

# RELIGIOUS SUPPRESSION IN CHINA

The legal underpinnings and practical implications  
of China's systematic repression of religion

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THE LEGAL UNDERPINNINGS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS  
OF CHINA'S SYSTEMATIC REPRESSION OF RELIGION



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## **Index**

Executive Summary	1
Legal Framework Employed by the Chinese Government to Oppress Christians	2
Sinicization	6
Case Study of Recent Major Incidents	7
Incident Tracker Report Summary	11
Policy Recommendations	13

## Executive Summary

This report seeks to provide an overview of religious persecution against Chinese Christians in recent years. With this report, we hope to piece together the various facets of Christian persecution in China and paint a holistic picture by presenting an in-depth legal analysis of Chinese laws related to religion, the Sinitization campaign, a case study of recent major persecution cases coupled with an incident report summary, and policy recommendations.

The report first addresses the legal structure employed by the Chinese government to monitor and constrict religious affairs. Delving into the problematic nature of these regulations, the report will detail the 2018 revised Regulations on Religious Affairs—an act that few have pointed out as unconstitutional and unlawful as an administrative decree—and will identify the government agencies who have benefited from such laws.

Coined by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2015, the term "Sinicization" has become a common theme used to restrict religions that are considered foreign, especially through the use of heavily-restricted state-sanctioned religious organizations. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attempts to assimilate religious minorities, chiefly Christians, into an identity more consistent with Chinese characteristics, while altering their theology to conform to CCP values.

Beijing and other local governments have evolved in their crackdown against churches throughout China. This report notes CCP tactics and standard procedures by diving into several major case studies, including an intensified clamp-down in the Henan province, Shouwang Church, Zion Church in Beijing, and Early Rain Covenant Church in Sichuan.

Along with this report, ICC has also compiled a separate incident dossier, documenting how the CCP targets Christians through its legal framework, Sinicization, closure or demolition of churches or places of worship, arresting of Christians, and social pressure. The dossier is available upon request, though we have included the key findings in this report. An interactive map has also been created to illustrate the scope of Christian persecution in China.

Lastly, the abuser of religious freedom should not go unnoticed and unpunished. With specific recommendations, ICC hopes to work with policymakers throughout the U.S. government and the cohort of religious freedom advocates to advance religious freedom for Chinese Christians.

# Legal Framework Employed by the Chinese Government to Persecute Christians

Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China sets the parameter for regulating the religious freedom of Chinese citizens. It declares that:

- (1) Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief.
- (2) No state organ, public organization, or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion.
- (3) The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state.
- (4) Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.

The third clause, “The state protects normal religious activities,” is problematic because the word “normal” can only be defined by the government. Thus, the state will only protect those religions that it deems normal and is not obligated to do so if it deems a religious activity abnormal. As a result, the government has the ability to crack down on certain religious practices or even disband them.

Since China does not have a law directly proscribing religion, the government uses other grounds to persecute Christians. As a result, the government will deal with a religious issue by transforming it into a financial crime or criminal case. For example, devotional materials printed and distributed by certain churches may be seen as “illegal publications,” with the act of publishing seen as an “illegal business operation.” Similarly, church gatherings can be characterized as “unlawful assembly” or “disrupting public order.” Inviting pastors from overseas to preach becomes a crime of “endangering national security.” When people reveal the persecution of Christians to foreign media organizations and NGOs, they are accused of “leaking state secrets.”

These are just some ways that the Chinese government has leveraged crimes unrelated to religion to clamp down on Christianity – other national laws are applied to deal with these cases as well. A typical example is pastor Wang Yi from the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu.

## Regulations on Religious Affairs—China’s Main Legal Tool for Religious Oppression

At the moment, the Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) are the main basis employed by the Chinese government to handle religious issues. Unless the stakeholder is being charged with other crimes, the National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA), previously the State Administration of Religious Affairs, is typically in charge of handling religious issues instead of the court.

The RRA are administrative regulations, not laws. The enforcement of the RRA is strongly arbitrary and is driven by certain department interests (religious affairs managing agency). Since it is not law, the RRA should only be used as a basis for administrative penalties, handled by administrative agencies. Administrative regulations are mandatory provisions enacted by the central government, usually under the State Council’s name.

The difference between administrative regulations and laws is that the latter needs to be enacted by the law-

making organ. In China, the National People's Congress and the Standing Committee play this role. These laws can be the legal basis of adjudication.

Administrative regulations, on the other hand, do not need to go through lawmaking organ. The government sets up, explains, and uses them to punish without involving others. Based on its interest, the NRAA enacted a set of administrative regulations through the State Council, bypassing the National Congress.

In legal proceedings, the NRAA's action replaces upper-level law with lower-level law, which is unconstitutional. Christians in China, however, have no standing to file a lawsuit because these administrative regulations are not subject to judicial adjudication. The government often calls house churches "illegal," yet such rhetoric is also baseless given the absence of a law on religion. Violating the RRA is, for the most part, a violation of the rules, not the law.

### **The Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs—Unconstitutional and Unlawful**

The enactment of the revised RRA, implemented in 2018, is against procedural justice given that it is not permissible for an administrative organ to regulate affairs pertaining to the freedom of religious belief, which are citizens' fundamental rights enshrined under Article 36. These regulations cannot replace laws. Lower-level laws cannot replace upper-level laws, and the administrative organ cannot replace the lawmaking organ.

Simply put, the freedom of religious belief is a fundamental right. Therefore, it must be regulated through legislation in order to protect the fundamental rights of all citizens. Without such protective legislation, the government is able to violate the principle of legal reservation. The State Council needs the authorization of a legislative body before it can enact administrative regulations curtailing the freedom of religious belief.

According to Article 9 and Article 10 of the Legislation Law, the State Council needs to be authorized by the National People's Congress and the Standing Committee before it can enact administrative regulations on those matters that the lawmaking organ should, but has yet to, enact laws on.

For an administrative organ to take action on things that the national lawmaking organ is supposed to do, it needs explicit authorization from the latter. This is an indispensable legal procedure. Without this authorization, the administrative organ cannot do things that only the lawmaking organ has the right to do.

The fact that the State Council enacted the RRA without the formal authorization from the national lawmaking organ is a clear violation of the Legislation Law. The administrative organ is only entitled to enact administrative regulations, not make laws.

### **Purpose of Revised Religious Regulations**

The fundamental purpose of the revised RRA is to maintain the existing religious administrative management mechanisms, which originate from the old mechanisms employed by the former Soviet Union to control religion. It is a typical module used by the states during the planned economy era to fully control society through the establishment of administrative agencies. For decades, while China has undertaken ambitious historical reforms in other fields, including reducing the number of administrative agencies from 100 to 27, this type of reform never occurred in the field of religion.

In order to survive and continue to exert influence, after repeated consideration, the NRAA enacted a revised set

of administrative management regulations. Not only does the new RRA leave the status enjoyed by the NRAA untouched, but it also strengthens and consolidates the NRAA's power, boosting its organizational clout. The NRAA would be able to avoid potential abolishment in the structural reform process.

However, the revised RRA certainly do not advance the rule of law of governing religion. Instead, they increase administrative discretion in two ways.

First, the newly revised RRA do not contribute to the transformation from the rule of man to the rule of law. Instead, through the lawmaking of the NRAA, the RRA strengthened the power of the religious management agency, rule of man, and reinforced the existing religious administrative management mechanisms, leading to an apparent regress.

Second, the basic criteria to rule the country in accordance with the law is to respect the Constitution and the law. The biggest issue with the new RRA is that it violates both the Constitution and the law. To regulate the Chinese people's basic rights with lower-level law, in this case, administrative regulations is in itself in violation of the Constitution and the Legislation Law.

The new RRA did not meet the basic requirement of lawmaking authorization and purview. It damages procedural justice, and in no way contributes to ruling the country in accordance with the law.

### **Beneficiaries of the Revised Religious Regulations**

It is clear that the drafter of the new RRA is the biggest beneficiary. In the name of lawmaking, the NRAA enlarged and strengthened its power. Under these new regulations, it can continue to monopolize the management of religious affairs in all aspects, as it has for the past few decades.

On the other hand, the beneficiaries of the RRA also include some state-sanctioned religious groups. In the new RRA, only those religious groups who are recognized by the government, such as protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), and the Buddhist Association of China, are able to obtain legal status and protection.

Religious groups that are not recognized by the government—such as house churches—are excluded from protection, and are therefore unable to enjoy their inalienable rights as entitled by the Constitution and the law.

### **Characteristics of the Revised Religious Regulations**

The revision of the RRA aims to repair past loopholes by targeting existing issues from the previous version. It expanded the articles from 55 to 77 and added many provisions on penalties. The revised version places more scrutiny on religious groups from lower-level governments and subjects the groups to hefty fines for unsanctioned activities.

Religious activities in schools, the publication of religious content online, and trips overseas for religious training need to be pre-approved before they can take place. Local governments might revoke education facility permits if they are used for religious activities outside sanctioned religious schools. The same goes for anybody who offers a venue for an "illegal religious event," with such an offender facing a fine of 20,000-200,000 yuan (USD \$3,000-\$30,000).

If groups are found conducting unapproved religious activities in China, up to 300,000 yuan (USD \$40,000) of fines will be applied. Any activity involving foreigners needs to be authorized and closely monitored by the government.

In addition to the fines, county, township, and village governments are given greater authority to control religious activities. This authorization empowers the lower-level governments to play an active role in cracking down on religion alongside Beijing.

One thing to note is Article 23 of the new RRA, where it states that “[p]laces of worship meeting the requirements for legal personhood, may register as legal persons with the Bureau of Civil Affairs upon the consent of a local religious group and the permission of local religious affairs managing bureau.” According to this provision, Buddhism and Taoism, which conduct their activities in temples, as well as TSPM churches and CCPA, which have church buildings recognized and approved by the NRAA, are able to register themselves as legal persons.

This is actually differential treatment deliberately designed to cater to the characteristics of different religions. While some religions conduct their activities on the grounds of their religious venues, others may conduct their activities on the grounds of the coming together of religious clergy and worshippers.

The new RRA did not take religious groups, but rather places of worship as the entity to apply for legal persons. This allows the government to purposefully exclude those religious groups by preventing places of worship from applying for legal personhood. As a result, different religions receive different treatment, sowing division among these religions. This tactic seeks to raise the social status of the local religions (Buddhism and Taoism) while suppressing the influence of the so-called foreign religions (Christianity and Islam).

Along with the new RRA, Beijing took action to shift jurisdiction over religious affairs from the NRAA to the United Front Work Department (UFWD), an organ of CCP. The UFWD works to co-opt and neutralize sources of potential opposition to the policies and authority of the Party. This reorganization authorizes the CCP to directly monitor all religious organizations and activities across China, both at the local and national level. While NRAA continues to exist, it is subject to the supervision and direction of the UFWD.

### **Revised Religious Regulations—Summary**

In summary, the newly revised RRA deprives believers of all faiths of the right to religious freedom and thus abuses their fundamental rights. It is a product of unconstitutional and unlawful action, a regression of law, and a tool for the persecution of Christians.

To make matters worse, on February 1, 2020, the Administrative Measures for Religious Groups came into effect, which furthers government control over all religious groups. The 41 articles contained in the document are comprehensive in nature, detailing all aspects of religious organization, observation, finances, activities, and communications at both the national and the local level. Chinese churches are required to register with the TSPM or the CCPA. Under such new measures, church leaders can be arrested and their churches disbanded.

History has shown that Beijing’s attempt to control religion with a growing number of unlawful regulations will prove unsuccessful. Like Christianity in North Korea, persecution may force believers underground, but it can never eradicate the faith itself.



## Sinicization

Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced a new theme to govern religious affairs in 2015. The word “zhongguo-hua,” or “Sinicization,” connotes Beijing’s plan to make religious groups within China submit to socialism and the CCP’s ideology by assimilating them into a unified identity with Chinese characteristics.

The official document from the Chinese State Administration for Religious Affairs calls for an interpretation of religious teachings and doctrines in ways that conform to “China’s outstanding traditional culture,” promote patriotic education and activities within religious communities and impel religious communities to exhibit Chinese ‘characteristics’ and ‘style’ in all religious thinking, institutions, rituals, behavior, and architecture, among other aspects.

Religions classified by Beijing as being under foreign influence, namely Christianity, Islam, and Tibetan Buddhism, have come under increased scrutiny as the government views their so-called foreign infiltration of Chinese society a threat to the atheist country.

In the case of Christianity, the Sinicization campaign seeks to diminish the effectiveness of Christian theology by taking several approaches: removing Christian symbols at churches and replacing them with CCP symbols, re-writing portions of the Bible, observing major Christian holidays with a Communist twist, and indoctrinating state-sanctioned clergy and leaders with CCP dogma.

In recent years, numerous TSPM churches and official Catholic dioceses have seen their crosses, statues of Mary or Jesus, or couplets with Bible verses removed from their places of worship. Last year, a state-vetted Three-Self church in Luoyang city in the Henan province replaced the Ten Commandments with President Xi Jinping’s quotes, invoking heavy criticism. Additionally, some churches received directives to install flag-raising platforms for the purpose of holding state flag-raising ceremonies at their churches. It is also common to find banners with CCP slogans decorating church walls.

After the Outline of the Five-Year Working Plan for Promoting the Sinicization of Christianity in China was published on March 28, 2018, Bibles became the next target of the CCP purge. Sales of Bibles, both online and in stores, were outlawed. A “comprehensive evaluation of the existing religious classics aiming at content which does not conform to the progress of the times” was undertaken by government officials. All the state-sanctioned religious associations were ordered to review their holy texts and adapt them to the “era of President Xi Jinping,” in order to find commonalities with socialism and establish a “correct understanding” of the text.

In preparation for the 70th Anniversary of the People’s Republic of China last October, churchgoers in state-sanctioned churches in Jiangxi province were asked to sing communist songs at church and even to host patriot singing contests. Choir members performed these songs to exalt CCP values. These measures were also extended to Christmas celebrations, where Three-Self churches in Henan and Jiangxi province danced to “red tunes” in uniform or sang the national anthem under the surveillance of local government officials.

Church leaders and clergy of state-approved churches risk the cancellation of their preaching certificate, removal from their position, or, worse yet, re-education and enforced disappearance if they are caught operating outside of the government’s orders. On January 10, 2019, the state-sanctioned church governing bodies in Shanzhou District in Henan Province’s Sanmenxia City published a notice to the state that the preaching permits of 57 preachers had been revoked, allegedly due to their refusal to follow CCP’s Sinicization policy. This indicates that membership in the state-sanctioned church no longer equates protection and privilege from the government. If a Christian does not serve the Party before God, the believer’s right to worship is at stake.

## Case Study of Recent Major Incidents

After the 2016 National Religious Work Conference was held, the Regulations on Religious Affairs were revised and passed in 2017 to be officially implemented in 2018. Responding to Beijing's call, all the provinces made concrete plans according to their own circumstances. The Sinicization of religion was the main theme of this latest policy.

In November 2016, the Communist Party of China Henan Province Committee, Henan Provincial Government's Suggestions on Strengthening and Improving the Implementation of Religion Work Under New Circumstances was published. In late 2017 and early 2018, Henan province initiated Learn to Implement Newly Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs and to Regulate Christianity in Rural Areas Pursuant to Law, an action plan designed to unfold in three phases.

### Henan Province – Increasing Crackdown

During the first phase (end of 2017 to late March 2018), Zhengzhou city authorities attempted to respect the rule of law by following certain procedures when they disbanded local house churches. For instance, they consistently issued Administrative Penalty Advance Notices before disbanding churches. One of the house churches that was disbanded, Gusui church, requested a hearing, which caused some levels of deterrence against the government's illegal administrative actions.

However, during the second phase (April through July 2018) and the third phase (August through December 2018), the government began implementing an initiative that went by the name Regulate Christianity in Rural Areas Pursuant to Law. The efforts of governments in prefecture-level cities such as Nanyang City to remove crosses, demolish churches, or ransack church property gradually turned more brutal and violent.

During the joint actions of the local Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau, Urban Management Bureau, and Public Security Bureau against churches, the authorities seemed to follow a standardized procedure: they would intrude gathering places including residences, turn away CCTV camera or cut off electricity, remove any church-goer who questioned them, confiscate cell phones from members who were recording the illegal administrative act, remove any Christian symbols such as the cross or Christian signs, both indoor and outdoor, so as to avoid leaving any trace behind, and seize all the desks, chairs, and other items, all without showing their IDs or proper documentation.

In 2018, the local government put pastor Wei Jindang, Yang Liupei, and Zhang Yinan under administrative detention. In April 2019, pastor Li Juncai in Henan province's Xinxiang was arrested under the alleged charges of destroying accounting books, the crime of "duty encroachment," and disrupting public service. On July 17, the Shangqiu city chairman of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement committed suicide at his church, exhausted by the pressure placed on him by the CCP. In the wake of this three-part campaign, the number of Three-Self churches was reduced, and house churches were forced to disperse.

### Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu

On August 31, 2018, senior pastor Wang Yi from Early Rain Covenant Church (ERCC) in Chengdu penned and published A Joint Statement by Pastors: A Declaration for the Sake of the Christian Faith. More than 400 pastors and leaders from house churches across China signed the statement, which pointed out that since the new Reg-

ulations on the Administration of Religious Affairs were announced, Christian churches across China had suffered varying degrees of persecution, contempt, and misunderstanding from government departments during public worship and religious practices. On December 8, pastor Wang Yi published his article *Reflections on the War on Religion*, stating that the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs are the government's attempt to initiate a war on religion.

The next day, the Sichuan public security took actions against ERCC in an ad hoc fashion: police descended on the church, its associated school, Western China Covenant Theological Seminary, and Western China Covenant College, removing more than 80 leaders from the church, including senior pastor Wang Yi, his wife Jiang Rong, elder Qin Derfu, elder Su Bingsun, and elder Yan Xixia.

On December 10, Wang Yi was criminally detained and accused of inciting subversion of state power. His wife, Jiang Rong, was also placed under Residential Surveillance at a designated location on the same charge. From the time the church was raided to March 16, 2019, 25 members, including elder Li Yingqiang, were criminally detained under charges of operating businesses illegally and “picking quarrels and provoking troubles.” Of these, 14 members received bail pending trial, while administrative detention was applied to others. ERCC members' attempts to organize gatherings at home or in the park at the beginning of 2019 were repeatedly blocked by district police.

The pastors from churches in Jiangsu's Xuzhou and Fujian's Xiamen, who are also members of a Presbyterian denomination, visited ERCC members following the arrests. However, their visitation invited local authorities' crackdown against their churches – they faced disbandment, administrative penalty, and administrative detention. The lawyer previously designated by pastor Wang Yi in 2017, Zhang Peihong, visited Chengdu at least nine times but was repeatedly denied the right to see his client by the authorities under the excuse that the power of attorney was not dated. Even Zhang's meetings with Wang's mother and other family members were interrupted by the local police.

On January 9, 2019, Zhang received power of attorney from Wang's mother to defend Wang, yet the agencies handling the case still refused to arrange a meeting between him and Wang, claiming that Wang was violating national security. In the end, Zhang was regarded as “personally involved” in the case and could not defend pastor Wang Yi.

Even after the elders, preachers, and other members were gradually released on bail pending trial, elder Qin Derfu and pastor Wang Yi remained in detention. On November 25, 2019, Qingyang District Court in Chengdu processed Qin Derfu's case and sentenced him to four years of imprisonment for “illegal business operation.” On December 30, Chengdu Intermediate People's Court charged Wang with “illegal business operation” and “inciting subversion of state power,” sentencing him to nine years of imprisonment. Wang was also to be stripped of his political rights for three years and forced to forfeit his personal assets valuing 50,000 yuan (USD \$7,000).

### **Zion Church in Beijing**

In March 2018, Zion Church in Beijing was asked by local authorities to install security cameras at their church. After the church refused, the local Commerce and Industry Bureau, Taxation Department, and Cultural Bureau repeatedly inspected the church and questioned its leaders. Sub-district offices, the community, and staff from nearby schools also played their part by defaming the church, claiming they were gathering illegally, politically

incorrect, and even that they were a cult. This placed further social pressures on Christians within their districts. Residential committee staff and district police also visited members' homes to threaten or force them not to meet at the church, pushing them to sign letter of guarantee. The bookshop and coffee store legally owned and operated by the church were annulled by local authorities.

On June 12, the church's WeChat public account was closed, and sermon videos were deleted from various websites. The church's landlord also breached their contract, unilaterally deciding that he would not rent to the church after August. Pastor Jin's personal property was sealed by the Chaoyang District Ethnic and Religious Affairs Office and Public Security Branch for the period from August 7, 2018 – August 7, 2019. To date, the local District Housing Management Bureau has not lifted the seal.

On September 9, 2018, plainclothes officers appeared at Zion Church during its morning worship. After its last service in the afternoon, hundreds of staff members from relevant government agencies descended upon the church in waves, demanding that all attendees leave, except senior pastor Jin Mingri. Beijing city Chaoyang District Civil Affairs Bureau announced on the same day that it was disbanding Zion Church. Local authorities soon entered to remove church signs and décor, confiscate property, and seal passage. In the early morning of September 10, the entrance door to the church was locked and guarded by minders.

Afterward, many elders and preachers were interrogated. Pastor Jin, pastor Gao Yingjia, pastor Wang Lin, and preacher Yang Jun came under surveillance from minders stationed outside of their homes. To date, pastor Jin has not been able to leave the country. His daughter, who was due to begin law school in the U.S., was also banned from leaving the country.

Zion Church was first founded by pastor Jin Mingri, who was once part of the Beijing Committee of the Three-self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Church and the Beijing Christian Council after he returned from the U.S. to China in 2007. This house church grew from an initial 200-300 worshippers to 1,000 at the time of disbandment. It offers services in Chinese, Korean, and English. Shouwang church's former senior pastor Jin Tianming and Zion Church pastor Jin Mingri were the first leaders to launch the Beijing House Church Pastors' Joint Prayer Meeting, which built a network of house church leaders nationwide. These leaders were also crucial members of China's preparatory committee at the Lausanne Congress.

In the last five years, Zion Church has increasingly become one of the focal points of Chinese house churches, with large-scale trainings, workshops, and fellowship events between churches held every week. The disbandment of Zion Church became a symbolic event, showcasing that the state is tightening its policy on house churches with severe crackdowns.

### **Shouwang Church**

On March 23, 2019, Beijing Shouwang Church was disbanded by the Ethnic, Religious and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and Civil Affairs Bureau of Haidian District.

Many Christians were asked to promise verbally or sign a letter of guarantee to not attend the church anymore. Some congregants were threatened through their parents. After the disbandment, many members began to receive a copy of the disbandment decision in person, delivered by their local police and staff from the sub-district office or residential committee. In addition, some members' landlords were pressured and had no choice but to break the lease, forcing them to move elsewhere.

Founded in 1993, Shouwang Church began to implement its vision to go public in the late 1990s. The church grew from holding secret meetings to renting a residential building before moving to an office building to accommodate the hundreds of members. The church soon began establishing church structure, starting publications, and setting up a website. In the mid-2000s, the church initiated a plan to purchase an office building as its place of worship. After they signed the contract and began making payments, the government interfered and the transfer of property never took place.

In 2011, since the church was blocked from renting a place for their gathering, it decided to conduct outdoor worship. As a result, their senior pastor at the time, Jin Tianming, has been placed under house arrest ever since, deprived of his personal freedom. Other pastors have also experienced different levels of personal freedom restrictions. During this time, exposed by the outdoor service, some members either lost their jobs, had to move somewhere else, or were punished with administrative detention. The church attendance dropped from 800-900 people to 300-400 people. Before the disbandment, the church had rented facilities for prayer meetings and communion. After being disbanded, the church no longer had access to any place for its gatherings. This was a landmark event for the obstruction faced by Chinese house churches as they gradually turned public.

## Incident Tracker Report Summary

ICC has been working vigorously on tracking global Christian persecution. In 2020, ICC specifically focused on China and their desire to wipe out a religion that refuses to submit to the CCP's control. ICC has categorized how the CCP targets Christians through Sinicization, the closure or demolition of churches and places of worship, the arresting of Christians, social pressure, and under its legal framework.

While the collection of the report data began on January 1, 2020, given the limitations of reporting from China (reports often are delayed due to security concerns), many incidents could be traced back to as early as March 2019. Most of these reports are based on information from China Aid, Bitter Winter, Radio Free Asia, Chinese Christian Fellowship of Righteousness, or other individual sources.

Note that the number of incidents recorded below does not necessarily represent the complete number of cases that took place. For example, 450 crosses were reportedly removed in one instance in Anhui province. In our records, this only counted as one. While the data here is correct to our best knowledge, there could be many cases that were not captured and recorded.

Sinicization began to intensify after the Four Requirements campaign was launched by the CCP in June 2018, requiring all state-approved churches to raise the national flag, promote the Chinese Constitution and other laws, place regulations on worship, preach "Core Socialist Values," and maintain China's traditional culture.

ICC has tracked 21 incidents of Sinicization since 2019. One example is when a state-approved church in Jiangxi province received Marxist books that have chapter titles such as "God Did Not Create the World," "Faith Comes from Witchcraft and Primitive Totems," and "Follow the Leadership of CCP." The government told this congregation to take pictures of themselves holding the book to show obedience and to be grateful to the CCP for "a happy life" despite the fierce control over them.

Another example of Chinese influence changing religious practices happened in December 2019. The United Front Work Department watched as a Three-Self church in Henan province sang the Chinese national anthem with a banner above them reading, "Celebrate Christmas by singing the national anthem." If they did not obey, the government had threatened to shut them down.

The Religious Affairs Bureau and the CCP have a single goal: to prevent religious influence from threatening their communist control. ICC has tracked 22 incidents of authorities demolishing religious structures and symbols. The CCP has torn down, destroyed, and removed numerous churches in China, especially those that refused to submit to its control. In Shanxi province, they are closing down kindergartens, an important venue for the churches to develop their faith through education. The government also does not allow any childcare to be near a temple or a church. The United Front Work Department (UFWD) and the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau (ERAB) work to coerce underground churches to join the state-approved churches. The CCP demolishes or shuts down sites that they deem as unlawful. They also destroy religious symbols, couplets (long banners with religious meaning), and statues of Jesus and Mary.

Whether it is an activist protesting the CCP, a pastor crossing into Myanmar to give aid, or a pastor who refuses to join a state-sanctioned church, the CCP detains anyone who stands in opposition. ICC has identified, via local news, 14 cases of arrests or disappearances. Pastor John Cao, Pastor Wang Yi, Hu Shigen, Liao Qiang, Hao Zhiwei,

Hong Ying, Wan Yanxiang, Pastor Yang Xibo, Pastor Zhao Huaiguo, Bishop Zhu Baoyu, and Preacher Luo are just a few of the many names targeted by the CCP.

The Early Rain Covenant Church and Pastor Wang Yi in Chengdu are among the most widely known cases of extreme social pressure, arrests, disappearances, and imprisonment under the CCP's legal framework. Standard charges often used to criminalize them are, "inciting subversion of state power," "proselytizing," "illegal gathering," "illegal business operation," and "illegal funding." They are often deprived of due process as their trials are not transparent and open to the public. Many have not been heard from since their disappearance.

Three-Self churches are part of the legal framework the CCP uses to systemically curb Christianity, including Catholicism. These churches are at the mercy of authority from laws that were passed entirely in contradiction to the Constitution, enforced by multiple departments, bureaus, and agencies using them to suppress non state-sponsored church activity. However, in recent years, many of the state-vetted churches also fell victim to CCP's persecution, with authorities employing methods such as demolition of churches and harassment of clergy that had been commonly used against house churches.

With the intensified crackdown against churches, both state-sanctioned and underground, there is no longer a safe place to be a Christian in China. According to our incident report, almost every province in China has seen Christian persecution on the rise, specifically Henan and Anhui province. Cross demolition campaigns have been active in these provinces, which have a high percentage of Christians. Thousands of crosses have been removed since 2018, with some churches leveled to the ground. Deteriorating Sino-U.S. relations could further encourage crackdown against churches in 2020.

## Policy Recommendations

### The Case for International Action Against China's Religious Freedom Violations

That China systematically commits, and even exports, religious violence is no secret to the international community. In response, countries around the world have publicly condemned China, insisting that it allow its citizens to practice their religion freely. From the United States to Europe and beyond, governments around the world recognize the need to push back on the severe religious freedom violations happening in China.

While China's brazen disregard for religious freedom certainly merits the international condemnation it has received, it is also incumbent on the international community to take real action against China's human rights violations and root this action in effective policy. China should be motivated, through economic pressure and other means, to change its ideological intolerance of religion.

There is a clear case to be made for the advancement of religious freedom on the simple grounds of human rights and individual dignity, but it is also in the best interests of China and the rest of the world to push for religious freedom in China. Academic research proves that increased religious freedom in a country leads to a healthier economy, greater innovation, and social stability. A report by a committee of UN human rights experts, published in November 2019, warned that China's repression of minority rights posed a security risk to the country through its potential to foster anti-regime sentiment.

### Action Items for U.S. Policymakers and Diplomats

First, the U.S. should seek ways to economically penalize the use of religious prisoners of conscience in factories.

Much of the conversation on Sino-U.S. relations is focused on their respective economic interests, and the way that trade between the two countries should be regulated. The U.S.'s economic interest is a valid concern of its own, but human rights and religious freedom concerns must be included in these discussions as well.

To this end, human rights observers in Washington, D.C. welcomed Customs and Border Protection's public enforcement actions against China's use of forced labor in 2019. More policies against the use of forced labor need to be promulgated. Research suggests that tens of thousands of Uyghurs have been sent to work in factories all across China. The problem of forced labor intersects with the issue of religious freedom in China, and the international community should respond by refusing to financially support these abuses.

Second, the U.S. diplomatic apparatus should work to increase the profile of religious freedom issues in its communications with its Chinese counterparts and with the greater international community.

The importance of consistent and specific diplomatic pressure on the topic of religious freedom has been recognized by multiple administrations. The Obama administration made it standard practice to raise the issue of prisoners of conscience in diplomatic conversations with governments who engage in this practice, and, more recently, the Trump administration issued an executive order on international religious freedom with similar requirements. This kind of diplomatic pressure is important to the overall goal of advancing religious freedom and should certainly be practiced with regard to China.



It is also important that the U.S. leads the global community in a coordinated pressure campaign against China's religious repression. Whether through joint statements, economic policies, or even travel restrictions of offending Chinese officials, a coordinated international effort stands the best chance of creating real change in China. The Global Magnitsky Act has been utilized in this vein already and should continue to be used to pressure China.

Lastly, policymakers in D.C. should rally behind legislation that calls China out for its religious freedom violations and imposes specific consequences for such behavior.

- S.3018 connects CCP status under the International Religious Freedom Act to loans from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
- S.3744 highlights the issue of Uyghur persecution and seeks to impose individual sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for the widespread abuses against the Uyghur community in Xinjiang
- H.R.4331 and S.2539 call for similar sanctions against officials involved in the harassment of the Tibetan community
- H.Res.493 and H.Res.640 condemn the persecution of Chinese Christians

Many other pieces of legislation exist along similar lines, authored by members on both sides of the aisle.

The issue of international religious freedom is one that should be at the core of U.S. interests. Both sides of the political debate agree that China's flagrant disregard for religious freedom must be stopped. It is only by coming together that effective policy will be passed and the U.S. will send a clear message to China that its persecution of religion is unacceptable.

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