

Recommendations

The developments described in this report entail both costs and opportunities for Chinese society and the international community. On an almost daily basis, injuries are suffered, families are shattered, and lives are lost, but new avenues for practicing religion, reducing repression, and benefiting fellow citizens are also discovered.

Nearly one-third of China's population is affected by the Chinese Communist Party's religious policies. Within this group, an estimated 80 to 120 million believers belong to faith communities rated in this study as suffering from "high" or "very high" levels of persecution, highlighting the urgency of their plight.

As noted in the report's overview essay, the party-state's relations with religious groups have implications far beyond this particular policy area, influencing China's political, economic, and social development in critical ways. And in an increasingly interconnected world, the same dynamics have repercussions outside China's borders.

The findings of this report show that the Chinese authorities cannot make meaningful advances toward the rule of law, enhance free expression, reduce corruption, ensure social stability, or cultivate genuine interethnic harmony unless they begin to loosen their control over religion, end impunity, and release religious prisoners. Indeed, continued repression seems likely to undermine a variety of policy goals shared by the party, foreign governments, and international human rights advocates.

Meanwhile, although this study has attempted to provide a comprehensive assessment of religious revival, repression, and resistance in China, various aspects of the topic deserve further investigation.

In this context, Freedom House urges the Chinese government, foreign policymakers, international civil society and religious organizations, journalists, and researchers to promptly implement as many of the following recommendations as possible.

A. For the Chinese government

- **Adopt a more inclusive regulatory framework.** Expand the space for religious practice within the law by taking steps such as establishing legal personhood for religious venues and loosening registration rules. One possible change would be to eliminate the requirement of affiliation with a "patriotic association" so that more Christian "house churches," Buddhist and Taoist temples, and informal groups like Falun Gong can operate legally and openly.

- **Lift limitations on the practice of religion for certain populations.** Remove restrictions on children’s religious participation to bring conditions in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which China has ratified. Remove restrictions on the ability of lay believers in Xinjiang and Tibetan areas, particularly government employees like civil servants and teachers, to observe the five pillars of Islam and routine elements of Tibetan Buddhist practice.
- **Reverse arbitrary decisions that significantly restrict religious space.** Several party policies regarding religion have an especially weak legal basis and have generated significant levels of repression and backlash from believers. The party should consider reversing these decisions. For example:
 - Allow Tibetans to revere the Dalai Lama as a religious figure. Cease vilifying him in state media, conflating religious belief with political separatism, and punishing believers for possessing copies of his image or teachings.
 - Repeal the ban on Falun Gong and abolish the extralegal 6-10 Office.
 - Cease the campaign in Zhejiang Province to remove crosses from church buildings and permit places of worship to replace crosses that were taken down.
 - Lift restrictions on believers wishing to travel to other parts of China or abroad, including for religious study or pilgrimage. End limitations on journalists’ and researchers’ access to sites of religious conflict, such as Uighur- and Tibetan-populated areas.
- **Release all religious prisoners.** Release from custody all individuals imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of belief and religious expression, including those documented in the Political Prisoner Database maintained by the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) or mentioned by name in this report. When prosecuting future cases involving religious believers, grant judges greater authority to distinguish between peaceful religious practice and acts of violence.
- **Take steps to end impunity.** Encourage judges to reject evidence obtained from torture in cases involving religious violations, in accordance with broader judicial reform efforts. Investigate allegations of torture and all suspicious deaths of religious believers in custody or at the hands of security forces, and prosecute those responsible for any unlawful deaths mentioned in this report. Implement the relevant recommendations of the UN Committee Against Torture, in line with China’s commitments as a party to the Convention Against Torture.
- **Cease organ transplants from prisoners.** End all organ transplants from prisoner populations and facilitate an independent international audit of organ sources to verify that the system is fully voluntary and transparent and does not victimize death-row or religious prisoners. Provide visas, freedom to travel, and access to medical files and relevant personnel to international experts investigating this issue.

B. For policymakers in the United States, Europe, and other democracies

- **Make religious freedom a priority in relations with the Chinese government.** Considering the scale and severity of violations of religious freedom and the presence of concerned

coreligionists in many countries around the world, the issue is worthy of particular attention in democratic governments' interactions with Chinese officials.

- Press the Chinese government to implement the recommendations listed above.
- Ensure that officials at all levels of government, including the president or prime minister, and across agencies raise human rights generally and religious freedom specifically in all meetings with Chinese officials (in the United States, this should include officials from the White House, the Department of State, the Treasury Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and Congress).
- Appoint religious freedom ambassadors with expertise in Chinese affairs. The Chinese government is one of the world's worst—and most extensive—violators of religious freedom, but it is also a sophisticated diplomatic interlocutor. Past performances indicate that appointees with previous experience in China are more effective in gaining access to and raising these sensitive topics with Chinese officials.
- When raising the issue, incorporate it into discussions of other critical human rights areas (like judicial reform or free expression), address all relevant religious groups, and avoid using language that inadvertently reinforces Chinese government rhetoric justifying restrictions or vilifying believers.
- **Draw attention to abuses and their link to the national interests of other countries.**
 - Highlight the cases of specific individuals imprisoned or persecuted for their faith. Former political prisoners have consistently reported that when foreign officials raised their cases, their treatment in prison improved; in some instances they were even released after such interventions.
 - Make public statements and private diplomatic demarches in a timely manner in response to events on the ground.
 - Take parliamentary action, including holding hearings; delivering floor speeches; issuing press releases; sending open letters to U.S., Chinese, and other government officials; and drafting legislation.
- **Put foreign trips to good use.** Before traveling to China, foreign officials (including presidents, prime ministers, other ministers, secretaries, assistant secretaries, UN special rapporteurs, ambassadors, and legislators) should do the following:
 - Meet with Chinese religious believers who have recently fled China to hear their accounts of persecution firsthand and learn about pressing problems.
 - When preparing to meet with provincial or city-level Chinese officials, make use of publicly accessible resources to determine local conditions for religious freedom and the names of persecuted local believers. Such resources include the Freedom House map attached to this report, the CECC Political Prisoner Database, and human rights groups' individual prisoner alerts.
 - Be ready to respond forcefully if news emerges that persecution increased in the

relevant region during or after the trip, as was the case for Christians surrounding the Group of 20 summit in 2016.

- **Increase penalties for violations of religious freedom.**

- **Impose entry and property sanctions on officials** who have committed or been complicit in the abuse, torture, or persecution of religious believers. Many officials travel to the United States and Europe for personal matters and hold funds in foreign bank accounts. Penalizing perpetrators through the blocking of visas and freezing of foreign-based assets is an effective way to ensure that these individuals face some measure of justice and to deter future abusers. In many countries, including the United States, this can be done without enacting additional laws. Under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), for example, foreign government officials who have engaged in “particularly severe violations of religious freedom” and their spouses and children can be denied entry to the United States.
- **Promptly delay or cancel official visits or exchanges**, with both central government and local or provincial officials, in response to egregious incidents of religious persecution.
- For the United States government, **retain China’s designation as a country of particular concern (CPC)** under the International Religious Freedom Act and **impose additional penalties available under the law**. China has been designated as a CPC—a country which “engages in or tolerates systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom”—every year since 1999, but the executive branch has typically chosen not to impose a broad range of economic penalties available under IRFA.

- **Engage in multilateral action.**

- **UN Human Rights Council:** Democratic countries on the council should issue a joint statement condemning the persecution of religious believers in China and worsening conditions for some groups, following the example of a recent joint statement on human rights in China more generally. Diplomatic resources should be devoted to encouraging participation by governments that may have constituencies interested in these issues but that do not typically criticize China’s human rights record, including India, Indonesia, and South Korea.
- **Interparliamentary initiatives:** Lawmakers in democratic states should undertake joint trips, coordinated resolutions, public statements, or letters on religious freedom in China.

- **Fund programs, policies, and research that will aid China’s religious believers.**

- Short-term emergency financial assistance allows religious believers to receive medical care, obtain legal counsel, leave the country, or meet other urgent needs.
- Longer-term financial assistance is necessary for individuals forced to flee China for indefinite periods, many of whom are unable to work due to their status as refugees.
- Donors should support programs that address challenges to religious freedom in

China, including projects that are based outside China for security reasons but affect conditions on the ground.

- Research efforts by government bodies (including annual reports), ad hoc interagency task forces, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, and scholars all require funding. Priorities could include the comprehensive documentation of victims and perpetrators of religious persecution or other areas of investigation listed in the sections below.

- **Resist Beijing's attempts to export its mistreatment of religious minorities.**

- Meet with the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, especially at the level of head of state or head of government.
- Ensure full protection of the freedoms of association and expression for activists from religious communities, particularly during visits by senior Chinese officials.
- Resist pressure to repatriate religious refugees to China, a troubling practice that some governments have engaged in repeatedly in recent years, particularly in South and Southeast Asia.

C. For international civil society and religious organizations

- **Adopt coreligionists in China for advocacy and moral support.** Religious institutions and congregations outside of China should "adopt" verified individual prisoners, offering spiritual, advocacy, and even financial support for persecuted members of their own faith, or building solidarity by doing the same for members of other religions. Such assistance might include weekly prayers on behalf of the individual, letter-writing campaigns to foreign governments and Chinese officials, and collection of monetary or in-kind donations for a detainee's family members.
- **Unify disparate advocacy efforts and share best practices.** While specialized advocacy is important and effective, diverse constituencies can magnify their impact through collective action on themes of common interest. Overseas groups supporting Christians, Tibetans, Uighurs, and Falun Gong adherents in China should develop collaborative projects and advocacy campaigns. They should also share tactics that have proven successful in reducing persecution of coreligionists in China, such as training grassroots believers on how to assert their legal rights when negotiating with officials or having overseas activists call police stations, courts, and prosecutors to urge the release of a religious detainee.
- **Improve documentation of religious prisoners and perpetrators.** Several human rights groups and overseas websites monitor cases of detention and imprisonment of religious believers in China, but these efforts are incomplete, uneven across different faiths, and sometimes lacking in international credibility. Some initiatives have begun to identify Chinese officials who have engaged in egregious abuses, but their databases are also disparate, may need independent verification, and are not always accessible in English. International civil society groups should fill these gaps and make full use of available Chinese government sources, including court verdicts, to complement reports from grassroots

believers. A joint documentation center could consolidate, research, and publicize such information. Better documentation of both prisoners and perpetrators would improve conditions for detainees in China by reducing their international anonymity; inform policymaking, civil society advocacy, academic exchanges, business dealings, and training programs; highlight individual responsibility for gross human rights violations; and provide some deterrence to members of the repressive apparatus in China.

- **Conduct joint investigations of forced labor and organ harvesting.** These two topics affect multiple faith groups and economic sectors, and involve strong transnational elements and serious human rights ramifications. As a result, they would benefit from an investigation by researchers with diverse areas of expertise, including on specific religious or ethnic groups, criminal justice, labor rights, and medicine. An investigation into forced labor by religious prisoners should focus on changes since the abolition of the “reeducation through labor” camp system in 2013 and seek to identify products manufactured by prisoners of conscience in China for export abroad, which would be illegal to import in some countries. An investigation into organ transplant abuse should trace the sources used in China’s expanding transplant industry, determining the extent to which organs are taken involuntarily from different communities of religious prisoners and the level of involvement by party-state officials.
- **Provide nongovernmental funding for these and other projects.** Private foundations, individual philanthropists, and donor organizations should provide funding for the above initiatives, as well as other projects that aim to expand religious freedom in China, document abuses, and counter repressive tendencies. Given the dangers many groups face inside China and the informal organizational structure of some religious networks, donors should establish funding mechanisms that allow for flexibility, including support for projects based outside of China that directly influence conditions inside the country.

D. For scholars and journalists

- **Choose words and sources with care.** When writing about religion in China, scholars and journalists should take care in their use of official rhetoric so as not to inadvertently legitimize misleading and vilifying propaganda about persecuted groups. They should consult a variety of sources on these topics, including accounts by refugees and research by overseas groups. While sources may vary in credibility, there are many skilled professionals, reliable eyewitnesses, and providers of valuable information among members of persecuted religious communities living outside China and their foreign supporters. Dismissing their perspectives and publications out of hand as inherently biased is itself prejudicial and risks significantly limiting the international community’s understanding of events on the ground.
- **Explore topics for further research.** In addition to those noted in the section above, subjects for research and investigative reporting include:
 - **Religious policy:** Any changes occurring in the realm of religious policy and persecution at the provincial and local levels following the introduction of updated national religious affairs regulations in 2016.
 - **Economic tensions:** The intersection of financial incentives and exploitation with religious restrictions and resistance, particularly as China’s economic growth slows,

and whether this increases official tensions with local Chinese Buddhist and Taoist leaders.

- **Catholics:** The treatment of Catholics from official and unofficial churches in the context of an apparently imminent agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese government on the appointment of bishops.
- **Protestants:** The degree to which the Chinese government's changing approach to Protestant churches, including increased harassment of state-sanctioned places of worship, spreads beyond Zhejiang Province and negatively affects church-state relations in other locales where restrictions were once relatively lax.
- **Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims:** How restrictions on religious practice affect daily life in Tibetan and Uighur areas, whether such infringements continue to increase, and how local populations respond.
- **Falun Gong:** The evolving situation of Falun Gong inside China, including ongoing large scale abuses, new trends such as uneven enforcement, and the campaign to lodge legal complaints against Jiang Zemin.
- **New religious movements:** The possibility of persecution against members of new or smaller religious groups that are often invisible to foreign observers because of their unfamiliarity and isolation.