

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, China advanced its so-called “sinicization” of religion, a far-reaching strategy to control, govern, and manipulate all aspects of faith into a socialist mold infused with “Chinese characteristics.” The strategy amplifies the Chinese government’s existing pervasive policies that, over time, have intruded into various communities. While the faithful in China are burgeoning, Xinjiang and Tibet increasingly resemble police states, further limiting freedom of religion or belief for Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, respectively, and authorities continue to crack down on unregistered and registered churches and persecute Falun Gong practitioners. In 2017, the Chinese government increasingly targeted religious individuals and organizations

believed to have foreign connections, particularly to Islam and Christianity. Throughout 2017, mounting reports revealed how Chinese authorities use torture against lawyers, human rights defenders, and other prisoners of conscience and those held in detention, often without charge, not only to intimidate, but also to force confessions and compel individuals to renounce their faith. Based on the government’s systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again finds that China merits designation in 2018 as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated China as a CPC since 1999, most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate China as a CPC under IRFA;
- Maintain the existing, ongoing export restrictions to China under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1990 and 1991 (P.L. 101-246);
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Integrate religious freedom and related human rights strategies into the bilateral relationship, including in annual dialogues and in both public and private fora, and across all U.S. government agencies and entities, and devise aspects tailored to specific communities, including:
 - Appoint and confirm a Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues and urge the Chinese government to resume dialogue with the Tibetan people;
 - Meet with house church leaders and advocates, both at their houses of worship and at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and U.S. consulates in China;
 - Call on the Chinese government to cease equating Islam with terrorism, separatism, extremism, or other perceived threats to state security; and
 - Call on the Chinese government to cease labeling Falun Gong as a cult and lift the ban on its practice;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and religious freedom advocates, and press the Chinese government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, lawyers, and adequate medical care from independent health care professionals, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Press the Chinese government to abide by its commitments under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and also independently investigate reports of torture among individuals detained or imprisoned, including reports of organ harvesting; and
- Press China to uphold its international obligations to protect North Korean asylum seekers crossing its borders, including by allowing the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees and international humanitarian organizations to assist them, and by ending repatriations, which are in violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol and/or the Convention against Torture.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Cosponsor and approve the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2017 (H.R. 1872/S. 821);
- Send regular Congressional delegations focused on religious freedom and related human rights to China and request to visit areas deeply impacted by the government’s severe religious freedom abuses, such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Zhejiang Province; and
- Advocate on behalf of individual prisoners of conscience and persons whom the Chinese government has detained or disappeared, as well as their family members.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

People's Republic of China

GOVERNMENT

Communist State

POPULATION

1,379,000,000+

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism; officially atheist

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

18.2% Buddhist

5.1% Christian

1.8% Muslim

21.9% Folk religions

52.2% Unaffiliated

OTHER GROUPS

Taoist, Hindu, Jewish, and others

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

In 2017, China's Communist Party held its 19th Party Congress, not only securing Xi Jinping's place as president for at least the next five years, but also enshrining in the Party constitution (and subsequently the country's constitution) "Xi Jinping Thought," a framework that marries Party policy with his personal and political ideology and elevates him among the Party's pantheon of leaders. With this set of guiding principles, along with the so-called "sinicization" of religion, Beijing and the Communist Party aim to fortify their ever-growing stranglehold on religion. For instance, Chinese authorities increasingly use the term "cult" to describe religious organizations, including several Christian groups, such as the Church of Almighty God, and the Falun Gong. Also, in September 2017 China released new Regulations on Religious Affairs that draw a strong correlation between religion and religious extremism, and also between religious activities and terrorist activities, including separatism. The regulations, which came into effect after the reporting period on February 1, 2018, introduce new government oversight of online discussions, increase fines (e.g., for those who organize unsanctioned religious events), and explicitly restrict unregistered groups from establishing religious schools or taking part in trainings or meetings overseas. Wang Zuoran, then head of the State Administration for

Religious Affairs (SARA), explained that the new law was necessary in light of "the foreign use of religion to infiltrate [China] . . . and [the spread of] religious extremist thought." Religious organizations that refuse to register with the state could be declared illegal and their clergy subject to criminal punishment.

Throughout 2017, the Chinese government continued to target lawyers, human rights defenders, and other advocates. By the end of the reporting period, nearly 300 individuals had been arrested, detained, or disappeared as part of a nationwide crackdown that began on July 9, 2015 (also known as the 709 Crackdown). On August 13, 2017, human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng—known for defending Christians, Falun Gong practitioners, and others—was disappeared and remained in secret detention at the end of the reporting period; reports indicated he may have first escaped house arrest before police captured him. Authorities have disappeared, imprisoned, and tortured Gao on numerous occasions, in part because he has chronicled China's myriad human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations. In November 2017, a court sentenced Christian human rights lawyer and advocate Jiang Tianyong to two years in prison for allegedly "inciting subversion of state power." As permitted under Chinese law, authorities held him in secret for six months before formally arresting him. His wife, Jin Bianling, alleges he was tortured in deten-

tion, an accusation Chinese authorities refuted. Authorities similarly rebuffed lawyer Xie Yang's claims of torture and released him on bail in May 2017 after he retracted his statements about police torture; since Xie's release, a court in December 2017 found him guilty of "subverting state power" but did not issue any additional punishment. Xie is one of three human rights activists—along with Hu Shigen and Zhou Shifeng—whom the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention recommended in October 2017 for immediate release. Mounting evidence of prisoner torture tempered the otherwise good news of the release of brothers and human rights lawyers Li Chunfu and Li Heping in January and May 2017, respectively; Li Heping was released on a suspended sentence and deprived of his political rights. Authorities rounded up both men in the 709 Crackdown, and at the end of the reporting period, both were suffering the ill effects of being forcibly medicated and brutally tortured during their detentions.

Numerous advocates and international figures have called on the Chinese government to cease its surveillance of and restrictions on Liu Xia, the wife of Nobel Peace Prize laureate and democracy advocate Liu Xiaobo who died in custody in July 2017 after Chinese authorities denied him adequate medical treatment for his liver cancer. He had been serving an 11-year sentence for allegedly "inciting subversion of state power." At the end of the reporting period, authorities continued to keep Liu Xia under unlawful house arrest.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Uighur Muslims

In 2017, authorities in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region instituted new and intrusive measures to further restrict Uighur (also spelled Uyghur) Muslims' basic human rights. These measures include discriminatory profiling at newly built armed checkpoints and police stations; travel restrictions both within and outside of China; increased security staff and financing; and the use of Global Positioning System (GPS) tracking systems, facial and iris recognition, DNA sampling, and voice pattern sampling to target Uighur Muslims.

This occurred in the context of ongoing restrictions, such as bans on fasting during Ramadan, prohibitions on children under 18 going to mosques, and authorities' efforts to diminish the Uighur language. In April 2017, new regional legislation identified 15 types of behavior the government views as extremist, such as wearing an "abnormal" beard, wearing a veil, or following halal practices (Muslim dietary laws). Also in April 2017, authorities applied across the region a list of banned Islamic baby names considered "extreme,"

later expanding it further to all children under the age of 16. Authorities also monitor Uighurs' phones for political and religious content and regularly confiscate religious materials such as prayer mats and Qur'ans. During Rama-

dan 2017, authorities embedded Party cadres in Uighur homes to ensure that Muslims did not fast or pray.

In addition to enhanced restrictions, in 2017 the Chinese government took unprecedented steps to round up Uighur Muslims both at home and abroad and force them into so-called "reeducation camps"; by the end of the reporting period, thousands of Uighur Muslims were believed to be in these government-run camps. Throughout 2017, Beijing ordered Uighur students studying abroad to return to their hometowns, in some cases detaining students' family members in Xinjiang. Citing the need to investigate their political views, authorities disappeared or jailed some students upon their return. Some students studying in Egypt stayed there or attempted to flee to other countries; beginning on July 4, 2017, and at the request of the Chinese government, Egyptian authorities detained approximately 200 Uighur students, some of whom were later released, while others were deported or imprisoned, or their whereabouts are unknown.

Uighur Muslims are not the only detainees in the reeducation camp system. During 2017, Chinese authorities in Xinjiang increasingly targeted Kazakh and Kyrgyz Muslims for their purported close ties to Uighur Muslims, raiding homes and businesses, restricting travel, and reportedly forcing some into the camps.

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The Chinese government regularly targets Uighur advocates and their families. In July 2017, Italian police detained Dolkun Isa—a German citizen originally from Xinjiang and current president of the Munich-based World Uyghur Congress—on his way to speak before the Italian Senate about the Chinese government’s restrictions against the Uighur people; police released him after several hours. The incident occurred just months after UN security in New York City removed Isa from an official UN meeting about indigenous peoples and rights, an event for which he was registered; UN security never explained his removal nor why they barred him from later reentering the building, and supporters believe it occurred under pressure from the Chinese government. In October 2017, reports surfaced that Chinese officials had detained as many as 30 relatives of Rebiya Kadeer, a prominent leader among the Uighur people and a former political prisoner. Also, Uighur Muslim prisoners commonly receive

unfair trials and harsh treatment in prison. Well-known Uighur scholar Ilham Tohti is currently serving a life sentence after being found guilty in 2014 of separatism in a two-day trial that human rights advocates called a sham. In November 2017, Professor Tohti was awarded Liberal International’s Prize for Freedom at a ceremony at The Hague. Gulmira Imin, who was a local government employee at the time of her arrest, also continues to serve a life sentence for her alleged role organizing protests in the regional capital, Urumqi, in July 2009—an allegation she denies. Throughout the year, USCIRF advocated on behalf of Ms. Imin as part of the Commission’s Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project.

Tibetan Buddhists

The Chinese government continues to pursue a strategy of antagonism and hostility toward Tibetan Buddhists and the Dalai Lama. Authorities control monks’ and nuns’ education, decide whether religious venues can be built or repaired, and restrict religious gatherings. In 2017, authorities confiscated Tibetans’ passports and regularly refused to issue them new ones, in part to restrict their travel to attend religious ceremonies and

celebrations overseas. Ahead of and during the October 2017 19th Party Congress, the Chinese government reportedly increased the security presence in the Tibet Autonomous Region and certain counties of Qinghai Province and imposed travel restrictions in various counties of Sichuan Province.

The Chinese government accuses the Dalai Lama of blasphemy and “splittism” and cracks down on anyone suspected of so-called separatist activities. Monks and nuns who refuse to denounce the Dalai Lama or pledge loyalty to Beijing have been expelled from their monasteries, imprisoned, and tortured. Chinese officials continued to protest foreign officials meeting the Dalai Lama, including a planned August 2017 visit to Botswana,

which the Dalai Lama later canceled due to exhaustion. During 2017, authorities released several Tibetans from prison before they served their full sentences; however, many others continue to languish in prison.

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For example, reports in December 2017 indicated that Tibetan monk Choekyi’s health was declining in prison; he is serving a four-year sentence after being arrested for celebrating the Dalai Lama’s birthday. Also, renowned Tibetan language advocate Tashi Wangchuk faced a one-day trial in January 2018, after the reporting period, connected to his March 2016 arrest and January 2017 indictment on separatism charges; the judge did not issue a verdict, but Mr. Tashi could face up to 15 years in prison.

One prisoner whose whereabouts have been a secret for more than two decades is Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. Selected by the Dalai Lama at the age of six as the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun holds the second-highest position in Tibetan Buddhism. Throughout the year, USCIRF advocated on behalf of the Panchen Lama as part of the Commission’s Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project. Dialogues between Beijing and the Dalai Lama have been stalled since January 2010. In protest of repressive government policies, at least 152 Tibetans have self-immolated since February 2009, including two Tibetan monks, Tenga and Jamyang Losal, who both died in 2017 from injuries related to their self-immolations.

In 2017, the Chinese government intensified the pervasive presence of Communist Party officials at Buddhist sites: at the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in Tibet, new restrictions and checkpoints and Party cadres were installed in top positions to oversee so-called “patriotic education” classes. Through June 2017, the government’s increased control and interference at Larung Gar led to the destruction of more than 4,700 structures, including homes, and the eviction of more than 4,800 monks and nuns. In August 2017, authorities commenced another phase of similar demolitions and evictions at the Yachen Gar Buddhist Center. Authorities reportedly had plans to demolish approximately 2,000 homes and expel 2,000 monks and nuns from Yachen Gar.

Christians

In 2017, the Chinese government escalated its efforts to prevent Protestant churches from operating outside the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). As a result, unregistered churches were pressured to register with the state, labeled as “evil cults,” and faced ongoing destruction of purportedly “illegal” church properties. Churches experienced increased restrictions and surveillance, including a campaign to install security cameras on church premises, primarily in Zhejiang Province. Local authorities also used physical violence against parishioners trying to save their churches, such as

in June 2017 at Shuangmiao Christian Church in Henan Province where authorities beat and detained parishioners. Observers note that some language in the new Regulations on Religious Affairs appears to target the existence and activities

of unregistered churches. While most persecution occurs outside the official TSPM, officially sanctioned churches also have faced property destruction and cross removal, such as in September 2017 at the state-sanctioned Holy Grace Protestant Church in Henan Province.

Authorities continued to harass, arrest, interrogate, and detain clergy and parishioners. For example, authorities in Xinjiang raided house churches, confiscated religious paraphernalia, and arrested several dozen Christians. In February 2017, a court sentenced former

deacon Zhang Xiuhong of the Living Stone Church—an unregistered Protestant house church in Guizhou Province—to five years in prison for alleged “illegal business operations.” In August 2017, authorities released Zhang, though she will face restrictions as she serves the balance of her five-year suspended sentence. Her sentencing came just one month after Pastor Yang Hua—also known as Li Guozhi—of the Living Stone Church was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for allegedly “divulging state secrets”; in March 2017, Pastor Yang was hospitalized, and his family and fellow parishioners remain concerned about his health in prison.

Authorities’ mistreatment of clergy extends to state-sanctioned TSPM churches. In December 2017, authorities unexpectedly released former Pastor Joseph Gu Yueese from prison and dropped the embezzlement charges against him. In addition to arresting him multiple times, state officials dismissed Gu from his post as pastor at Chongyi Church, a Protestant, state-run megachurch in Zhejiang Province, and removed him from his role with the local state-run China Christian Council. In 2017, reports surfaced that authorities have tortured Pastor Zhang Shaojie of the state-sanctioned Nanle County Christian Church; Pastor Zhang is serving 12 years in prison for “gathering a crowd to disrupt public order.” The government’s growing restrictions on state-run churches and clergy further exemplifies

its expansive control over Protestantism in China.

The year 2017 marked 60 years since the establishment of the state-run Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). Despite overtures by Pope Francis and other Catholic

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officials and reports of an agreement, talks between Beijing and the Vatican about appointing bishops remained unresolved at the end of the reporting period. China has stipulated that the Vatican must cut relations with Taiwan and agree not to interfere in China’s internal affairs. For instance, China accused the Vatican of interfering when the latter expressed “grave concern” about authorities’ May 2017 detention of Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of Wenzhou. Reportedly, this was Bishop Shao’s fourth detention since September 2016; the government has pressured him

to join the CCPA since he is recognized by the Vatican and not Beijing. In early January 2018, shortly after the reporting period, authorities released him.

Falun Gong

Since 1999, the Chinese government has banned the practice of Falun Gong, labeling it an “evil cult” under article 300 of China’s Criminal Law. Falun Gong’s 18-year persecution was initiated by then President Jiang Zemin, who also created the infamous 610 Office, an extrajudicial security apparatus wholly designed to eradicate Falun Gong. Authorities regularly target Falun Gong practitioners and force them into labor camps or prisons; many disappear without being heard from again. While detained, Falun Gong practitioners suffer psychiatric and other medical experimentation, unnecessary medical tests, sexual assault/violence, torture, and organ harvesting, often as efforts to force them to renounce their faith. Authorities have detained some Falun Gong practitioners multiple times. For example, on September 19, 2017, police in Nanjing detained Ma Zhenyu, who had been arrested five times previously for practicing Falun Gong, served time in prison, and was subjected to multiple interrogations and torture. Also in 2017, authorities continued to monitor Falun Gong practitioner and former prisoner of conscience Zhiwen Wang, restricting his freedom of movement and preventing him from reuniting with his family in the United States.

In February 2017, human rights advocates objected to a Chinese official’s prominent role at the Vatican’s Pontifical Academy of Sciences’ Summit on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism. Although China claims it ended the practice of harvesting organs from prisoners (many of whom are believed to be Falun Gong practitioners or other religious followers) on January 1, 2015, advocates believe the practice has continued. Dr. Huang Jiefu, a surgeon and former vice minister for health, represented China at the summit and spoke of China’s attempts to reform its organ transplant systems and processes; however, critics noted his direct role in performing transplant surgeries and directing China’s transplant program. In July 2017,

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the World Organization to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong (WOIPFG) added updated information to its list of more than 37,000 organizations and 80,000 individuals believed to have persecuted Falun Gong practitioners; the newest additions include government officials from the Ministry of State Security, as well as personnel from the 610 Office, public security, and the judiciary.

Forced Repatriation of North Korean Refugees

Each time it forcibly returns individuals to North Korea without evaluating each person’s case to determine whether they qualify for refugee status, China violates its obligations under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. In 2017, China detained dozens of North Koreans, and far more likely went unrecorded.

Among those China not only detained but also arrested were a mother and her four-year-old son who fled North Korea via China en route to join her husband in South Korea; the pair were among a

group of 10 defectors whom China forcibly repatriated to North Korea in November 2017. In 2017, Chinese officials also arrested two South Korean pastors and forcibly removed more than 60 South Korean Christians after alleging the individuals acted as missionaries for their work assisting North Korean refugees in China.

U.S. POLICY

In 2017, the United States and China conducted reciprocal high-level visits. At the April 2017 meeting between President Donald Trump and President Xi in Florida, the two leaders modified the structure of the relationship, elevating bilateral talks to a U.S.-China Comprehensive Dialogue with four pillars: the Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, the Comprehensive Economic Dialogue, the Law Enforcement and Cybersecurity Dialogue, and the Social and Cultural Issues Dialogue. In a statement following the visit, the White House reported that President Trump raised “protecting human rights and other values.” In November 2017, while in Beijing giving remarks during his first official visit to China, President

Trump said that “the United States also continues to advocate for reforms that advance economic freedom, individual rights, and the rule of law.”

In past years, the United States joined in several multilateral letters and statements critiquing China’s human rights record, including at least two instances in 2016. The United States was not among the signatories to a February 2017 letter to China’s Minister of Public Security about the detention and torture of human rights lawyers, but a U.S. Embassy spokesperson noted that the embassy regularly raises human rights concerns with China, “including raising individual cases of people in China who have been harassed, detained without trial and allegedly tortured.” Also, while describing his March 2017 visit to Beijing, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, “And I made clear that the United States will continue to advocate for universal values such as human rights and religious freedom.” The State Department similarly raised concerns, for example, in June 2017 when it worsened China’s ranking in the 2017 Trafficking in Persons Report, downgrading it to the Tier 3 level, in part for its use of North Korean forced laborers and forcible repatriation of North Korean asylum-seekers. Also, in July 2017 then Secretary Tillerson issued a statement noting the “tragic passing” of well-known dissident Liu Xiaobo and calling on the Chinese government to “release Liu Xia from house arrest and allow her to depart China, according to her wishes.” On June 29 and August 22, 2017, the Treasury Department sanctioned Chinese individuals and companies that conduct business with North Korea. And on December 21, 2017, President Trump imposed sanctions on Gao Yan under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (P.L. 114-328, Subtitle F). The Treasury Department’s press release identifies Gao Yan as director of the Beijing Public Security Bureau Chaoyang Branch where human rights activist Cao Shunli died in custody in March 2014; authorities denied her access to medical treatment and legal representation. With respect to freedom of religion or belief, in August 2017 then Secretary Tillerson noted China’s abuse of religious freedom in his public remarks at the launch of the 2016 International Religious Freedom Report, specifically naming violations against Falun Gong practitioners, Uighur Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists.

The State Department last redesignated China as a CPC in December 2017. At the same time, then Secretary Tillerson extended the existing sanctions related to restrictions on exports of crime control and detection instruments and equipment.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER TENZIN DORJEE

The reincarnation system is unique to the Nalanda Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the highest reincarnation of Tibet followed by His Holiness the Panchen Lama. The Chinese leadership has disappeared Panchen Gedhun Choekyi Nyima for over twenty years and he will be 29 on April 25, 2018. Unfortunately, Communist China controls and manipulates the reincarnation system of Tibet for political agenda and domination. Chinese leadership simply awaits the demise of the Dalai Lama to select his next reincarnation. For religious freedom and the return of His Holiness to Tibet, to date, 152 Tibetans self-immolated, including six in 2017. His Holiness the Dalai Lama meanwhile seeks to resolve Sino-Tibetan issues nonviolently through the mutually beneficial Middle Way Approach. His Holiness seeks a genuine autonomy for all of Tibet, within China’s federation, to preserve her distinctive identity, language, religions, culture and traditions. If China looks at the Tibet issue from all angles, she can become more open and receptive to resolve it for the good of all. However, if the Tibet issue remains unresolved, His Holiness said it clearly, as early as in the 80s, that he will reincarnate in a free country, not under China’s control of Tibet, to continue his unfinished work. In this regard, China cannot control the next Dalai Lama and the Tibet issue will continue over generations. In accordance with the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002, the U.S. government should engage China internationally and multilaterally to resolve the Tibet issue for regional and global peace and stability.