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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN CHINA

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

State-Controlled Religion and Religious Freedom Violations in China

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Introduction

The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its government *exercise* comprehensive and extensive control over religion in China through a complex web of state laws, regulations, and policies, which the Party and government agencies implement and enforce at all levels. Central to the CCP's *institutional control* of religion are the seven state-controlled national religious organizations—the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), the Chinese Taoist Association (CTA), the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) and Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China (BCCCC), the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and China Christian Council (CCC), and the Islamic Association of China (IAC)—and their local subsidiaries, often known as “patriotic religious associations.”¹

The CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) and the government's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA)² *supervise* these seven state-controlled religious organizations, which are responsible for managing religious affairs of the five officially recognized religions—Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. Religious groups that belong to one of these five religions must *register* with the government and are subjected to ongoing supervision and control by the seven state-controlled religious organizations, as well as by the government and CCP. Authorities often target for repression independent groups, such as Protestant house churches and underground Catholics, that have refused to join these officially recognized religious organizations.

This factsheet provides an overview of the state-controlled religious organizations and their role and function within China's institutional control of religion, demonstrating their complicity in the government's systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

1 The China Christian Council (CCC) exists alongside the Protestant TSPM as its sister association; together they are often referred to as the “Protestant Two Associations.” The Bishops Conference of Catholic Church in China (BCCCC) exists as the sister association of the Catholic CCPA, and together they are often referred to as the “Catholic One Association One Conference.” According to the Chinese government, as of 2018, there were approximately 5,500 such state-controlled religious organizations throughout the country, including seven at the national level. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfjps/ndhf/37884/Document/1626520/1626520.htm>

2 These state-controlled religious organizations were formerly supervised by SARA, which was previously a constituent department of the State Council (China's central government). In 2018, SARA was absorbed into the CCP's UFWD, thus making SARA and the seven state-controlled religious organizations under direct CCP control. SARA was retained as a front for international engagement purposes. http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-03/21/content_5276191.htm#1



Political Loyalty to the CCP

China's religious regulations and policies explicitly require the loyalty of state-controlled religious organizations to the CCP and to serve its political objectives and interests. As such, the CCP uses these religious organizations as a means to a political end, rather than out of any sense of genuine interest in protecting the religious freedom of communities that the organizations claim to represent. For example, Article 5 of the 2020 [Measures on the Administration of Religious Groups](#) requires state-controlled religious organizations to support and promote the CCP's leadership and its political views. Article 2 demands that such organizations be "patriotic"—a euphemism for political loyalty required of them to the CCP—and serve as connecting "bridges" for the CCP and government to "unite" religious communities. Furthermore, according to Article 15, "political reliability" is a key requirement for leadership positions within state-controlled religious groups.

CCP leader Xi Jinping similarly emphasized these points in his policy speech at the December 2021 [National Religious Work Conference](#), during which he called on state-controlled religious groups to "promote patriotism" and to "continuously enhance [their] identification with the great motherland, the Chinese nation, the Chinese Communist Party, and [Chinese socialism]." Xi also said that representatives of religious groups must be "politically reliable" and able to "play a role during critical times."

Political loyalty to the CCP is also deeply embedded in the bylaws of state-controlled religious organizations. For example, the bylaws of [BAC](#), [CTA](#), [CCPA-BCCCC](#),

[TSPM-CCC](#), and [IAC](#) identify them as "patriotic religious organizations," with an express purpose to "unite and guide" members of their respective religious communities to "support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system."

The Role of State-Controlled Religious Organizations

As state-controlled religious organizations must be politically loyal to the CCP, they are also legally required to assist or work with the CCP and government in promulgating, implementing, and enforcing state laws, regulations, and policies—often at the expense of the religious communities they claim to represent. Religious policies are formulated at the highest level of the CCP and government and filter down through the CCP's UFWD, SARA, and the seven state-controlled national religious organizations—and subsequently to their provincial and local subsidiaries that work closely with their counterparts in local government, law enforcement, and religious affairs bureaus. For example, Article 8 of the revised 2018 [Regulations on Religious Affairs](#) (RRA) mandates state-controlled religious organizations to work with the government in implementing state laws, regulations, and policies.

Similarly, Article 5 of the 2020 [Measures on the Administration of Religious Groups](#) requires these organizations to follow and implement state laws, regulations, and policies, including the CCP's coercive "[sinicization of religion](#)" policies that have led to severe religious freedom violations against the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and other Turkic groups, Protestant house church Christians, and Tibetan Buddhists. Article 17

further mandates these organizations to serve as conduits for CCP propaganda by publicizing information and “educating” their respective religious communities on state laws, regulations, and policies in order to ensure their support and political loyalty for CCP rule and China’s political system. These religious organizations must subject themselves to ongoing supervision, monitoring, and control by relevant CCP and government agencies on a wide variety of religious matters, ranging from the management of religious schools and places of worship to the selection of clergy and other leadership positions (Articles 19–36). Noncompliant groups and individuals run the risk of official punishment, which could range from suspension to administrative or criminal penalties (Articles 37–38).

Following the December 2021 National Religious Work Conference, top leaders of the CCP’s UFWD, SARA, and the state-controlled national religious organizations [convened](#) a meeting to “study and implement” Xi Jinping’s policy speech—calling it “an important political task” for the country’s religious organizations. The conference placed a great emphasis on promoting and implementing the “sinicization of religion” policy and called for “strengthening ideological and political guidance” on religion. It also stressed the importance of “patriotism” and that religious leaders must be “politically reliable.” In addition, the conference called for “resolving prominent religious problems” such as “foreign infiltration activities through using religion”—a euphemism for religions with foreign connections such as Christianity, Islam, and Tibetan Buddhism—and “illegal religious activities,” referring to activities of independent religious groups such as the underground Catholic church and the Protestant house church.

The seven state-controlled religious organizations routinely [organize](#) meetings (often with CCP’s UFWD officials present) and [issue](#) directives to their affiliate religious associations and places of worship, such as mosques and churches, to ensure compliance with the CCP’s religious policies. Nationwide, many state-sanctioned places of worship have been turned into propaganda centers to [enforce](#) the CCP’s ideology and policies. They are forced to [display](#) Communist propaganda posters, including images and quotes of Communist leaders such as Xi Jinping and Mao Zedong, although the display of such images [violates](#) religious principles of some religions. Moreover, state-sanctioned clergy members are forced to [incorporate](#) CCP ideology and policies into their sermons or speeches.

Sinicization of Religion

State-controlled religious organizations play an integral role in the government’s implementation and enforcement of its “sinicization of religion” policies. In recent years, national religious organizations [released](#) their respective “Five-Year [Sinicization Work Plans](#),” which uniformly tasked all state-controlled religious groups with implementing those plans. The work plans share some common themes, including an emphasis on patriotism and loyalty to the CCP and China’s political system, as well as efforts to sinicize the interpretation of religious doctrines, sermons, rituals, and architectural styles of places of worship in order to conform to the CCP’s ideological and policy requirements. Some of these work plans contain sinicization themes that are specific to certain religions, such as “resisting extremism, heresy, cults, and [foreign] infiltration,” as found in the Protestant [TSPM-CCC](#) and the Islamic [IAC](#) work plans.

Official campaigns to sinicize religion have a disproportionately adverse impact on Christianity, Islam, and Tibetan Buddhism—religions which authorities consider to be more foreign and subversive. For example, state-controlled religious organizations have been involved in altering, censoring, and controlling the content of [Christian](#), [Islamic](#), and [Tibetan Buddhist](#) religious texts (such as the [Bible](#) and the Qur’an), [doctrines](#), sermons, and hymns to ensure their alignment with the CCP’s interpretation of religion, policy, and political objectives. These organizations also have been involved in [promoting](#) and [facilitating](#) the government’s sinicization efforts to forcibly [demolish, remove, or modify](#) places of worship (such as mosques, churches, and temples) and architectural styles and religious [symbols](#) (such as crosses and mosque domes) deemed too foreign or insufficiently sinicized.

It is worth noting that state sanction or registration does not exempt religious organizations from government persecution under these policies. For example, demolition campaigns have [included](#) a number of state-sanctioned places of worship, such as the [Sacred Heart Catholic Church](#) in Ghulja (Yili), Xinjiang. Also, state-sanctioned religious leaders who oppose, protest, or resist government policies run the risk of official reprisal, such as the high-profile arrest in January 2017 of [Gu Yuese](#), a former top Zhejiang provincial TSPM-CCC leader and pastor of China’s largest state-sanctioned Protestant church. Government authorities have persecuted him for his public disagreement with these demolition campaigns.

In cooperation with the government, state-controlled religious organizations, like the Protestant TSPM-CCC, have been complicit in [banning](#) independent Protestant house churches and coercing them to [join](#) the state-controlled TSPM-CCC. Such organizations commonly [denounce](#) and harshly persecute as illegal “heretical sects” or “[cults](#)” any group that refuses to join their ranks. The [chilling statement](#) of TSPM chairman Xu Xiaohong—who also [serves](#) as a member of the CCP’s Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)—during a March 2019 CPPCC meeting is illustrative of the CCP’s ruthless determination to sinicize Christianity: “the marks of foreign religion must be mercilessly eradicated from Chinese Christianity.” He further claimed that sinicization is the Chinese church’s “inevitable choice” and the CCP and government’s “ardent hope.”

Sinicization Campaigns in Xinjiang and Tibet

China’s [sinicization and forced assimilation](#) campaigns have treated ethno-religious minority groups such as Uyghurs and Tibetans particularly harshly, with the complicity of state-controlled religious organizations. For example, sinicization campaigns in Xinjiang have led to arbitrary and extrajudicial detention of millions of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in concentration camps, all in the name of “re-education,” “vocational training,” and “fighting terrorism, separatism, and extremism.” The government has [detained](#) hundreds of Muslim religious leaders and scholars, including Muhammad Salih Hajim, the first person who translated the Qur’an into the Uyghur language, who died in one such camp. Moreover, authorities have forced Uyghurs to renounce their Islamic faith, eat pork, and gather to burn copies of the Qur’an. Authorities have also banned traditional Islamic practices such as the wearing of beards and veils. The [U.S. government](#), the U.N. Office of the [High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), the [European Parliament](#), and several other countries’ [parliaments](#) have determined the Chinese government’s abuses of Uyghurs in Xinjiang as amounting to genocide and/or crimes against humanity.

Central and provincial-level CCP and government officials have vowed in meetings with the state-controlled IAC to continue their coercive sinicization policy in Xinjiang, despite growing international criticism and pressure. In September 2022, Wang Yang—then a member of the CCP’s powerful Politburo Standing Committee and CPPCC Chairman—and You Quan—then head of the CCP’s UFWD—met with the IAC’s new leadership team and [called on](#) them to “listen to the Party and follow the Party without ambiguity” and to “further advance the

sinicization of Islam.” Similarly, during a March 2022 [visit](#) to the state-controlled Xinjiang Islamic Association by top Xinjiang Party and government officials, including current Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Ma Xingrui and head of Xinjiang’s UFWD Zumret Obul, Ma called on religious leaders to fully implement the sinicization of Islam.

The state-controlled BAC is involved in sinicization campaigns in Tibet, often implementing them in the name of “anti-separatism” and in connection with the Dalai Lama. Experts are [concerned](#) that the Chinese government’s sinicization policy could [threaten](#) the survival of Tibetan Buddhism. The newly [issued](#) Tibet Autonomous Region Implementing Measures for Regulations on Religious Affairs (effective October 2021) stipulates that religious work must be led by the CCP and guided by Xi Jinping’s political thought. These new measures further mandate that state-controlled religious groups work with the government to spread propaganda on, and to implement, state laws, regulations, and policies—giving the sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism a particular emphasis. In July 2022, the BAC’s subsidiary in Tibet [issued](#) a directive to implement CCP policies that included “advancing the sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism.” The directive vilified the Dalai Lama and called on Tibetan Buddhists to renounce him and his influence on Tibetan Buddhism in order to sinicize the religion. Chinese authorities routinely [crack down](#) on Tibetans for [possessing](#) the Dalai Lama’s pictures and have ordered Tibetans looking for work in the public sector to renounce him as a condition for employment.

Central to the CCP’s sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism is its insistence on [interfering](#) in the reincarnation or selection process of Tibetan Buddhist leaders—including the Dalai Lama—during which the state-controlled BAC plays an integral role. According to [national](#) and provincial-level [regulations on reincarnation](#), the BAC must perform the application and search for, and recognition of, the reincarnation of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders (known in Chinese as “living Buddhas”), and it must receive Chinese government approval. The government has repeatedly [stated](#) its intent to [interfere](#) in the succession process of the Dalai Lama in particular, claiming that it has the ultimate authority to appoint the successor. As a point of reference, the Chinese government forcibly disappeared [Gedhun Choekyi Nyima](#)—the 11th Penchen Lama whom the Dalai Lama recognized in 1995—and installed Gyaltzen Norbu as the state-sanctioned choice. Now a [top leader](#) of the state-controlled BAC and a member of the CPPCC, Gyaltzen Norbu actively [endorses and promotes](#) the CCP’s political rule and its sinicization policy in Tibet.



Conclusion

State-controlled religious organizations remain an integral part of the CCP's institutional control of religion. These organizations are expected to be absolutely loyal to the CCP, to serve as conduits and endorsers of state propaganda, and to facilitate the implementation of the CCP's religious policies—notably the deeply coercive policy on the sinicization of religion.

The integral involvement of these state-controlled religious organizations in such repression renders them complicit in the CCP's systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. On the other hand, these religious organizations are also ironically victims of the CCP's religious policy; they are deprived of genuine practice of religion without state interference, and any perceived disloyalty and public disagreement with the CCP and government leads to severe punishment.

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