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Key Findings

The Chinese government continues to perpetrate particularly severe violations of religious freedom. For Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims, conditions are worse now than at any time in the past decade. Independent Catholics and Protestants face arrests, fines, and the shuttering of their places of worship. Practitioners of Falun Gong, as well as other Buddhist, folk religionist, and Protestant groups deemed "superstitious" or "evil cults," face long jail terms, forced renunciations of faith, and torture in detention, and the government has not sufficiently answered accusations of psychiatric experimentation and organ harvesting. Based on these systematic, egregious, ongoing abuses, USCIRF again recommends that China be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, in 2014. The State Department has designated China as a CPC since 1999.

Background

While the Chinese Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the constitution protects only "normal" religious activities, which is not defined. Religious groups and individuals believed to pose a threat to national security or social harmony, or whose practices are deemed superstitious, cult-like, or beyond the vague legal definition of "normal," face severe restrictions, harassment, detention, imprisonment, and other abuses. Despite this, millions of Chinese manifest their beliefs openly in officially "recognized" religious venues or within the seven government-approved religious organizations. Senior government officials regularly praise the positive role played by religious communities in society. In September 2013, President Xi Jinping publicly expressed his hope that China's "traditional cultures" of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism can help staunch the country's "moral decline." New directives seem to allow approved religious groups to conduct charitable activities. These are positive developments that were unthinkable two decades ago.

Nevertheless, the government continues to see the growth of religious communities which resist its oversight as potential threats to social stability, security, or its core interests. There continues to be suspicion among Communist Party officials about the growth of religious belief and practice. Government authorities continue to provide strict ideological control and oversight of government-supported religious groups; praise religious groups who resist "foreign infiltration;" prohibit

religious affiliation among Communist Party members and some government employees; and restrict the amount of religious materials available, including on the Internet.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2013-2014

Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims

Since the 2008 and 2009 protests in Tibetan and Uighur areas respectively, the Chinese government has intensified efforts to discredit religious leaders, issued new measures to increase government oversight of monasteries and mosques, and implemented new programs to ensure the political loyalty of Buddhist monks and weaken the religious beliefs of Uighur Muslims. There are hundreds of Tibetans and Uighurs in prison for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy, including individuals arrested in the past year.

Religious freedom conditions in Tibetan areas remain acute. Since May 2011, there have been 127 self-immolations, including 61 monks, nuns, and former nuns. In the past year, there were 18 self-immolations, including nine by Buddhist monks. These protests are directly related to Chinese efforts to control religious practice and culture of Tibetans, but Chinese authorities view these expressions of protest as criminal activities. Authorities detain senior monks for periods after self-immolations by monks associated with their monasteries, and in April 2013 officials in Dzoebe, Ngaba Autonomous Prefecture, issued new rules extending criminal penalties to family members, fellow villagers, and monasteries of self-immolators. The December 2013 detention for anti-state activity of popular religious teacher Khenpo Kartse led to clashes between his followers and police, large demonstrations for his release, and the detention for several weeks of monks advocating for his release.

In Xinjiang province in the past year, over 100 people have died in clashes between Uighur Muslims and police and security units. Ongoing tensions were ignited after a Uighur man and five others drove a car through a line of tourists in Tiananmen Square. Beijing views the recent violence as motivated by extremism and separatism, but some contend it is related to China's heavy-handed restrictions on Uighur religious practice. For example, the person accused of planning the Tiananmen attack reportedly was motivated by the destruction of a refurbished mosque in his hometown. In response to the recent violence, police in Xinjiang have implemented another "strike hard" campaign aimed at curtailing banned religious activity. These new restrictions triggered additional violence when residents of No. 16 village, Aykol town, Aksu prefecture pelted police with stones after they halted Eid Al-Fitr prayers. Over 300 people were detained. In June, in Hanerik township near Hotan, two young Uighurs died in clashes with police after a local mosque was raided, reportedly because the Imam refused to read a government-approved sermon. Uighurs in Hotan remain in jail after being arrested in 2012 for running an independent religious school.

Protestants and Catholics

Protestants and Catholics who refuse to join the state-sanctioned religious organizations continue to face severe restrictions, including efforts to undermine and harass their leaders, arrest and detentions, and property destruction. The head of China's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) recently called on government officials to renew efforts to "guide" unregistered Protestants and Catholics to join the state-sanctioned churches. He also urged efforts to "break" large Protestant house churches into small groups. According to reports by Protestant house church leaders, 1,470 people were detained in the past year and 10 were given sentences of more than one year, both increases from the previous year.

In June 2013, a court in Taiyuan, Shanxi province convicted two Christian bookstore owners to five and two years' imprisonment for "illegal business operations." In April 2013, seven house church leaders from Pingdingshan city, Hebei province were sentenced to between three and seven

years for being part of a "cult." Churches in Shandong, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Shaxi provinces were forcibly closed after they refused to register with the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). In November 2013, Pastor Zhang Shaojie, head of the Nanle County Christian Church, Henan province (which is affiliated with the TSPM) was arrested and 20 church members were detained after filing official complaints in a local land dispute. Local officials beat visitors to the church and detained lawyers seeking to assist in Pastor Zhang's case, which remains pending.

Relations between Beijing and the Vatican remained problematic as China continued to promote bishops ordained without Vatican approval to positions of Church oversight and governance. Dozens of unregistered Catholic clergy, including three bishops, remain in detention, in home confinement, or disappeared. Bishop Ma Daqin, who publicly quit the state-sanctioned Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) during his July 2012 ordination ceremony as auxiliary bishop of Shanghai, remains in detention, his whereabouts unknown. The CPA officially stripped him of his bishopric last year.

Falun Gong

The Chinese government continued its 15-year campaign to eradicate Falun Gong activity and pressure practitioners to renounce their beliefs. China maintains an extrajudicial security apparatus, the 6-10 Office, to stamp out Falun Gong activities and created specialized facilities known as "transformation through reeducation centers" to force practitioners to relinquish their faith. As many as 2,000 individuals are estimated to be detained in these extralegal centers. There are 486 known Falun Gong practitioners currently serving prison sentences. Practitioners who do not renounce their beliefs in detention are subject to torture, including credible reports of deaths in custody and the use of psychiatric experiments and possible organ harvesting.

Human Rights Defenders

Since 2011, more than 100 human rights defenders, many who often work on religious freedom cases, were forcibly disappeared, tortured, detained, stripped of legal licenses, or sentenced to prison terms. In the past year, officials beat lawyers who sought access to arrested Falun Gong and Protestants or to clients in "black jails" where individuals are held without charge. In July, 13 lawyers were barred from assisting Falun Gong clients during their trial in the port city of Dalian.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

A China committed to protecting and advancing its citizens' fundamental rights and religious freedoms is in the interests of the United States. Religious freedom directly relates to expanding the rule of law, developing civil society, aiding stability in ethnic minority areas, expanding the freedoms of expression and association, and bringing China firmly within the international system. In addition to recommending that the U.S. government continue to designate China as a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Raise religious freedom concerns at the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue and other high-level bilateral meetings with Chinese leaders; encourage Chinese authorities to delink state control of religious groups from security policy to provide more civic space for peaceful and independent religious activity; use the annual U.S.-China Human Rights Dialogue as a mechanism to further higher-level discussions and reach concrete agreements;
- Ensure that high-level U.S. officials speak directly to the Chinese people about the universality and importance of religious freedom and related human rights;
- As permitted by IRFA and to more directly convey U.S. concerns about severe religious freedom violations in China, impose targeted travel bans and other penalties on specific officials and state agencies who perpetrate religious freedom abuses, as well as on specific

provinces or autonomous regions with the highest numbers of documented religious freedom abuses;

- 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 and coordinate its 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;
- In multilateral institutions where China and the United States are members and in bilateral discussions, press China to uphold its international obligations to protect North Korean asylum seekers, including and especially obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol, 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 of new technologies and distributing programs to counter censorship.

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