more defiantly, growing beards or donning headscarves even where it is forbidden, or confronting police when they try to enforce intrusive regulations.

"After 2009, everything changed. Now the rule is, if I go to your house, read some Quran, pray together, and the government finds out, you go to jail."

—Barna, Uighur woman from Xinjiang now living in the United States, 2015[5]

"This video [of a young Hui girl reciting Quran verses] has drawn a gasp from the public.... The Education Department of Gansu Province strongly condemns the act that harms the mental health of the youth, and demands education agencies... strictly ban religion from campuses."

—Education Department of Gansu Province, May 2016[6]

IV: Tibetan Buddhism

Degree of persecution:

Tibetan Buddhism

VERY HIGH

Trajectory of persecution:

Tibetan Buddhism

Minor Increase

Key findings

1. **Revival and expansion:** Tibetan Buddhism has revived significantly since the rampant destruction of the Cultural Revolution. Over the past decade, it has gained millions of new believers from the urban Han elite across China, joining the widespread piety among roughly six million Tibetans.

2. **Extensive controls:** The Chinese authorities impose severe constraints on the religious practice of Tibetan Buddhists, particularly devotion to the exiled Dalai Lama, a core tenet for many believers. Intrusive official presence in monasteries, pervasive surveillance, routine reeducation campaigns, limits on travel and communications, and regulations discouraging religiosity among government employees and university students affect most monastics and many lay believers. Nevertheless, some controls are implemented unevenly across different geographic areas or schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

3. **Violent repression:** Chinese security forces in Tibetan areas are quick to employ coercive measures to suppress perceived religious dissent, including the use of live ammunition against unarmed civilians. Human rights groups and media reports indicate that at least 321 Tibetans have been detained since November 2012 in connection with religious activism or expression, of whom 75 were given prison sentences.[9] Several individuals die in police custody each year.[10]

4. **Under Xi Jinping:** President Xi Jinping has largely continued Hu Jintao–era policies and campaigns while deepening and expanding certain controls. Some new measures have escalated tensions with monastics and lay believers. These include criminalizing assistance to



The prominent Larung Gar Buddhist Academy before and during demolitions in 2016. The authorities reportedly sought to reduce the number of Tibetan and Chinese students in residence.

Credit: Wikimedia/Jimmy Lee, Contact Magazine

self-immolators, canceling previously permitted festivals, increasing intrusive restrictions on private religious practice, and more proactively manipulating Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and the selection of religious leaders.



5 **Economic carrots and sticks:** Various rewards and punishments encourage local officials to use coercive rather than cooperative methods to handle disputes with Tibetan religious communities. Economic incentives are also increasingly being used as a form of collective punishment to deter acts of protest or resistance to religious repression, often affecting the livelihood of entire families or villages.

6 **Resilience and resistance:** Tibetans' private devotion to the Dalai Lama has proved incredibly resilient despite over two decades of suppression efforts. The constant denunciation and vilification of the Dalai Lama by Chinese officials and state media remains one of the most offensive aspects of the government's religious policy. The expansion of campaigns forcing monastics and lay believers to denounce him has been a key factor motivating protests, including 140 self-immolations since 2009. Many Tibetans also employ more subtle forms of resistance, creating avenues to discreetly engage in forbidden religious practices or share information.

"The central party committee is the real Buddha for Tibetans."

—Zhang Qingli, former party secretary of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, March 2007[7]

"The [government's] propaganda efforts don't work, as everybody knows these are false. His Holiness means the world to all Tibetans. Everyone in Tibet hopes to meet His Holiness one day."

—Nyima Lhamo, recently exiled refugee from Sichuan Province, August 2016[8]

V: Falun Gong

Degree of persecution:

Falun Gong

VERY HIGH

Trajectory of persecution:

Falun Gong

Minor Decrease

Key findings

1. **Survival:** Despite a 17-year Chinese Communist Party (CCP) campaign to eradicate the spiritual group, millions of people in China continue to practice Falun Gong, including many individuals who took up the discipline after the repression began. This represents a striking failure of the CCP's security apparatus.

2. **Ongoing large-scale persecution:** Falun Gong practitioners across China are subject to widespread surveillance, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and torture, and they are at a high risk of extrajudicial execution. Freedom House independently verified 933 cases of Falun Gong adherents sentenced to prison terms of up to 12 years between January 1, 2013, and June 1, 2016, often for exercising their right to freedom of expression in addition to freedom of religion. This is only a portion of those sentenced, and thousands more are believed to be held at various prisons and extralegal detention centers.

3. **Cracks in the crackdown:** Despite the continued campaign, repression appears to have declined in practice in some locales. President Xi Jinping has offered no explicit indication of a plan to reverse the CCP's policy toward Falun Gong. But the purge and imprisonment of former security czar Zhou Yongkang and other officials associated with the campaign as part of Xi's anticorruption drive, together with Falun Gong adherents' persistent efforts to educate and discourage police from persecuting them, have had an impact.

4. **Economic exploitation:** The party-state invests hundreds



Falun Gong practitioners meditating in public in Guangzhou in 1998, before the Communist Party banned the spiritual group in 1999. Such sessions remain forbidden.

Credit: Minghui

of millions of dollars annually in the campaign to crush Falun Gong, while simultaneously engaging in exploitative and lucrative forms of abuse against practitioners, including extortion and prison labor. Available evidence suggests that forced extraction of organs from Falun Gong detainees for sale in transplant operations has occurred on a large scale and may be continuing.

5 **Response and resistance:** Falun Gong practitioners have responded to the campaign against them with a variety of nonviolent tactics. They have especially focused on sharing information with police and the general public about the practice itself, the human rights violations committed against adherents, and other content aimed at countering state propaganda. In recent years, a growing number of non–Falun Gong practitioners in China—including human rights lawyers, family members, and neighbors—have joined these efforts.

"[The Communist Party initiated] the worst instance of religious persecution since the Cultural Revolution, with the clampdown against Falun Gong."

—André Laliberté, Ottawa University, leading scholar on religion in China, 2015[11]

"Orders for arrests continue to come down from high-level authorities, but sometimes the Public Security Bureau agents will say no, they are only exercising to be healthy."

—Chinese human rights lawyer, 2013[12]

Recommendations

The developments described in this report entail both costs and opportunities for Chinese society and the international community. On an almost daily basis, injuries are suffered, families are shattered, and lives are lost, but new avenues for practicing religion, reducing repression, and benefiting fellow citizens are also discovered.

Nearly one-third of China's population is affected by the Chinese Communist Party's religious policies. Within this group, an estimated 80 to 120 million believers belong to faith communities rated in this study as suffering from "high" or "very high" levels of persecution, highlighting the urgency of their plight.

As noted in the report's overview essay, the party-state's relations with religious groups have implications far beyond this particular policy area, influencing China's political, economic, and social development in critical ways. And in an increasingly interconnected world, the same dynamics have repercussions outside China's borders.

The findings of this report show that the Chinese authorities cannot make meaningful advances toward the rule of law, enhance free expression, reduce corruption, ensure social stability, or cultivate genuine interethnic harmony unless they begin to loosen their control over religion, end impunity, and release religious prisoners. Indeed, continued repression seems likely to undermine a variety of policy goals shared by the party, foreign governments, and international human rights advocates.

Meanwhile, although this study has attempted to provide a comprehensive assessment of religious revival, repression, and resistance in China, various aspects of the topic deserve further investigation.

In this context, Freedom House urges the Chinese government, foreign policymakers, international civil society and religious organizations, journalists, and researchers to promptly implement as many of the following recommendations as possible.

A. For the Chinese government

- **Adopt a more inclusive regulatory framework.** Expand the space for religious practice within the law by taking steps such as establishing legal personhood for religious venues and loosening registration rules. One possible change would be to eliminate the requirement of affiliation with a "patriotic association" so that more Christian "house churches," Buddhist and Taoist temples, and informal groups like Falun Gong can operate legally and openly.

- **Lift limitations on the practice of religion for certain populations.** Remove restrictions on children's religious participation to bring conditions in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which China has ratified. Remove restrictions on the ability of lay believers in Xinjiang and Tibetan areas, particularly government employees like civil servants and teachers, to observe the five pillars of Islam and routine elements of Tibetan Buddhist practice.

- **Reverse arbitrary decisions that significantly restrict religious space.** Several party policies regarding religion have an especially weak legal basis and have generated significant levels of repression and backlash from believers. The party should consider reversing these decisions. For example:
    - Allow Tibetans to revere the Dalai Lama as a religious figure. Cease vilifying him in state

media, conflating religious belief with political separatism, and punishing believers for possessing copies of his image or teachings.

- Repeal the ban on Falun Gong and abolish the extralegal 6-10 Office.

- Cease the campaign in Zhejiang Province to remove crosses from church buildings and permit places of worship to replace crosses that were taken down.

- Lift restrictions on believers wishing to travel to other parts of China or abroad, including for religious study or pilgrimage. End limitations on journalists' and researchers' access to sites of religious conflict, such as Uighur- and Tibetan-populated areas.

- **Release all religious prisoners.** Release from custody all individuals imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of belief and religious expression, including those documented in the Political Prisoner Database maintained by the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) or mentioned by name in this report. When prosecuting future cases involving religious believers, grant judges greater authority to distinguish between peaceful religious practice and acts of violence.

- **Take steps to end impunity.** Encourage judges to reject evidence obtained from torture in cases involving religious violations, in accordance with broader judicial reform efforts. Investigate allegations of torture and all suspicious deaths of religious believers in custody or at the hands of security forces, and prosecute those responsible for any unlawful deaths mentioned in this report. Implement the relevant recommendations of the UN Committee Against Torture, in line with China's commitments as a party to the Convention Against Torture.

- **Cease organ transplants from prisoners.** End all organ transplants from prisoner populations and facilitate an independent international audit of organ sources to verify that the system is fully voluntary and transparent and does not victimize death-row or religious prisoners. Provide visas, freedom to travel, and access to medical files and relevant personnel to international experts investigating this issue.

B. For policymakers in the United States, Europe, and other democracies

- **Make religious freedom a priority in relations with the Chinese government.** Considering the scale and severity of violations of religious freedom and the presence of concerned coreligionists in many countries around the world, the issue is worthy of particular attention in democratic governments' interactions with Chinese officials.
    - Press the Chinese government to implement the recommendations listed above.

    - Ensure that officials at all levels of government, including the president or prime minister, and across agencies raise human rights generally and religious freedom specifically in all meetings with Chinese officials (in the United States, this should include officials from the White House, the Department of State, the Treasury Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and Congress).

    - Appoint religious freedom ambassadors with expertise in Chinese affairs. The Chinese government is one of the world's worst—and most extensive—violators of religious freedom, but it is also a sophisticated diplomatic interlocutor. Past performances indicate that appointees with previous experience in China are more effective in gaining access to and raising these sensitive topics with Chinese officials.

    - When raising the issue, incorporate it into discussions of other critical human rights areas (like judicial reform or free expression), address all relevant religious groups, and avoid using language that inadvertently reinforces Chinese government rhetoric justifying restrictions or vilifying believers.

- **Draw attention to abuses and their link to the national interests of other countries.**
    - Highlight the cases of specific individuals imprisoned or persecuted for their faith. Former political prisoners have consistently reported that when foreign officials raised their cases, their treatment in prison improved; in some instances they were even released after such interventions.

  - Make public statements and private diplomatic demarches in a timely manner in response to events on the ground.

  - Take parliamentary action, including holding hearings; delivering floor speeches; issuing press releases; sending open letters to U.S., Chinese, and other government officials; and drafting legislation.

- **Put foreign trips to good use.** Before traveling to China, foreign officials (including presidents, prime ministers, other ministers, secretaries, assistant secretaries, UN special rapporteurs, ambassadors, and legislators) should do the following:
  - Meet with Chinese religious believers who have recently fled China to hear their accounts of persecution firsthand and learn about pressing problems.

  - When preparing to meet with provincial or city-level Chinese officials, make use of publicly accessible resources to determine local conditions for religious freedom and the names of persecuted local believers. Such resources include the Freedom House map attached to this report, the CECC Political Prisoner Database, and human rights groups' individual prisoner alerts.

  - Be ready to respond forcefully if news emerges that persecution increased in the relevant region during or after the trip, as was the case for Christians surrounding the Group of 20 summit in 2016.

- **Increase penalties for violations of religious freedom.**
  - **Impose entry and property sanctions on officials** who have committed or been complicit in the abuse, torture, or persecution of religious believers. Many officials travel to the United States and Europe for personal matters and hold funds in foreign bank accounts. Penalizing perpetrators through the blocking of visas and freezing of foreign-based assets is an effective way to ensure that these individuals face some measure of justice and to deter future abusers. In many countries, including the United States, this can be done without enacting additional laws. Under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), for example, foreign government officials who have engaged in "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" and their spouses and children can be denied entry to the United States.

  - **Promptly delay or cancel official visits or exchanges**, with both central government and local or provincial officials, in response to egregious incidents of religious persecution.

  - For the United States government, **retain China's designation as a country of particular concern** (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act and **impose additional penalties available under the law**. China has been designated as a CPC—a country which "engages in or tolerates systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom"—every year since 1999, but the executive branch has typically chosen not to impose a broad range of economic penalties available under IRFA.

- **Engage in multilateral action.**
  - **UN Human Rights Council:** Democratic countries on the council should issue a joint statement condemning the persecution of religious believers in China and worsening conditions for some groups, following the example of a recent joint statement on human rights in China more generally. Diplomatic resources should be devoted to encouraging participation by governments that may have constituencies interested in these issues but that do not typically criticize China's human rights record, including India, Indonesia, and South Korea.

  - **Interparliamentary initiatives:** Lawmakers in democratic states should undertake joint trips, coordinated resolutions, public statements, or letters on religious freedom in China.

- **Fund programs, policies, and research that will aid China's religious believers.**
  - Short-term emergency financial assistance allows religious believers to receive medical care, obtain legal counsel, leave the country, or meet other urgent needs.

  - Longer-term financial assistance is necessary for individuals forced to flee China for

indefinite periods, many of whom are unable to work due to their status as refugees.

- Donors should support programs that address challenges to religious freedom in China, including projects that are based outside China for security reasons but affect conditions on the ground.

- Research efforts by government bodies (including annual reports), ad hoc interagency task forces, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, and scholars all require funding. Priorities could include the comprehensive documentation of victims and perpetrators of religious persecution or other areas of investigation listed in the sections below.

- **Resist Beijing's attempts to export its mistreatment of religious minorities.**
  - Meet with the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, especially at the level of head of state or head of government.

  - Ensure full protection of the freedoms of association and expression for activists from religious communities, particularly during visits by senior Chinese officials.

  - Resist pressure to repatriate religious refugees to China, a troubling practice that some governments have engaged in repeatedly in recent years, particularly in South and Southeast Asia.

C. For international civil society and religious organizations

- **Adopt coreligionists in China for advocacy and moral support.** Religious institutions and congregations outside of China should "adopt" verified individual prisoners, offering spiritual, advocacy, and even financial support for persecuted members of their own faith, or building solidarity by doing the same for members of other religions. Such assistance might include weekly prayers on behalf of the individual, letter-writing campaigns to foreign governments and Chinese officials, and collection of monetary or in-kind donations for a detainee's family members.

- **Unify disparate advocacy efforts and share best practices.** While specialized advocacy is important and effective, diverse constituencies can magnify their impact through collective action on themes of common interest. Overseas groups supporting Christians, Tibetans, Uighurs, and Falun Gong adherents in China should develop collaborative projects and advocacy campaigns. They should also share tactics that have proven successful in reducing persecution of coreligionists in China, such as training grassroots believers on how to assert their legal rights when negotiating with officials or having overseas activists call police stations, courts, and prosecutors to urge the release of a religious detainee.

- **Improve documentation of religious prisoners and perpetrators.** Several human rights groups and overseas websites monitor cases of detention and imprisonment of religious believers in China, but these efforts are incomplete, uneven across different faiths, and sometimes lacking in international credibility. Some initiatives have begun to identify Chinese officials who have engaged in egregious abuses, but their databases are also disparate, may need independent verification, and are not always accessible in English. International civil society groups should fill these gaps and make full use of available Chinese government sources, including court verdicts, to complement reports from grassroots believers. A joint documentation center could consolidate, research, and publicize such information. Better documentation of both prisoners and perpetrators would improve conditions for detainees in China by reducing their international anonymity; inform policymaking, civil society advocacy, academic exchanges, business dealings, and training programs; highlight individual responsibility for gross human rights violations; and provide some deterrence to members of the repressive apparatus in China.

- **Conduct joint investigations of forced labor and organ harvesting.** These two topics affect multiple faith groups and economic sectors, and involve strong transnational elements and serious human rights ramifications. As a result, they would benefit from an investigation by researchers with diverse areas of expertise, including on specific religious or ethnic groups, criminal justice, labor rights, and medicine. An investigation into forced labor by religious prisoners should focus on changes since the abolition of the "reeducation through labor" camp system in 2013 and seek to identify products manufactured by prisoners of conscience in China

for export abroad, which would be illegal to import in some countries. An investigation into organ transplant abuse should trace the sources used in China's expanding transplant industry, determining the extent to which organs are taken involuntarily from different communities of religious prisoners and the level of involvement by party-state officials.

- **Provide nongovernmental funding for these and other projects.** Private foundations, individual philanthropists, and donor organizations should provide funding for the above initiatives, as well as other projects that aim to expand religious freedom in China, document abuses, and counter repressive tendencies. Given the dangers many groups face inside China and the informal organizational structure of some religious networks, donors should establish funding mechanisms that allow for flexibility, including support for projects based outside of China that directly influence conditions inside the country.

D. For scholars and journalists

- **Choose words and sources with care.** When writing about religion in China, scholars and journalists should take care in their use of official rhetoric so as not to inadvertently legitimize misleading and vilifying propaganda about persecuted groups. They should consult a variety of sources on these topics, including accounts by refugees and research by overseas groups. While sources may vary in credibility, there are many skilled professionals, reliable eyewitnesses, and providers of valuable information among members of persecuted religious communities living outside China and their foreign supporters. Dismissing their perspectives and publications out of hand as inherently biased is itself prejudicial and risks significantly limiting the international community's understanding of events on the ground.

- **Explore topics for further research.** In addition to those noted in the section above, subjects for research and investigative reporting include:
    - **Religious policy:** Any changes occurring in the realm of religious policy and persecution at the provincial and local levels following the introduction of updated national religious affairs regulations in 2016.
    - **Economic tensions:** The intersection of financial incentives and exploitation with religious restrictions and resistance, particularly as China's economic growth slows, and whether this increases official tensions with local Chinese Buddhist and Taoist leaders.
    - **Catholics:** The treatment of Catholics from official and unofficial churches in the context of an apparently imminent agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese government on the appointment of bishops.
    - **Protestants:** The degree to which the Chinese government's changing approach to Protestant churches, including increased harassment of state-sanctioned places of worship, spreads beyond Zhejiang Province and negatively affects church-state relations in other locales where restrictions were once relatively lax.
    - **Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims:** How restrictions on religious practice affect daily life in Tibetan and Uighur areas, whether such infringements continue to increase, and how local populations respond.
    - **Falun Gong:** The evolving situation of Falun Gong inside China, including ongoing large scale abuses, new trends such as uneven enforcement, and the campaign to lodge legal complaints against Jiang Zemin.
    - **New religious movements:** The possibility of persecution against members of new or smaller religious groups that are often invisible to foreign observers because of their unfamiliarity and isolation.

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Notes

Freedom House

Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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