WHAT IS THE CHINA DISSENT MONITOR?

The China Dissent Monitor (CDM) collects and shares information about the frequency and diversity of dissent in the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was created in response to the information gap resulting from media restrictions in the PRC and risks associated with collecting information from within the country about dissent and protest. The project prioritizes capturing offline collective action in public spaces, though cases of less public and online dissent are also included to illustrate diversity among dissent actions. Sources for the CDM database include news reports, civil society organizations, and PRC-based social media, including the application of a machine-learning algorithm developed by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Doublethink Lab. See the full dataset and methodology at chinadissent.net.

HIGHLIGHTS

• Over 950 dissent events recorded during the fourth quarter of 2023. During the fourth quarter of 2023, CDM logged 952 dissent events, a 30 and 50 percent increase over the previous two quarters, respectively, suggesting an increasing amount of protest in China. Labor (61 percent) and housing (17 percent) protests were most frequently recorded. The remaining 22 percent involve issues such as environmental concerns, school safety, fraud, land disputes and forced demolition, and religious freedom. About 18 percent (172) of events occurred in Guangdong Province, followed by Henan, Shandong, Shaanxi, and Sichuan. CDM has altogether collected 4,638 dissent events since June 2022, of which 2,465 are fully coded and available on the CDM website.

• Protests linked to school safety issues. During this reporting period, CDM documented 30 cases of parents and others protesting the deaths of students while at public schools and universities, often spurred by distrust of government investigation of or response to these incidents.

• 200 cases of religious dissent. CDM has collected 200 total cases of religious adherents practicing or sharing their faith despite restrictions against these activities since June 2022. Occurring across 29 provinces or regions of the PRC, the majority (163) involved Falun Gong practitioners, 23 involved Christians, 11 involved Tibetan Buddhists, and three involved Muslims. Nearly all of the activities (94 percent) resulted in repression, underscoring the continued risks that people face for peacefully practicing religion in the country.

• Residents protest against waste disposal facilities. In 24 cases across 16 cities, CDM documented demonstrations by residents against the health and environmental impacts of waste facilities. Despite repression of 42 percent of these events, protestors achieved some form of concession in at least three cases.

• Per capita repression highest in Shanghai, Tibet, Beijing, and Shaanxi. CDM most frequently recorded repression in Henan and Guangdong, compared to other regions. But, when the size of a region's population is incorporated into the calculation, Shanghai, Tibet, Beijing, and Shaanxi have proportionally more recorded protest events. Our analysis indicates that the higher rates of repression may be driven by higher rates of protest in those regions.
Distribution of protest events (October through December 2023)

Total dissent events recorded, by month
FEATUERED ANALYSIS

SCHOOL DEATHS, RESPONSE, REFLECTS PUBLIC DISTRUST IN AUTHORITIES

Deep distrust turned to outrage. On December 24, 2023, a 14-year-old student died in Yuhuayuan School (previously called Qinghuayuan School) located in Shangqiu, Henan Province (case 2396). The school claimed that the student committed suicide by jumping off a building, but puncture wounds and bruises found on his body raised doubts about the cause of death. Three days later, the Ningling County government released an announcement stating, without supporting evidence, that the student had committed suicide for personal reasons. The statement soon aroused public outrage. On the same day, the deceased’s family held up the teenager’s photos in front of the school, along with a banner reading “Return my child,” and shouted, “Qinghuayuan teachers killed a student.”

Thousands of people joined the family, marching to the school to mourn the student’s death and demand the truth. The protests occurred over two days, peaking on December 28 with around 10,000 participants. The authorities’ concealment of possible criminal activities and use of nontransparent and questionable investigation tactics to “maintain social stability” appears to have motivated many people to take to the streets. According to international media, some protesters were beaten and arrested by the police. The city government also turned off streetlights to drive away the crowd, blocked roads to prevent people from entering the city, and sent texts to warn residents against participating in the protest.

Protests led by parents. While the Shangqiu case has been covered by international media outlets such as Radio Free Asia and Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch, a larger pattern of protests led by parents in China has not been as well reported. CDM has documented 38 events since June 2022 of parents protesting after a child or youth was harmed in public schools and universities, including in instances of severe school bullying and sexual abuse. Among these, 30 events involved a student death. The causes—as reported by the schools—have included health issues, unsafe facilities, and suicide. Like the Shangqiu case, most parents did not trust authorities’ investigations, driving them to protest by holding banners and their children’s photos in front of schools to demand the truth and justice.
Demanding truth could result in retaliation. Since the crackdown on the demonstrators in Shangqiu, there have been no reports about the deceased student’s family or any efforts toward redress. CDM has documented some form of repression in 20 percent of similar cases of parent protests. Parents who have continued to protest and demand the truth about their children’s deaths or whereabouts were viewed by authorities as creating provocations, resulting in retaliation. For example, in Tengzhou, Shandong Province, a student reportedly jumped to his death while at school in December 2023 (case 2178). His family posted the child’s photos and awards on the school gate in protest, but were later detained by authorities for taking an “excessive approach.” CDM also documented three cases where parents were harassed or taken away by police when holding their missing children’s photos on the streets looking for clues of their children’s whereabouts (cases 2313, 2314, and 2315). Instead of responding to the demands of citizens, local authorities repeatedly worked to cover up problems, with the apparent aim of reducing social mobilization. Ultimately, the government’s obfuscation feeds mistrust, which contributes to more backlash.

SUSTAINED DISSENT BY RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Dissent in the face of long-term restrictions. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has strictly managed organized religion since its inception, resulting in restrictions on many types of religious practices and gatherings, particularly by unregistered groups that refuse to operate under the party’s watchful eye. CDM has recorded a total of 200 incidents of dissent linked to freedom of religion or belief since June 2022, in which religious adherents publicly or semi-privately practiced or shared their beliefs with others, despite state prohibitions. This dissent has occurred in 29 provinces and regions. While few events involved believers directly challenging authorities, almost all recorded incidents (94 percent) were suppressed. CDM has documented 15 types of repressive tactics used by the state against these believers, ranging from administrative measures such as fines, summonses, prosecutions, and reportings, to coercive means including arrest, torture, and even the killing of dissenters.

Religious groups face different limits. Falun Gong practitioners account for 163 of the 200 cases of dissent, compared to 23 cases of Christians, 11 cases of Tibetan Buddhists, and 3 cases of Muslims. One reason for the variation between these groups is different population sizes. For example, there are only 6 million Tibetans in the PRC. Another could be that the CCP implements harsher social controls on non-Han religious groups, like Uyghur Muslims or Tibetan Buddhists, resulting in less opportunity for religious practice or dissent. The availability of information may also create a gap in this dataset. Whereas there is dedicated reporting on cases of Falun Gong dissent like that of the website Minghui, securitization and stricter information controls on the Tibetan and Uyghur communities lead to unreported dissent and greater difficulties in gathering reliable data on dissent. As a result, this dataset should not be considered representative of the proportion of dissent for each group.
Religious dissent takes different forms. The ways religious adherents challenge authority is very specific to each group’s practices or circumstances. Tibetans expressed their respect for the Dalai Lama, which is prohibited by the CCP, by setting up altars in their homes, making tributes to him, wearing amulets with his photo, and singing hymns. Five Tibetan men in Sichuan who lit incense and prayed for the longevity of the Dalai Lama (case 601) were arrested and tortured, with one man dying in custody. Among the cases of dissent by Christians, most were communal gatherings, services, or prayers organized by unregistered or prohibited churches with 10 to dozens of people participating in the events. Most cases of Falun Gong dissent in CDM’s dataset involve individuals sharing information with other people about Falun Gong beliefs or abuses faced by its practitioners. Such dissemination is prohibited by the CCP, which has designated Falun Gong an illegal “cult.” In May 2023, Wang Shulan was reported for sharing Falun Gong information at a market Jixi, Heilongjiang Province, resulting in her arrest and eventual four-year prison sentence. Among the three Muslim cases, two were direct clashes with the authorities arising from the demolition of a mosque’s dome by a local government (cases 478 and 1631). Destruction or alteration of religious buildings and statues has become a main component of the Sinicization campaign introduced under Xi Jinping in 2016.

Religious persecution as state policy. Since Xi Jinping came to power, he has continued to legalize previously informal political directives, creating a tougher environment for religious groups. CDM data suggests that Christian groups may be the most affected. Following the implementation of Measures on the Supervision and Management of Financial Affairs of Venues for Religious Activities in June 2022, the Chinese government repeatedly and falsely accused church members of “fraud.” CDM documented the case of a church in Linfen, Shanxi Province, writing a letter to the attorney general protesting that the law defied common sense (case 1628). Because face-to-face religious gatherings are often restricted by authorities, many Christians choose to meet online. However, in March 2022, the government passed the Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services, which stipulates that only registered official religious organizations are allowed to convene online. An elder of the Early Rain Covenant Church who planned to hold an online gathering in December 2022 was taken away by police before the event (case 2237). Subsequent to the implementation of these measures, there was an apparent rise in censors policing Tibetan religious practices online, such as prayer groups on social messaging platforms. In February 2023, a Tibetan woman from Gansu shared photos and videos of the Monlam Chenmo prayer festival online, and police subsequently confronted her warning against sharing such information so widely online (case 2072).

“GARBAGE SIEGE” REMAINS THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTEST IN CHINA

Flawed waste management policies spur protest. Since 2019, large cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, and others have legislated mandatory waste sorting in an attempt to alleviate the long-standing issue of excessive waste besieging urban areas. However, policies continue to emphasize waste treatment rather than source reduction, leaving the root causes unaddressed. The lack of public communication in the CCP’s top-down, authoritarian approach to environment management makes waste disposal systems even more difficult to implement. This situation has catalyzed environmental protests in China. CDM has recorded 24 events related to waste disposal disputes across 7 provinces and 16 cities since June 2022. Protests have targeted various facilities of different scales, including large garbage processing sites, intermediate transfer stations, incineration power plants, and small collection stations in residential areas. Most of these protests are preventive actions against projects still in the planning stages, while some are reactions to operational waste facilities that cause pollution or other negative external effects.
Residents in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province protested at the construction site of a waste collection site in September 2023 (source: Weibo)

**Using rule-of-law discourse to advance rights.** Most such protests in CDM’s dataset demanded legal procedures and public-information disclosure, questioned inadequate environmental impact assessments, and called for relocation of a site. In February 2023, a plan to construct the largest waste processing station in Wuhan triggered protests by hundreds of demonstrators (case 1370). Some even attempted to rush into the government compound, leading to a significant police response with numerous arrests. Protesters argued that the proposed site was too close to residences and schools and adjacent to a wetland conservation area, and posed a serious threat to public health. In December 2023, several dissent events related to waste disposal occurred in Shanghai. Residents of multiple neighborhoods in Putuo District joined forces to oppose the construction of a food waste processing station (cases 2346, 2347). In Pudong’s Xinchang District, homeowners from several residential communities collectively expressed opposition to a waste transfer station. Besides the fear of potential health risks, the protesters also raised concerns over the impact on cultural heritage, namely in the ancient town of Xinchang, that might be caused by the project (cases 2327, 2328).

**Protesters frequently win concessions.** Despite evident repression in 10 events (42 percent), there were at least 3 concessions to the protests. For instance, a waste transfer station project in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, was temporarily halted due to resident protests (case 2438). In Shanghai’s Datuan District, the strong odor from an operational waste factory infuriated nearby residents, causing them to occupy the factory for days and leading to a temporary halt in operations (cases 2349, 2350). It’s important to note that there may have been concessions in other cases that CDM was unable to document because concessions may occur long after a protest ends and information about it is not readily available.

**Waste-to-power incinerators still unwelcome.** Public opposition to waste incineration stations occurred as early as 2009 when a large protest erupted in the Panyu District of Guangzhou. Amid concerns about the emission of toxins during incineration, similar protests have continued to occur in China. In August 2023, hundreds of residents in Anqing, Anhui Province, protested in response to plans for a waste incineration power plant (case 2363). Although police suppressed the demonstration, the plan was subsequently put on hold. Environmental protesters in China may be able to win some concessions, but their inability to build a formal movement under an authoritarian system means that the policy issues at the root of these disputes will likely remain unresolved. Indeed, waste policy in the government’s 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–25) has encouraged and subsidized the construction of waste incineration facilities.
BY THE DATA

PER CAPITA REPRESSION

Examining a sample of all fully coded offline demonstrations in the CDM database (1,626 events), when ranked by the cases of repression, Henan and Guangdong lead other regions. These are also the two provinces with the greatest number of protests (178 and 159, respectively). However, when the population of each region is incorporated into a per capita repression measure, the order changes considerably, led by Shanghai, Tibet, Beijing, and Shaanxi. In exploring what factors might lead to greater rates of repression, the rate of protest is strongly correlated, as visualized in the scatter plot below. This suggests that as protest becomes more prevalent in a region, authorities may react by ramping up repression. However, causality could go the other direction: more repression by a region’s government could lead to greater discontent and protest by its residents. Other factors such as the political importance of a region to the CCP or public security expenditure could also impact the prevalence of repression, as investigated in a paper by scholars Yao Li and Manfred Elfstrom.

Repression incidents and rate per million people by region in China

Plot of rates of protest and repression by region in China.