



CHINA

Key Findings

China's severe religious freedom violations continued in 2015. While the Chinese government sought to further assert itself on the global stage, at home it pursued policies to diminish the voices of individuals and organizations advocating for human rights and genuine rule of law. During the past year, as in recent years, the central and/or provincial governments continued to forcibly remove crosses and bulldoze churches; implement a discriminatory and at times violent crackdown on Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists and their rights; and harass, imprison, or otherwise detain Falun Gong practitioners, human rights defenders, and others. Based on the continuation of this long-standing trend of religious freedom violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2016 that China be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for its systematic, egregious, and ongoing abuses. The State Department has designated China as a CPC since 1999, most recently in July 2014.

Background

The past year was marked by the Chinese government's deliberate and unrelenting crackdown on human rights and dissent. This crackdown transpired while the government considered new laws to bolster its power and reach, such as a national security law enacted July 1 and a terrorism law adopted on December 28. China's leadership has long justified its harsh policies, including against Uighur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and others, by asserting the importance of confronting the so-called "three evils" – separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism. In 2015, the Chinese Communist Party tightened its internal ideology, elevating the crusade against the three evils, particularly with respect to religious freedom.

During the past year, the government increased its targeting of human rights lawyers and dissidents, some of whom advocated for religious freedom or

represented individuals of various beliefs. In July, authorities across China undertook a sweeping dragnet rounding up lawyers and human rights defenders, including religious freedom advocates, with nearly 300 arrested, detained, or disappeared. Many of these individuals came under government suspicion precisely because they chose to represent politically-undesirable religious groups, such as Uighur Muslims, unregistered Christian leaders and members, and Falun Gong practitioners. While most were released, the location of a few individuals remains unknown and additional detentions and arrests continue. Among those criminally detained or facing charges of subversion or endangering state security are Wang Yu, Li Heping, and Zhang Kai, human rights lawyers known for defending Falun Gong practitioners, Christians, and others. China also punished individuals exercising their right to free speech, such as human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang, who in December was handed a three-year suspended sentence for "picking quarrels" and "inciting ethnic hatred" in a series of social messages critical of the government's policies.

Those following one of China's five officially recognized religions – Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism – and affiliated with one of the corresponding state-sanctioned "patriotic religious associations" are protected in theory from the government's crackdown on religion. However, the continued imprisonment of Pastor Zhang Shaojie of the state-registered Nanle County Christian Church demonstrates that state recognition is no guarantee of protection. The government continued to accuse individuals and religious organizations of engaging in so-called "cult" activities. Underground house churches are particularly vulnerable to these accusations; Buddhist leader Wu Zeheng received a life sentence in October for his alleged involvement in a cult.

The Chinese Communist Party officially is atheist and took steps in 2015 to ensure that Party members

reject religion or belief. More than half of China's population is unaffiliated with any religion or belief. There are nearly 300 million Chinese who practice some form of folk religion; more than 246 million Buddhists; at least 68 million Christians; nearly 25 million Muslims; and less than 3.6 million apiece practice Hinduism, Judaism, or Taoism.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2015–2016

Uighur Muslims

In January 2015, Chinese authorities extended their “strike hard” anti-terror campaign launched in 2014 that imposed wide-scale restrictions against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. In addition to increased arrests for alleged terrorist activities and the presence of additional troops, security forces reportedly closed religious schools and local authorities continued to crack down on various forms of allegedly “extremist” religious expression, such as beards for men and face-covering veils for women. Local authorities in parts of Xinjiang also threatened action against Muslim business owners if they declined to sell alcohol and cigarettes based on their religious beliefs and traditions. As in years past, officials banned the observance of Ramadan, taking steps to prevent party officials, public servants, and students from fasting. In July 2015, the government of Thailand forcibly repatriated 109 Uighur Muslims to China, reportedly due to Chinese pressure.

an attempt to recruit global support for his campaign of repression against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, President Xi Jinping accused the international community of double standards in its response to perceived terrorism within China. This perspective diminishes the connection between the Chinese government's harsh repression and the actions of some Uighur Muslims: the crackdown has led to the detention or deaths of hundreds and possibly thousands of Uighur Muslims as well as instability and insecurity, fueling resentment and the very extremism the government claims it is trying to quell.

Beijing's attempt to control messaging about its treatment of Uighur Muslims reached beyond its own borders. In December 2015, China expelled French journalist Ursula Gauthier for her writings challenging the government's claims regarding Uighur terrorism. While other foreign journalists have been expelled or denied visas in the past, Gauthier's expulsion was the first in several years. Also in December, China released Rexim and Shawket Hoshur, brothers of American journalist Shohret Hoshur; they had been detained since August 2014 and charged with, but not convicted of, endangering state security. The charges against them and a third brother who is still detained were a means to punish Shohret for his reporting on Xinjiang. Though the two brothers' release is a positive step, all three brothers' detentions reflect the Chinese government's increasing willingness to employ extra-judicial methods and spurious charges to retaliate against individuals and their

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China continued to deny that its repressive policies toward Uighur Muslims contribute to the community's discontent and at times aggressive reaction. Following the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, China equated its own experience with so-called Uighur separatists with the situation faced by France concerning the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Days later, Chinese police killed 28 Uighurs the government suspected of involvement in a September 2015 coal mine attack in Xinjiang that killed more than 50, mostly Han Chinese. In

family members who criticize its repressive policies in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

Tibetan Buddhists

In 2015, the Chinese government maintained tight control of Tibetan Buddhists, strictly monitoring and suppressing their cultural and religious practices. Government-led raids on monasteries continued, and Chinese party officials in Tibet infiltrated monasteries with Communist Party propaganda. Reports

indicated increased government interference in the education and training of young Buddhist monks. In protest of these and other repressive policies, at least 143 Tibetans have self-immolated since February 2009. Buddhist leader Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, who had been serving a 20-year sentence, died in prison in July 2015. Supporters of the popular monk maintained he was falsely accused of separatism and terrorism, and there were reports that police opened fire on a group of supporters who had gathered in his memory. Chinese authorities cremated Tenzin Delek Rinpoche's body against his family's wishes and Buddhist practice, leading many to suspect foul play in his death. Also, authorities subsequently detained his sister and niece for nearly two weeks after they requested his body be turned over to them.

The past year was marked by several notable anniversaries: the 80th birthday of the Dalai Lama, the 50th anniversary of Beijing's control over the Tibet Autonomous Region, and the 20th anniversary of the disappearance of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, also known as the Panchen Lama. Abducted at the age of six, the Panchen Lama has been held in secret by the Chinese government for more than two decades. Also in 2015, the government accused the Dalai Lama of "blasphemy" for suggesting he would not select a successor or reincarnate, effectively ending the line of succession; Beijing also reiterated its own authority to select the next Dalai Lama.

Protestants and Catholics

In May 2015, authorities in Zhejiang Province circulated draft regulations governing the color, size and location of religious signs, symbols, and structures. While the regulations apply to all religious markers, the move aligned with provincial officials' systematic efforts in recent years to forcibly remove church crosses in Zhejiang Province, an area with a high concentration of Christians. Officially branded the "Three Rectifications and One Demolition" campaign, Chinese authorities use the pretext of building code violations to target houses of worship, particularly churches, as illegal structures. By some estimates, the number of cross removals and church demolitions totaled at least 1,500, and many who opposed these acts were arrested. The campaign reached such intensity in 2015 that even government-approved churches and the provincial arms

of the government-run Catholic Patriotic Association and Protestant Christian Council publicly expressed alarm, including in a public letter written by the government-appointed bishop of Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province and co-signed by several priests.

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Although Chinese authorities released several parishioners and pastors throughout the year, they continued to summon, question, detain, and even arrest clergy and parishioners of unregistered house churches, such as at Huoshi Church in Guizhou Province. In January 2015, local officials informed the family of imprisoned Bishop Cosmas Shi Enxiang that he had died. At the time of his reported death, the underground bishop had been imprisoned, without charges, for 14 years at a secret location, in addition to previous imprisonments and hard labor. In March, a court sentenced Pastor Huang Yizi to one year in prison for trying to protect the cross at Salvation Church in Zhejiang Province from removal. Additionally, as noted above, human rights lawyers often are targeted for assisting religious followers. For example, prior to a meeting with U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom David Saperstein in August 2015, Chinese authorities seized human rights lawyer Zhang Kai. Mr. Zhang is known for his work on behalf of those affected by the church demolitions and cross removals in Zhejiang Province and previously represented Pastor Huang. Following six months of being held without charge – likely at one of China's notorious "black jail" facilities known for their use of torture – Zhang Kai was criminally detained in February 2016.

The Vatican and China continued their ongoing formal dialogues, including a Vatican delegation's visit to China in October 2015. During the year, the Vatican reportedly suggested a compromise regarding the selection and approval of bishops in China, though the government of China has not agreed. While some

positive developments transpired – Bishop Wu Qin-jing was installed, Bishop Zhang Yinlin was ordained, and the Vatican approved Bishop-designee Tang Yuange – China still insists it has the authority to appoint bishops independent of the Holy See.

Falun Gong

In 2015, thousands of Falun Gong practitioners reportedly were arrested or sent to brainwashing centers or other detention facilities. Brainwashing centers are a form of extralegal detention known to involve acts of torture. Based on statements from Chinese health officials, the long-standing practice of harvesting organs from prisoners was to end on January 1, 2015. However, many human rights advocates believe the practice continues. Imprisoned Falun Gong practitioners are particularly targeted for organ harvesting. Li Chang, a former government official sentenced to prison for his involvement in a peaceful Falun Gong demonstration, is among the countless Falun Gong practitioners who remain imprisoned at the end of the reporting period. The Chinese government continued to deny Wang Zhiwen a passport or the ability to travel freely to receive proper medical care following the torture he endured during his 15 years in prison. Chinese authorities denied a visa and barred entry into mainland China to Anastasia Lin, a human rights advocate and Falun Gong practitioner. As Miss World Canada 2015, Ms. Lin was scheduled to participate in the Miss World event held in China in December 2015.

Forced Repatriation of North Korean Refugees

During its 2015 review of China's record, the UN Committee against Torture recommended that the Chinese government cease its practice of forcibly repatriating North Korean refugees. In its report, the Committee noted it had obtained "over 100 testimonies from North Koreans . . . indicating that persons forcibly repatriated . . . are systematically subjected to torture and ill-treatment." This violates China's obligations under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and its 1969 Protocol. China claims North Koreans entering China without permission are economic migrants, but does so without evaluating each individual's case to determine whether they qualify for refugee status. For example, in October 2015, nine North Korean refugees, including a one-year-old infant, were discovered in Vietnam along

the Northeast border with China and transferred to Chinese police. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, among others, called on China and Vietnam to disclose their whereabouts. To date, no information has been made available, and human rights organizations fear they have already been returned to North Korea.

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U.S. Policy

On January 6, 2016, North Korea reported it had detonated a hydrogen bomb. While the claims were largely discredited, the international community – including the United States and China – responded swiftly. Secretary of State John Kerry discussed the matter with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing, and while the two sides agreed a response was necessary, they differed on the approach and the degree to which sanctions should be applied. The two also discussed China's activity in the South China Sea. By February, Congress advanced legislation imposing both mandatory and discretionary sanctions against individuals conducting certain kinds of business with North Korea. The UN Security Council considered new sanctions against North Korea in light of the nuclear test and the country's announced plans to launch a satellite, both in violation of Security Council resolutions.

In 2015, the United States and China conducted several bilateral dialogues, including the Strategic & Economic Dialogue (S&ED) in June and the resumption of the Human Rights Dialogue (HRD) in August, both held in Washington, DC. At the S&ED, the two countries reached agreements on climate change, ocean conservation, global health, counterterrorism cooperation, and other matters of bilateral interest. At the HRD, the head of the U.S. delegation, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Tom Malinowski, discussed several religious freedom issues,

including the treatment of Christians, Uighur Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists.

In September 2015, President Xi Jinping made his first visit to the United States since becoming president in 2013. Human rights organizations widely condemned Xi's high-profile visit. At a joint press conference with Xi, President Barack Obama said that the discussions during Xi's visit included human rights and religious freedom issues, such as the United States' concerns about forcibly closed churches, the treatment of ethnic minorities, and the importance of preserving Tibetan religious and cultural identity.

Throughout the year, United States raised a number of human rights issues with China both publicly and privately, including individual cases. For example, the U.S. Department of State expressed concern and/or condemnation about the detention of women activists and human rights defenders and also the forced repatriation of Uighur Muslims by Thailand. The Department of State also expressed sadness over the death in prison of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche and called for Pu Zhiqiang's suspended sentence to be vacated. Along with other Administration visits to China, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom David Saperstein visited the country in August 2015. At the October release of the 2014 Report on International Religious Freedom, Ambassador Saperstein mentioned human rights lawyer Zhang Kai, who was detained by Chinese authorities one day prior to meeting with the Ambassador.

Recommendations

China's approach to religious freedom and related human rights does not comply with international standards. At the same time, China increasingly flouts these standards as it grows more assertive on the global stage and seeks to assume the mantle of world leadership. To reinforce to China that such leadership must go hand-in-hand with the respect for and protection of religious freedom and related human rights, the U.S. government consistently should integrate human rights messaging – and specifically religious freedom – throughout its interactions with China. In addition to recommending the U.S. government continue to designate China as a CPC, USCIRF recommends the U.S. government should:

- Continue to raise consistently religious freedom concerns at the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic

Dialogue and other high-level bilateral meetings with Chinese leaders, and encourage Chinese authorities to refrain from conflating peaceful religious activity with terrorism or threats to state security;

- Urge the Chinese government to release prisoners of conscience who have been detained, sentenced, or placed under house arrest for the peaceful exercise of their faith, and continue to raise individual prisoner cases;
- Initiate a “whole-of-government” approach to human rights diplomacy with China in which the State Department and National Security Council staff develop a human rights action plan for implementation across all U.S. government agencies and entities, including developing targeted talking points and prisoner lists, and providing support for all U.S. delegations visiting China;
- Increase staff attention to U.S. human rights diplomacy and the rule of law, including the promotion of religious freedom, at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and U.S. consulates in China, including by gathering the names of specific officials and state agencies who perpetrate religious freedom abuses;
- Convey more directly U.S. concerns about severe religious freedom violations in China, impose targeted travel bans, asset freezes, and other penalties on specific officials who perpetrate religious freedom abuses—as permitted by IRFA;
- Press China to uphold its international obligations to protect North Korean asylum seekers crossing its borders, including by allowing the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 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; and
- Encourage the Broadcasting Board of Governors to use appropriated funds to advance Internet freedom and protect Chinese activists by supporting the development and accessibility of new technologies and programs to counter censorship.