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World Report 2020 - China

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2019 marked the 70th anniversary of its rule by deepening repression. Under President Xi Jinping’s leadership, the one-party Chinese government tightened its grip over sectors of society it found threatening, such as the internet, activists, and nongovernmental organizations. It strengthened ideological control, particularly in higher education, among religious and ethnic minorities, and within the bureaucracy. It devoted massive resources to new technologies for social control, adding artificial intelligence, biometrics, and big data to its arsenal to monitor and shape the minds and behaviors of 1.4 billion people. Government censorship now extends far beyond its borders; its mix of typically financial incentives and intimidation are manipulating discourse about China around the world.

Thirteen million Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang are suffering particularly harsh repression. The government’s “Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Extremism” has entailed mass arbitrary detention, surveillance, indoctrination, and the destruction of the region’s cultural and religious heritage. Credible estimates indicate that about 1 million Turkic Muslims are being indefinitely held in “political education” camps, where they are forced to disavow their identity and become loyal government subjects. Others have been prosecuted and sent to prison, and some have received lengthy and even death sentences for crimes that violate fundamental rights, “splitism” or “subversion.”

In a year in which the CCP was especially keen to maintain a veneer of stability, Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China that enjoys limited—but eroding—freedoms, exploded with/into? open defiance. Beginning in June, at least 2 million people in a city of 7 million filled the streets to demand greater freedoms.

The protests, sparked by the Hong Kong government’s introduction of legal amendments that would have allowed extraditions to China, have evolved into a city-wide resistance movement against CCP rule.

A number of governments and international institutions issued public condemnations of China’s most egregious human rights violations, but few took concrete actions, such as imposing sanctions or export controls.

Xinjiang

The extraordinarily repressive Strike Hard Campaign, launched in 2014, continued unabated against the Turkic Muslim population. To counter mounting international concern about the crackdown, Chinese authorities organized multiple, highly controlled trips for selected journalists and diplomats—including from the United Nations—to Xinjiang. In March, Xinjiang authorities announced that they had arrested nearly 13,000 “terrorists” in the region since 2014, and on July 30, publicly stated that “most” held in Xinjiang’s “political education” camps had “returned to society”; neither claim was substantiated with credible evidence.

Several media reports in 2019 revealed that some people who had been “released” were assigned to factories against their will, where they were given wages far below the legal minimum and prohibited from leaving.

Xinjiang authorities also continued to remove children whose parents were detained or in exile and hold them in state-run “child welfare” institutions and boarding schools without parental consent or access.

The Chinese government continues to deny independent observers—including UN human rights experts—unfettered access to the region, which makes verifying information, particularly concerning detainees, very difficult.

Authorities’ use of technologies for mass surveillance and social control has been unprecedented, especially in a region where people cannot challenge such intrusions. The Integrated Joint Operations Platform, a computer program central to Xinjiang’s mass surveillance systems, keeps tabs on many facets of people’s lives, including their movements and electricity use, and alerts authorities when it detects irregularities. Even tourists to the region—including non-Chinese citizens—are required to download a phone app that secretly monitors them.

International scrutiny of foreign academics and companies operating in the region has increased. One company, the US-based Thermo Fisher Scientific, which supplied DNA sequencers to Xinjiang police when authorities were indiscriminately collecting DNA from residents, announced in February that it would “cease all sales and servicing of our human identification technology” in Xinjiang.

Hong Kong

On January 23, the Hong Kong government introduced a bill that would criminalize “insults” to the Chinese national anthem. On February 12, the Hong Kong Security Bureau proposed changes to two laws that would enable criminal suspects in the city to be extradited to the Chinese authorities—which have a track record of torturing suspects and subjecting them to unfair trials—while removing public oversight over the process.

In April, a Hong Kong district court convicted nine leaders of the 2014 nonviolent pro-democracy “Umbrella Movement” on public nuisance charges. Legal scholar Benny Tai and retired professor Chan Kin-man were each handed 16-month prison terms.

On June 9, anger over the proposed extradition amendments and deteriorating freedoms prompted 1 million people to protest, according to organizers. On June 12, tens of thousands gathered around Hong Kong’s legislature, the Legislative Council (LegCo), to press the government to drop the amendments. In response, Hong Kong police moved to disperse the protesters, firing teargas, beanbag rounds, and rubber bullets. Hong Kong’s Chief Executive Carrie Lam condemned the protest, calling it “a riot.” Although Lam later suspended the amendments, her long refusal to formally withdraw them or condemn police brutality, and her designation of the June 12 protest as “riot” led to a record-breaking march with an estimated 2 million demonstrators on June 16. On July 1, some broke into LegCo, painting slogans on some chamber walls. Protests spread across the city, and continued at time of writing.

Although most protesters acted peacefully, Hong Kong police dispersed them with excessive force, including by beating those subdued on the ground. Suspected gang, or “triad,” members also repeatedly attacked protesters and pro-democracy lawmakers, leading to public accusations that police responded inadequately to violence against protesters. Some protesters used violence, throwing Molotov cocktails at police, setting roadblocks on fire; and in a number of cases attacked people they accused of being pro-Beijing infiltrators, including setting one person on fire.

Police increasingly restricted freedom of assembly by denying applications for protests.

On September 4, Lam formally withdrew the amendments, and on September 26 she staged a “dialogue” with some members of the public. But the unrest continued as the government would not meet most of the protesters’ central demands, including implementing genuine universal suffrage—a right promised in Hong Kong’s functional constitution—and launching an independent investigation into police abuses.

Tibet

Authorities in Tibetan areas continue to severely restrict religious freedom, speech, movement, and assembly, and fail to redress popular concerns about mining and land grabs by local officials, which often involve intimidation and unlawful use of force by security forces. In 2019, officials further intensified surveillance of online and phone communication.

Authorities in Tibetan areas have also stepped up use of a nationwide anti-crime campaign to encourage people to denounce members of their communities on the slightest suspicion of sympathy for the exiled Dalai Lama or opposition to the government. Two cases publicized by the Qinghai authorities in 2019, involving local opposition to land acquisition by the government, demonstrate that Tibetans are being prosecuted under the campaign for defense of their economic and cultural rights.

From May to July 2019, the authorities expelled thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns from the Yachen Gar monastery in Sichuan, and their dwellings demolished, according to X. Those without residence status in Sichuan were deported to their home provinces, where they were reportedly detained for reeducation. Meanwhile, Tibetan Autonomous

Region leaders called for an intensification of “Sinicization” policies to “strengthen the management of monasteries,” subjecting monastic populations to “legal” exams to test their competence in political reeducation, and requiring senior religious figures to endorse state policies on the selection of the next Dalai Lama.

In the Ngawa Tibetan region of Sichuan, two more young men set themselves on fire in protest against the Chinese government, in November and December 2018. Since March 2009, 155 Tibetans have self-immolated.

Human Rights Defenders

In July, dissident Ji Sizun, 69, died in state custody. Two months after being released from prison, Ji succumbed to unknown illnesses, guarded by police in a hospital in Fujian province. He had reportedly been ill-treated while serving a four-and-a-half-year sentence on fabricated charges of “gathering a crowd to disrupt public order” and “picking quarrels.” Consistent with a number of other cases in recent years of prominent human rights defenders dying in or soon after release from detention, authorities have not held anyone accountable for wrongdoing.

Courts handed down lengthy prison terms to prominent human rights activists after sham proceedings. In January, a court in Tianjin sentenced human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang to four-and-a-half years in prison for “subversion.” In the same month, a court in Hubei province sentenced Liu Feiyue, a veteran activist and founder of the human rights news website Minsheng Guancha, to five years in prison for “inciting subversion.”

In April, a Sichuan court sentenced activist Chen Bing to three-and-a-half years for commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. In July, a court in Sichuan province handed down a 12-year sentence to Huang Qi, a prominent activist and founder of human rights website 64 Tianwang, on “leaking state secrets” charges. Huang, detained since November 2016, suffers from several serious health conditions for which he has not been given adequate treatment.

More human rights defenders were detained in 2019. As part of an ongoing nationwide crackdown on labor activism that began in July 2018, Shenzhou police in January and March detained Yang Zhengjun, Ke Chengbing, and Wei Zhili, editors of the workers’ rights news website New Generation, accusing them of “picking quarrels.” In June, Guangdong police detained labor activist Ling Haobo on unknown charges. In August, Hunan authorities detained Cheng Yuan, Liu Dazhi, and Wu Gejianxiong, staff members of the anti-discrimination group Changsha Funeng, on “subversion” charges.

Police across the country detained activists and citizens who showed support for the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. In June, Beijing police detained activist Quan Shixin for “picking quarrels.” In September, Guangzhou authorities detained Lai Rifu after he shared a protest song on social media. In October Guangzhou authorities detained Sophia Huang Xueqin, a journalist who has written extensively about China’s #MeToo movement and about the protests in Hong Kong.

Aside from detentions and enforced disappearances, authorities continue to subject human rights activists and lawyers and their families to house arrest, harassment, surveillance, and travel bans. In April, Beijing authorities blocked lawyer Chen Jiangang from leaving China to take part in a fellowship program in the United States. Sichuan police harassed the octogenarian mother of imprisoned activist Huang Qi, in an apparent attempt to prevent her from speaking out. Police forcibly disappeared her mother by placing her under incommunicado house arrest for days, and sending government agents to live in her home. Beijing authorities pressured schools in the city to expel or deny admission to the 6-year-old son of imprisoned lawyer Wang Quanzhang.

Freedom of Expression

Authorities continued a national crackdown on users of Twitter—already blocked in China—that started in November 2018. Authorities detained or summoned hundreds of Twitter users, forcing them to delete “sensitive” tweets or close their accounts. Meanwhile, the government launched a disinformation campaign on Twitter and Facebook that frames Hong Kong’s protesters as violent and extreme, prompting the platforms to suspend hundreds of accounts originating in China.

Authorities further restricted the internet in China. In March, censors removed social media accounts of Ma Ling, a clickbait blogger who commanded an audience of more than 16 million. Ma was accused by state media of circulating false information. In June, China’s internet regulator shut down the financial news aggregator wallstreetcn.com, and ordered Q Daily, a news site known for its stories on social issues, to stop updating content for at least three months.

The government also tightened its ideological grip over universities and schools. In a March speech, President Xi called for educators to fend off “false ideas and thoughts” when teaching ideologies and politics courses. In March, Tsinghua University suspended prominent law professor Xu Zhangrun and placed him under investigation after he published a series of essays that warned of deepening repression under President Xi.

The effect of Chinese government censorship continues to reach beyond the Chinese borders. WeChat, China’s popular messaging platform used by more than a billion Chinese-speakers at home and abroad, is subject to the usual Chinese censorship applied to all domestic social media. Dissent artist Ai Weiwei’s involvement with the Hollywood film “Berlin, I Love You” was cut after investors, distributors, and other partners raised concerns about the artist’s political sensitivity in China. In an episode of “The Good Fight,” American broadcaster CBS censored an animated short that depicted a host of references to topics that have been censored on the Chinese internet. CBS said it was concerned with risks of its shows and movies being blocked in China and the safety of its employees in China.

Mass Surveillance

The government’s use of mass surveillance technologies is on the rise. Police, security agencies, and public and private entities targeted their use at vulnerable communities. In 2019, media reports revealed that a Hangzhou school had installed cameras to monitor students’ facial expressions and attentiveness, while a Nanjing company had required sanitation workers to wear GPS watches to monitor their efficiency.

Chinese technology companies, particularly Huawei but also artificial intelligence companies such as Cloudwalk, were under intense scrutiny for their ties to the Chinese government and their cooperation with foreign technology counterparts. As they expand worldwide, offering affordable equipment and services to governments and companies, there are concerns that they are enabling the proliferation of mass surveillance. In July, a media report found that US technology companies had collaborated with a Chinese company, Semptian, in developing microprocessors that enable computers to analyze vast amounts of data more efficiently, and that Semptian had used them to enhance mass surveillance and censorship for Chinese security agencies.

China does not have a unified privacy or data protection law. Although the government shows growing interest in regulating private companies’ collection of consumer data, such regulations are limited to the commercial sphere.

Freedom of Religion

The government restricts religious practice to five officially recognized religions in officially approved premises. Authorities retain control over religious bodies’ personnel appointments, publications, finances, and seminary applications. The government classifies many religious groups outside its control as “evil cults,” and subjects members to police harassment, torture, arbitrary detention, and imprisonment.

In December 2018, police detained the pastor and scores of members of Early Rain Covenant Church, an independent Protestant church in the southwestern city of Chengdu. Most were released days or months later. Pastor Wang Yi, a prominent member of China’s Christian community and a former legal scholar, remains in police custody and has been charged with “inciting subversion.”

In a speech in March, Xu Xiaohong, the official who oversees state-sanctioned Christian churches, called on churches to purge Western influence and to further “Sinicize” the religion. In September, a state-sanctioned church in Henan province was ordered to replace the Ten Commandments with quotes by President Xi.

In its continuing campaign to crack down on Islamic traditions, authorities in Gansu, Ningxia, and other Hui Muslim areas demolished domes on mosques and banned the public use of Arabic script.

A CCP notice banning retired Tibetan government employees from performing *kora*, the practice of circumambulating a sacred site, appears to have been issued in early August 2019.

Women’s and Girls’ Rights

As the country’s sex ratio imbalance has made it difficult for many men to find wives, “bride” trafficking from neighboring countries to China appears to have increased from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, North Korea, and Pakistan. Many women and girls are deceived through false promises of employment into travelling to China, only to be sold to Chinese families as brides and held in sexual slavery, often for years. In April, a Pakistani television station gained entry to what it said was a “matchmaking center” in Lahore where six women and girls, two only 13 years old, were held awaiting transit to China as brides.

In July, Wang Zhenhua, a prominent businessman and philanthropist, was detained by the police as they investigated a child molestation incident that injured a 9-year-old girl. Government censors initially blocked online discussions and media reporting of the case, leading to an online uproar. Also in July, a court in Chengdu ruled in a case of alleged sexual harassment in favor of the plaintiff, marking the first ruling since the #MeToo movement gathered momentum in China.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

China decriminalized homosexuality in 1997, but it still lacks laws protecting people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, and same-sex partnership is not legal. In March, during the UN Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review, China accepted recommendations to adopt legislation prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in education and employment. However, a National People’s Congress spokesperson said in August that the government would not consider marriage equality.

In January, the Guangzhou government banned two lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights organizations, including a student-led group at the University of Guangzhou. In March, government censors cut scenes depicting homosexuality from the Oscar-winning movie “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

China continued to detain and forcibly return hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of North Korean refugees, thus violating its obligations as a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. The government refused to consider fleeing North Koreans as refugees, even though those returned have long been persecuted. Human Rights Watch considers North Koreans in China as refugees *sur place*, meaning their arrival in China put them at risk if returned.

Key International Actors

A number of governments and parliaments have publicly expressed grave concerns about the situation in Xinjiang and other serious human rights violations by the Chinese government, and continue to seek to monitor trials and assist human rights defenders. The US Congress and European Parliament issued resolutions and considered legislation on issues including Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang, yet few governments were willing to impose tougher responses, such as sanctions or export controls, to press Beijing to change its policies.

In June, Germany granted refugee status to two activists from Hong Kong.

In March (https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-1605_en.htm), the European Commission announced a review of its relations with China, defining the country also as a “systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.” The European Union regularly raised human rights concerns in its Human Rights Council statements, in the EU-China human rights dialogue, and in occasional statements throughout the year. However, no human rights concerns were publicly raised by EU leaders during the 21st EU-China Summit, held in Brussels in April (https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china_en/60836/Joint%20statement%20of%20the%2021st%20EU-China%20summit).

The US repeatedly rhetorically condemned China’s human rights violations, yet these comments were weakened by President Trump’s complimentary commentary of President Xi. In October, the US placed the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau and its subsidiary agencies, the quasi-military entity in Xinjian known as the bingtuan, and eight Chinese technology firms on the Department of Commerce’s “entities list,” effectively blocking them from doing business with US companies, in response to their role in repression in Xinjiang. At around the same time, the US State Department announced it would withhold visas from Chinese government officials found to be culpable in Xinjiang abuses.

In July, 25 governments signed a letter to the UN Human Rights Council president, echoing the high commissioner’s call for an independent investigation in the Xinjiang region. China promptly organized a competing letter, signed by 50 governments, praising China’s regional approach to “counter-terrorism,” and noting that people in Xinjiang “enjoy a stronger sense of happiness.” Yet throughout the year the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) did not condemn abuses against Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang—while sharply criticizing abuses against Muslims elsewhere—and instead praised China’s treatment of Muslims.

Foreign Policy

In April, China hosted the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. The “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), announced in 2013, is China’s trillion-dollar infrastructure and investment program stretching across some 70 countries. During the forum, President Xi pledged to work with other countries to foster environment-friendly development, yet some of the BRI projects have been criticized for lack of transparency, disregard of community concerns, and threats of environmental degradation.

In February, thousands of people in Kachin State in Myanmar marched to protest a proposed China-financed mega-dam project. In March, the state-owned Bank of China said it would evaluate the funding commitment to a hydropower plant in Indonesia.

In late 2018, Chinese authorities detained two Canadians, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, in what is widely viewed as an act of retaliation against Canada for the arrest of Meng Wanzhou, an executive at the Chinese tech giant Huawei.

In August, Beijing formally arrested writer and China-born Australian citizen Yang Hengjun on espionage charges, seven months after he was detained in southern China.

Chinese authorities continued to try to restrict academic freedom abroad. In February, the Chinese consulate in Toronto told students at McMaster University to notify the consulate of the academics present at an event on repression in Xinjiang. At a number of universities in Australia in August, pro-Beijing students attempted to forcibly silence other students demonstrating peacefully in support of Hong Kong's democracy movement; similar incidents have been reported across Europe, New Zealand, and the United States. Few universities have responded with robust defenses of all students' and scholars' right to academic freedom.

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