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## **The Battle for China's Spirit: *Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping***

**WASHINGTON, February 28, 2017** — The Chinese government's controls over religion have intensified under Xi Jinping, seeping into new areas of daily life and triggering growing resistance from believers, according to the report *The Battle for China's Spirit*, released today by Freedom House.

"Many spiritual activities practiced freely around the world—from fasting during Ramadan to praying with one's children or performing Falun Gong meditation exercises—are restricted and can be harshly punished in China," said Sarah Cook, a senior research analyst at Freedom House and the report's author. "The scale and severity of controls over religion, and the trajectory of both growing persecution and pushback, are affecting Chinese society and politics far beyond the realm of religious policy alone."

*The Battle for China's Spirit* examines the evolution of the Communist Party's policies of religious control and citizens' responses to them since November 2012, in the first comprehensive analysis of its kind. It focuses on seven major religious groups that together account for over 350 million believers: Chinese Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Falun Gong.

"The party's rigid constraints render it impossible for state-sanctioned institutions to meet the growing demand for religion in Chinese society," Cook said. "The result is an enormous black market, forcing many believers—from Taoists and Protestants to Tibetan Buddhists—to operate outside the law and to view the regime as unreasonable, unjust, or illegitimate."

Religious controls have taken different forms for different localities, ethnicities, and denominations. In many parts of China, ordinary believers do not necessarily feel constrained in their ability to practice their faith. Others face bureaucratic obstacles, mandatory political "reeducation," or economic exploitation.

But authorities also regularly deploy harsh penalties, long prison terms, and deadly violence against certain communities. At least 100 million people—nearly one-third of estimated believers in China—belong to religious groups facing "high" or "very high" levels of persecution.

Under Xi, many persecutory policies have expanded and evolved. A more restrictive legal environment has been put in place. Repression has expanded to target more state-registered congregations and leaders. And the government has adapted religious controls to a new technological landscape, increasing electronic surveillance at places of worship and imprisoning believers for sharing content on social media platforms or using tools to circumvent internet censorship.

“Despite tightening controls, millions of religious believers defy official restrictions in daily life. Indeed, the survival of groups and beliefs that the party has invested tremendous resources to crush represents a remarkable failure of the government’s repression,” Cook said. “It reflects the party’s difficulty in confronting citizens who are willing to make sacrifices for higher principles. From this perspective, it would appear that in the long-term battle for China’s spirit, an unreformed Communist Party will ultimately lose.”

### Key findings by religious community

- **Chinese Buddhism and Taoism:** President Xi and other officials portray Chinese Buddhism and Taoism as increasingly important for realizing the party’s political goals at home and abroad, including building regime legitimacy on the basis of traditional Chinese culture. Despite such support and an environment of relatively low persecution, economic exploitation of temples for tourism purposes has emerged as a key point of contention among the state, clergy, and lay believers.
- **Christianity:** Since early 2014, local authorities have intensified efforts to stem the spread of Christianity amid official rhetoric about the threat of “Western” values and the need to “Sinicize” religions. Persecution of Protestants—at both unofficial and state-sanctioned churches—has especially increased, while warming relations between Beijing and the Vatican has led some Catholics to be optimistic about the faith’s future trajectory in China.
- **Islam:** Chinese government treatment of Muslims differs significantly across ethnic and geographic lines, but both Hui and Uighur Muslims have experienced increased restrictions and Islamophobia since November 2012. Controls on religion have deepened and expanded in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in particular, including regarding religious dress, children’s education, and forced selling of alcohol.
- **Tibetan Buddhism:** The Chinese authorities impose severe constraints on the religious practice of Tibetan Buddhists, most notably veneration of the exiled Dalai Lama. New measures imposed since November 2012 include punishing assistance to self-immolators, canceling previously permitted festivals, increasing restrictions on private religious practice, and more proactively manipulating Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and selection of religious leaders.
- **Falun Gong:** Falun Gong practitioners continue to be subject to widespread and severe human rights violations. Freedom House independently verified 933 cases of Falun Gong adherents sentenced to prison terms of up to 12 years since January 2013. Nevertheless, the purge of key party officials as part of Xi’s anticorruption campaign and Falun Gong outreach to local police have led to reduced repression in some locales.

To view the summary of findings, see the report here: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/china-religious-freedom>

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