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## USDOS – US Department of State (Author)

### 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: China

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reports on Hong Kong, Macau, Tibet, and Xinjiang are appended at the end of this report.

The constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which cites the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), states that citizens "enjoy freedom of religious belief" but limits protections for religious practice to "normal religious activities" without defining "normal." The government recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Only religious groups belonging to one of the five state-sanctioned "patriotic religious associations" representing these religions are permitted to register with the government and are officially permitted to hold worship services. Regulations require clergy to pledge allegiance to the CCP and socialism and to "resist illegal religious activities and religious extremist ideology, and resist infiltration by foreign forces using religion." On September 1, new administrative measures took effect requiring monasteries, churches, mosques, temples, and other "places of religious activity" to uphold the leadership of the CCP, implement "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," and promote the "Sinicization" of religion. The measures also stipulate that the content of sermons should both reflect "socialist core values" and be integrated with "traditional Chinese culture."

The law bans religious or spiritual groups that the government considers to be "cults" or promote heterodox teachings. Laws ban unauthorized domestically generated online religious content and prohibit overseas organizations and individuals from operating online religious information services in the country without a permit. National law prohibits organizations or individuals from interfering with the state educational

system for minors, effectively barring individuals younger than 18 from participating in most religious activities or receiving religious education.

The government continued to assert control over religious groups and to restrict the activities and personal freedom of religious adherents it perceived as threatening state or CCP interests, according to religious groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and international media reports. NGOs and media outlets continued to report deaths in custody and that the government tortured, physically abused, arrested, disappeared, detained, sentenced to prison, subjected to forced indoctrination in CCP ideology, and harassed adherents of both registered and unregistered religious groups for activities related to their religious beliefs and practices. Due to a lack of transparency regarding law enforcement's persecution of religious followers, estimates of those imprisoned during the year for their religious beliefs ranged from the low thousands to more than 10,000. NGOs reported that some previously detained individuals were denied freedom of movement even after their release. The Dui Hua (Dialogue) Foundation's Political Prisoner Database said that as of December 31, authorities held 2,772 prisoners on charges of "organizing/using a cult to undermine implementation of the law."

According to *Minghui*, a Falun Gong-affiliated publication, 188 Falun Gong adherents died during the year as a result of persecution. *Minghui* also reported that during the year authorities imprisoned 755 Falun Gong practitioners, arrested 3,457, and harassed 2,749 others, with harassment and arrests increasing around politically sensitive events. In March, the New York City Bar Association published a report that found there was "ample evidence China continues to engage in forced organ harvesting of prisoners of conscience." NGOs reported that the government continued to pressure unregistered religious groups to join state-sanctioned patriotic religious associations or disband, subjecting their leaders to arrests and harassment. The unregistered Church of Almighty God (CAG) reported that during the year, the government arrested at least 12,463 members in large-scale raids conducted in multiple provinces, imprisoned at least 2,207, and subjected at least 5,832 to torture or forced indoctrination. According to the CAG, at least 20 members died as a result of persecution. NGOs reported authorities raided Protestant house churches and detained and arrested members for conducting "illegal religious activities." Authorities continued to severely restrict Muslims from participating in the Hajj.

The government continued its multiyear campaign of "Sinicization" to bring all religious doctrine and practice in line with CCP doctrine, which included requiring clergy of all faiths to attend political indoctrination sessions, suggesting content for sermons that emphasized loyalty to the CCP and the state, and pushing for the "harmonization" of religion with a Han-centric conception of Chinese traditional culture. There were reports authorities continued to remove "Arab" architectural features such as

domes and minarets from Hui mosques in multiple provinces. Authorities continued to require CCP members and members of the armed forces to be atheists and forbade them to engage in religious practices. Leaders of the state-sanctioned religious groups and government officials worked together to inculcate religious personnel with party ideology and to eliminate and, in some instances, defrock “dissident” clergy whom authorities deem insufficiently “patriotic.” The government prosecuted unregistered clergy for “fraud.” In some instances, it withheld social welfare benefits from individuals who refused to reject folk religions. The government continued its campaign against religious groups it characterized as “cults,” including the CAG and Falun Gong, and it conducted propaganda campaigns aimed at school-age children against *xie jiao* (literally “heterodox teachings”).

According to reports, the government maintained a near-ubiquitous system of high-technology surveillance of religious sites and expanded use of local party cadres to surveil neighbors and report “cult-related activities, illegal preaching, and other political and security risks.” Authorities blocked religious websites and censored religious content from the popular messaging service WeChat. Authorities continued to restrict the printing and distribution of the Bible, the Quran, and other religious literature and penalized businesses that copied and published religious materials. One human rights group said local officials commonly treated unauthorized religious and “superstitious” books, including unauthorized versions of Bibles, the same as pornography with regard to penalties for their production, distribution, and possession. During the year, the government raided and outlawed house church schools, academies, and summer camps in rural and urban parts of the country.

NGOs and individuals reported that authorities conducted physical and digital surveillance overseas on Falun Gong adherents, Uyghur Muslims and other Muslims and members of religious minority groups from Xinjiang, and Tibetan Buddhists and harassed, detained, or otherwise persecuted their family members in China. They pressured members of religious minority groups living overseas to spy on fellow expatriates. Authorities sought the refoulement of Uyghurs from foreign countries, and pressured members of other religious minority groups to return to China.

The two-year provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops between the government and the Holy See, originally signed in 2018 and renewed in 2020 and 2022, remained in effect through October 2024. Some Catholic Church leaders viewed the agreement as an exception to government regulations prohibiting foreign involvement in religion. During the year, the Holy See publicly indicated the PRC had violated the agreement on multiple occasions, with the Holy See Foreign Minister-equivalent saying Holy See diplomats were attempting to negotiate “improvements.” On April 4, PRC authorities unilaterally transferred

Bishop Joseph Shen Bin from the Haimen Diocese in Jiangsu Province to serve as bishop of the vacant Shanghai Diocese, without Vatican consultation or concurrence. In July, the Pope officially approved Shen Bin's appointment but the Vatican's Prime Minister-equivalent said the PRC's unilateral action "seems to disregard the spirit of dialogue and cooperation" of the bishops agreement.

Christians, Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Falun Gong practitioners reported societal discrimination in employment, housing, and business opportunities. Media outlets observed a rise in antisemitic rhetoric on Chinese social media following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel.

The U.S. Secretary of State, the U.S. Ambassador to the PRC, and other senior State Department officials, as well as U.S. embassy and consulate general representatives, issued public statements, including via social media, supporting religious freedom and condemning the PRC's abuses of the rights of members of religious minority groups in the country, including in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. On November 15, during a Summit meeting with President Xi, the U.S. President directly raised concerns regarding PRC human rights abuses, including in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. The Secretary of State, U.S. Ambassador, and other embassy and consulate general officials met with a range of government officials to advocate greater religious freedom and tolerance and for the release of individuals imprisoned for religious reasons. The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general officials met with members of registered and unregistered religious groups, family members of religious prisoners, NGOs, and others to reinforce U.S. support for religious freedom.

On August 22, the Secretary of State announced visa restrictions against unnamed PRC government officials "for their involvement in the forcible assimilation of more than one million Tibetan children in government-run boarding schools." On December 8, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned two Chinese nationals under the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act for their connection to serious human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and the Department of Homeland Security added three PRC entities to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List for participating in forced labor transfers of Uyghurs and other religious and ethnic minority groups in the Xinjiang region.

Since 1999, China has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated China as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restriction on exports to China of crime control or detection instruments and equipment, under the Foreign



Relations Authorization Act of 1990 and 1991 (Public Law 101-246), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the act.

## Section I.

### Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.4 billion (midyear 2023). The 2019 State Council Information Office (SCIO) report, *Seeking Happiness for People: 70 Years of Progress on Human Rights in China*, reported that there are approximately 200 million religious adherents in the country. A 2018 SCIO white paper on religion in the country states there are approximately 5,500 religious groups. In August, the Pew Research Center published a report titled *Measuring Religion in China* that concluded levels of religious identity in China have remained stable since 2010.

The 2018 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) found that 90 percent of respondents report no religious affiliation, while 4 percent report identifying as Buddhist, 3 percent as adherents of folk religions, 2 percent as Christian, and 1 percent as Muslim. Measurements of religious affiliation, however, vary depending on survey methodology. As reported by Pew in August, while only 4 percent of the population “identify with or believe in Buddhism,” according to the 2018 GCSS, 33 percent report “believing in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva,” indicating some individuals hold syncretic beliefs that combine Buddhism, Chinese folk religions, and broader Chinese traditional practices. The 2018 GCSS found that 2 percent of Chinese believe in Christianity, but 7 percent of respondents to the 2018 China Family Panel Studies survey said they believe in Jesus or *tianzhu*, the word used by Chinese Catholics for God. Using different methodology, researchers from Boston University estimate Christians total 106 million.

Local and regional figures for the number of religious followers, including those belonging to the five officially recognized religions, are unclear. Local governments do not release these statistics, and even official religious organizations do not have accurate numbers. The Pew Research Center and other observers say the numbers of adherents of many religious groups often are underreported. In 2021, the U.S. government estimated Buddhists comprise 18.2 percent of the country's total population, Christians 5.1 percent, Muslims 1.8 percent, followers of folk religions 21.9 percent, and atheists or unaffiliated persons 52.2 percent, with Hindus, Jews, and Taoists comprising less than 1 percent. According to a 2017 estimate by the NGO Freedom House, there are more than 350 million religious adherents in the country, including seven to 20 million Falun Gong practitioners, 12 million Roman Catholics, six to eight million Tibetan Buddhists, and hundreds of millions who follow various folk traditions. According to Boston University's 2020 World Religion Database, there are 499 million folk and ethnic religionists (34 percent), 474 million agnostics (33 percent), 228 million Buddhists (16 percent), 106 million

Christians (7.4 percent), 100 million atheists (7 percent), 23.7 million Muslims (1.7 percent), and other religions adherents who together constitute less than 1 percent of the population, including 5.9 million Taoists, 1.8 million Confucians, 20,500 Sikhs, and 2,900 Jews. According to 2015 data from the World Jewish Congress, the country's Jewish population is 2,500 and concentrated in Beijing, Shanghai, and Kaifeng.

The SCIO's 2018 white paper found the number of Protestants to be 38 million. Among these, there are 20 million Protestants affiliated with the Three Self-Patriotic Movement (TSPM), the state-sanctioned umbrella organization for all officially recognized Protestant churches, according to information on TSPM's website in 2017. The SCIO report states there are six million Catholics, although media and international NGO estimates suggest there are 10-12 million, approximately half of whom practice in churches not affiliated with the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), the state-sanctioned umbrella organization for Catholics. Accurate estimates on the numbers of Catholics and Protestants, as well as other faiths, are difficult to calculate because many adherents practice exclusively at home or in churches that are not state sanctioned.

According to the 2018 SCIO white paper, there are 10 ethnic minority groups totaling more than 20 million persons for whom Islam is the majority religion. The Pew August report estimates 17 million Chinese identify as Sunni Muslims. The two largest Muslim ethnic minority groups are Hui and Uyghur, with Hui Muslims concentrated primarily in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and in Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan Provinces. The State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), also referred to as the National Religious Affairs Administration, estimates the Muslim Hui population at 10.6 million. Uyghur Muslims are concentrated in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

While there is no reliable government breakdown of the Buddhist population by school, the vast majority of Buddhists are adherents of Mahayana Buddhism, according to the Pew Research Center. Most ethnic Tibetans practice Tibetan Buddhism, although a sizeable minority practices Bon, a pre-Buddhist Indigenous religion.

Prior to the government's 1999 ban on Falun Gong, the government estimated there were 70 million adherents. Falun Gong sources estimate that tens of millions continue to practice privately.

## Section II.

### Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution, which cites the leadership of the CCP and the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping Thought, states

citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief,” but it limits protections for religious practice to “normal religious activities” without defining “normal.” It states religion may not be used to disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educational system. The constitution provides for the right to hold or not to hold a religious belief and declares that state organs, public organizations, and individuals may not discriminate against citizens “who believe in or do not believe in any religion.” The constitution states, “Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.”

The law does not allow individuals or groups to take legal action against the government based on the religious freedom protections afforded by the constitution. Criminal law allows the state to sentence government officials to up to two years in prison if they violate a citizen’s religious freedom.

The government recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Regulations require religious organizations to register with the government. Only religious groups belonging to one of the five state-sanctioned religious associations are permitted to register, and only these organizations may legally hold worship services. The five associations, which operate under the direction of the CCP’s United Front Work Department (UFWD), are the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), Taoist Association of China, Islamic Association of China, TSPM, and CCPA. Other religious groups, such as Protestant groups unaffiliated with the official TSPM or Catholics professing loyalty to the Holy See but not affiliated with the CCPA, are not permitted to register as legal entities. The law does not provide a mechanism for religious groups independent of the five official patriotic religious associations to obtain legal status.

The CCP is responsible for creating religious regulations and oversees the UFWD, which in turn manages the SARA’s functions and responsibilities. The SARA is responsible for implementing the CCP’s regulations on religious affairs and administers the provincial and local bureaus of religious affairs.

The 2020 Administrative Measures for Religious Groups regulate the organization, function, offices, supervision, projects, and economic administration of communities and groups at the national and local levels. The measures state that only registered groups may operate legally and stipulate that religious organizations must support the leadership of the CCP, adhere to the direction of Sinicization, and implement the values of socialism. They state specifically that religious organizations shall “follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, abide by laws, regulations, rules, and policies, correctly handle the relationship between national law and canon, and enhance national awareness, awareness of the rule of law, and citizenship.”

The SARA's 2021 Administrative Measures for Religious Clergy require all clergy to pledge allegiance to the CCP and socialism. The measures state religious clergy "should love the motherland, support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, support the socialist system, abide by the constitution, laws, regulations, and rules, practice the core values of socialism, adhere to the principle of independent and self-administered religion in China, adhere to the direction of the Sinicization of religion in China, and operate to maintain national unity, religious harmony, and social stability." The measures also state that clergy should "resist illegal religious activities and religious extremist ideology, and resist infiltration by foreign forces using religion." The measures also provide that "entrance to religious places of worship should be regulated through strict gatekeeping, verification of identity, and registration." The measures create a database of "religious personnel" to track their performance and also stipulate that authorities shall hold religious organizations and institutions responsible for the behavior of individual religious clergy. They stipulate religious staff should study "the contents of doctrines and regulations that are conducive to social harmony, progress of the times, and health and civilization." The measures instruct religious clergy to integrate these doctrines and regulations into "preaching and to play a role in promoting the Sinicization of religion in our country."

On September 1, revisions to the 2005 Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues took effect requiring "places of religious activity" to uphold the leadership of the CCP, implement "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era," and promote the Sinicization of religion. Ensuring support for and compliance with these policies is listed as the first responsibility of managers of religious institutions, who are also required to establish a system to ensure religious personnel study CCP policies. The measures also stipulate that the content of sermons should both reflect "socialist core values" and be integrated with "traditional Chinese culture." The updated measures prohibit the construction of large open-air religious statues outside temples and churches, and state religious activity sites "shall integrate Chinese culture and embody Chinese style in areas such as architecture, sculpture, painting, and decoration." They require managers of religious venues to "prevent foreign forces from using religion to infiltrate" their organization.

Measures promulgated in 2022 ban unauthorized domestic online religious content and prohibit overseas organizations and individuals from operating online religious information services in the country without a permit. The measures direct government regulators to ban content that uses religion "to incite subversion of state sovereignty, oppose the leadership of the Communist Party, undermine the socialist system, national and ethnic unity, and social stability, or advocate extremism, terrorism, national separatism, and religious fanaticism." The measures require that any individual or organization engaging in

“cyberspace religious information-releasing services, reposting services, and dissemination platform services,” such as streaming or publishing sermons, obtain a government permit to do so and validate that permit every three years. Without a permit, organizations and individuals “must not proselytize online, carry out religious education or training, publish preaching or repost or link to related content, organize the carrying out of religious activities online, or broadcast religious rites such as obeisance to Buddha, burning incense, ordinations, services, masses, or baptisms, through means such as text, images, audio, or video either live or in recordings.” To acquire a permit, individuals or organizations must apply to the religious affairs department of the government of the province, autonomous region, or municipality where they are located.

The law bans certain religious or spiritual groups. Criminal law defines banned groups as “cult [xie jiao] organizations” and provides for criminal prosecution of individuals belonging to such groups and punishment of up to life in prison. There are no published criteria for determining or procedures for challenging such a designation. Criminal law prohibits “organizing and using a sect, cult, or superstition to undermine implementation of the law.” Violations carry a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

The CCP maintains an extralegal, party-run security apparatus to eliminate the Falun Gong religious group and other banned organizations. The government considers Falun Gong an “illegal organization.” The government continues to ban the Guanyin Method religious group (Guanyin Famen or the Way of the Goddess of Mercy) and Zhong Gong (a *qigong* exercise discipline). The government also characterizes a number of Christian groups as “cult organizations,” including the Shouters, CAG (also known as Eastern Lightning), Society of Disciples (Mentu Hui), Full Scope Church (Quan Fanwei Jiaohui), Spirit Sect, New Testament Church, Three Grades of Servants (San Ban Puren), Association of Disciples, Established King Church, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Family of Love, and South China Church.

According to regulations, in order to register, religious organizations must submit information on the organization’s historical background, members, doctrines, key publications, minimum funding requirements, and government sponsor, which must be one of the five state-sanctioned religious associations. Registration information is required only once, but religious organizations must reregister if changes are made to the required documentation.

The civil code permits a religious organization established according to law to apply for the status of a “legal person” (nonprofit entity). This status permits such organizations to own property, publish approved materials,



train staff, and collect donations, and facilitates authorities' ability to track and regulate religious institutions.

Religious and other regulations permit the five official patriotic religious associations to engage in activities such as building places of worship, training religious leaders, publishing literature, and providing social services to local communities. The CCP's UFWD, including the SARA, and the Ministry of Civil Affairs provide policy guidance and supervision on the implementation of these regulations.

Regulations stipulate that individuals who participate in unsanctioned religious activities are subject to criminal and administrative penalties. The regulations also stipulate that any form of income from illegal activities or illegal properties shall be confiscated and a fine imposed of between one to three times the value of the illegal income or properties. If the illegal income or properties cannot be identified, officials may impose a fine of less than 50,000 renminbi (RMB) (\$7,000). Authorities may penalize property owners renting space to unregistered religious groups by confiscating those properties and related income and levying fines of between RMB 20,000 (\$2,800) and RMB 200,000 (\$28,000).

Government policy allows registered religious groups to engage in charitable work, but regulations specifically prohibit faith-based organizations from proselytizing while conducting charitable activities. Authorities require faith-based charities, like all other charitable groups, to register with the government. Once they are registered as official charities, authorities allow them to raise funds publicly and to receive tax benefits. The government does not permit unregistered charitable groups to raise funds openly, hire employees, open bank accounts, or own property. According to several unregistered religious groups, the government requires faith-based charities to obtain official cosponsorship of their registration application from the local official religious affairs bureau. Authorities often require these groups to affiliate with one of the five state-sanctioned religious associations.

The law requires members of religious groups to seek approval to travel abroad for "religious training, conferences, pilgrimages, and other activities." Anyone found organizing such activities without approval may be fined between RMB 20,000 (\$2,800) and RMB 200,000 (\$28,000). Authorities may seize illegally obtained income connected to such travel and, "if the case constitutes a crime, criminal responsibility shall be investigated according to law." The regulations permit only the Islamic Association of China to organize Muslim pilgrimage trips and require that those who apply to join the Hajj be "patriotic, law-abiding, and have good conduct," have never before participated in the Hajj, and be in sound physical and mental health. Travelers must also be able to pay all costs associated with Hajj travel and oppose religious extremism.

Regulations specify that no religious structure, including clerical housing, may be transferred, mortgaged, or utilized as an investment. SARA regulations restrict religious groups conducting business or making investments by stipulating the property and income of religious groups, schools, and venues must not be distributed and should be used for activities and charities befitting their purposes; any individual or organization that donates funds to build religious venues is prohibited from owning those venues.

Regulations impose a limit on foreign donations to religious groups, stating such donations must be used for activities that authorities deem appropriate for the group and the site. Regulations state that donations exceeding RMB 100,000 (\$14,000) must be submitted to the local government for review and approval. Religious groups, religious schools, and “religious activity sites” may not accept donations from foreign sources that have conditions attached.

SARA regulations require that religious activity “must not harm national security” or support “religious extremism.” The regulations do not define “extremism.” Measures to safeguard national unity and respond to “religious extremism” include monitoring groups, individuals, and institutions. Penalties for “harm to national security” may include suspending groups and canceling the credentials of clergy. The counterterrorism law describes “religious extremism” as the ideological basis of terrorism and states religious extremism uses “distorted religious teachings or other means to incite hatred or discrimination, or advocate violence.”

National laws allow each provincial administration to issue its own regulations concerning religious affairs, including penalties for violations. In addition to the five officially recognized religions, local governments may, at their discretion, permit followers of certain unregistered religions to carry out religious practices.

By law, prison inmates have the right to believe in a religion and maintain their religious faith while in custody, but not a right to exercise their faith, such as by accessing prayer facilities or meeting with clergy. According to law, Muslim prisoners are reportedly allowed to have meals with the “halal” label.

The law does not define what constitutes proselytizing. The constitution states that no state unit, social organization, or individual may force a citizen to believe or not believe in a religion. Offenders are subject to administrative and criminal penalties.

By law and judicial interpretation, it is a crime to force others to wear “extremist” garments or symbols; doing so is punishable by up to three years’ imprisonment, short-term detention, or controlled (supervised)

release, as well as a concurrent fine. Authorities have discretion to punish individuals for voluntarily wearing such garments or symbols. The law and its interpretation do not define what garments or symbols are considered “extremist.”

Publication and distribution of literature containing religious content must follow guidelines determined by the State Publishing Administration. Publication of religious material must also conform to guidelines determined by the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee. Online activities (“online religious information services”) of religious groups require prior approval from the provincial religious affairs bureau, a requirement that overlaps with measures passed in 2022 regulating religious content online. Authorities may confiscate religious texts published without authorization, including Bibles, Qurans, and Buddhist and Taoist texts, and close unauthorized publishing houses.

The government offers some subsidies for the construction of state-sanctioned places of worship and religious schools. To establish a place of worship, a religious group must first receive approval from the religious affairs department of the local government when the facility is proposed, and again before services are first held at that location. Religious organizations must submit dozens of documents to register during these approval processes, including detailed management plans of their religious activities, exhaustive financial records, and personal information on all staff members. Religious communities not going through the formal registration process may not legally have a dedicated facility or worship meeting space. Therefore, every time such groups want to reserve a space for worship, such as by renting a hotel room or an apartment, they must seek a separate approval from government authorities for that specific service. Worshipping in a space without prior approval, gained either through the formal registration process or by seeking an approval for each service, is considered an illegal religious activity and is subject to criminal or administrative penalties.

Among other qualifications, national regulations require Muslim clerics to “uphold the leadership of the CCP; [and] love Islam and serve Muslims.” According to sources, imams must pass an examination testing their ideological knowledge to renew their license each year.

By regulation, if a religious structure is to be demolished or relocated because of city planning or the construction of “key” projects, the party responsible for demolishing the structure must consult with its local bureau of religious affairs (guided by the SARA) and the religious group using the structure. If all parties agree to the demolition, the party conducting the demolition must agree to rebuild the structure or to provide compensation equal to its appraised market value.

Regulations allow only the five state-sanctioned religious associations or their affiliates to form and register religious schools. Children younger than 18 are prohibited from participating in religious activities and receiving religious education, even in schools run by religious organizations. One regulation states that no individual may use religion to hinder the national education system and that no religious activities may be held in schools. The law mandates the teaching of atheism in schools, and a CCP directive provides guidance to universities on how to prevent foreign proselytizing of university students. The Administrative Measures for Religious Schools issued by the SARA in 2021 stipulate that religious schools should ensure the curriculum includes CCP ideological training.

Ministry of Education regulations prohibit private tutors, including those based abroad, from using textbooks “propagating religious teachings, doctrines, canons, xie jiao, or feudal superstitions, etc.”

The law states job applicants shall not face discrimination in hiring based on religious belief.

The PRC is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). With respect to Macau, the central government notified the UN Secretary-General that residents of Macau shall not be restricted in the rights and freedoms to which they are entitled unless otherwise provided for by law. In case of restrictions, the restrictions shall not contravene the ICCPR. With respect to Hong Kong, the central government notified the UN Secretary-General that the ICCPR would also apply to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

## GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

### Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

Authorities continued to arrest and otherwise detain leaders and members of religious groups, often those connected with groups not registered with the state-sanctioned religious associations. Authorities reportedly used vague or insubstantial charges, sometimes in connection with religious activity, to convict and sentence leaders and members of religious groups to years in prison. Due to the lack of transparency regarding law enforcement’s persecution of religious followers, estimates of those imprisoned during the year for their religious beliefs ranged from the low thousands to more than 10,000.

NGOs, religious groups, and media sources continued to report torture, denial of medical treatment, deaths in custody, enforced disappearances (often through “residential surveillance at a designated location” – a form of black-site detention utilized by authorities against individuals accused of endangering state security), and organ harvesting in prison of individuals whom authorities targeted based on their religious beliefs or affiliation. NGOs and media reported authorities used violence during

arrests and tortured detainees, including by forcing them to maintain stress positions, beating them, depriving them of food, water, and sleep, and subjecting them to forced indoctrination. NGOs reported that some previously detained individuals were denied freedom of movement even after their release.

In March, the Christian advocacy NGO ChinaAid reported that authorities arrested staff of the Church of Abundance in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, including Fu Juan and pastors Lian Changnian and Lian Xuliang, officially for "fraud," and tortured them at a black site. ChinaAid reported that officers also tortured other Christians identified as Brother Wang and Brother Jia. Police cuffed Wang's hands and feet to a chair, covered his head with a curtain, and "tried to compel him to betray his pastors and give up his faith." Police fastened Jia to a tiger chair to immobilize him, forced smoke into his eyes for 20 minutes, and forced him to squat for three hours during interrogation.

Minghui reported in December that it confirmed 188 deaths during the year as a result of persecution of Falun Gong members and an additional 66 deaths that occurred in prior years. Minghui stated many deaths were linked to injuries sustained while under torture in detention or incarceration, while others died after being denied adequate medical treatment. For example, Minghui reported that Wuhan resident Zong Ming, a Falun Gong practitioner, died in January, six days after her release from an eight-month stay in a reeducation center. On her release, Zong was reportedly emaciated and struggled to speak. She died after hospital staff refused to treat her. Another practitioner, Hu Yongxiu, died in custody six days after police arrested her on March 30 for talking to people about Falun Gong outside of a hospital in Wuhan, Hubei Province, according to Minghui.

According to NGOs, authorities continued to arrest Falun Gong practitioners in large numbers. *Minghui* reported that authorities imprisoned 755 Falun Gong practitioners during the year (compared with 446 in 2022), arrested 3,457 individuals in 30 provinces and municipalities, and harassed 2,749 others through raids, orders to attend mandatory indoctrination classes, loss of their jobs, and other discrimination. Harassment and arrests increased around politically sensitive events, such as the annual meetings of the National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, both held in March, and "World Falun Dafa Day" on May 13. Human rights advocates expressed concern about ongoing detention and in some cases reports of torture of Falun Gong practitioners, often for alleged activities related to Falun Gong practice. Detained individuals included Chen Yang, Cao Zhimin, Liu Aihua, Zhou Deyong, Meng Zhaohong, Kong Qingping, Hou Lijun, and Xu Na. Falun Gong practitioner Wang Zhiwen, who was imprisoned from 1999-2014, reportedly remained subject to an exit ban, i.e., prohibited from leaving the country.



According to *Minghui*, “Often during arrests, practitioners face excessive violence by the police. Once in custody, they may be victims of torture as the police attempt to force them to renounce Falun Gong or provide information about what they have done to raise awareness about the persecution or their interactions with other practitioners.” For example, on February 20, police arrested Zhang Jue of Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, for talking to people about Falun Gong on the street. Police tied her to a tiger bench, beamed bright light into her eyes, and interrogated her for the entire night without allowing her to sleep.

According to the Christian advocacy NGO CSW (formerly Christian Solidarity Worldwide), Falun Gong practitioner Feng Yunqing remained in Wuhan Women’s Prison at year’s end, serving a seven-and-a-half-year sentence for “using a cult to undermine law enforcement.” Authorities arrested Feng in 2017 after she posted videos to the internet regarding the government’s persecution of Falun Gong, Christian house churches, and human rights activists. CSW said authorities kept her husband Fang Bin, a Falun Gong practitioner and COVID-19 whistleblower, under strict surveillance after his April release from prison.

According to the Falun Dafa Information Center, on June 12, authorities sentenced Falun Gong practitioners He Binggang and his fiancée Zhang Yibo to six- and five-years’ imprisonment, respectively, for their alleged involvement in developing and maintaining firewall circumvention software. *Minghui* reported Falun Gong practitioners developed the software, called oGate, to overcome government internet censorship. Police arrested He and Zhang in Shanghai in 2021, along with other Falun Gong practitioners from different parts of the country believed to be involved in oGate. Authorities reportedly denied He access to his attorney during his detention.

Civil society organizations continued to express concern over reports that authorities forced members of religious organizations, in particular Falun Gong members and ethnic Uyghurs, to serve as organ donors. In March, the New York City Bar Association published a report titled *Human Organ Supply: Report on Ethical Considerations and Breaches in Organ Harvesting Practices* that found there was “ample evidence China continues to engage in forced organ harvesting of prisoners of conscience.” Writing in *Voices in Bioethics* in March, one of the New York City Bar Association report’s authors said that in China, “there is evidence that people incarcerated for religious beliefs and practices (Falun Gong) and ethnic minorities (Uyghurs) have been subjects of forced organ harvesting,” with witnesses testifying to “the removal of organs from live people without ample anesthesia, summonses to the execution grounds for organ removal, methods of causing death for the purpose of organ procurement, removing eyes from prisoners who were alive, and forcing live prisoners into operating rooms.”

In August, the Europe-based Coordination of Associations and Individuals for Freedom of Conscience and the Romanian Independent Society of Human Rights, joined by the Association for Ethical Organ Transplants and 12 other NGOs, submitted a written statement to the UN Human Rights Council calling on the UN Secretary-General to initiate a fact-finding mission regarding forced organ harvesting in China. The statement also called on the World Health Organization (WHO) to include a verification of the end of forced organ harvesting of Chinese Falun Gong members in its One Health agenda.

Multiple Falun Gong practitioners reported to *Minghui* that authorities forced them to undergo medical examinations against their will while in detention and to provide blood samples.

The NGO Dui Hua reported that as of December 31, authorities held as prisoners 2,772 individuals for “organizing/using a cult to undermine implementation of the law.”

Media and NGOs reported that despite the provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops between the Holy See and the government, the government continued to harass, detain, disappear, arrest, imprison, and in some cases defrock Catholic clergy who did not join the state-sanctioned CCPA. ChinaAid and *Union of Catholic Asian News (UCA News)* reported in September that a court in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, convicted Catholic priest Father Joseph Yang Xiaoming of “impersonating religious personnel” and obtaining money by fraud after he refused to join the CCPA. The local religious affairs bureau began a case against Yang in 2021 after he refused to register with the government following his ordination. The court ordered the confiscation of “illegal proceeds” totaling RMB 28,473 (\$4,000), fined Yang RMB 1,500 (\$210), and ordered him to cease practicing as a priest. *UCA News* said Yang was reportedly ordained by Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin, a Vatican-approved bishop whom PRC authorities arrested several times for refusing to join state-run church bodies, and that religious affairs bureau personnel had acknowledged the validity of his ordination certificate. According to ChinaAid, Yang termed the religious affairs bureau’s actions “unjust” and a violation of canon law.

Members of the CAG, an unregistered organization that authorities labeled a “cult”, faced large-scale detention and arrest in 29 provinces, according to civil society reporting. The CAG reported that during the year, the government arrested at least 12,463 individuals, compared with 10,895 arrests in 2022. Authorities sentenced at least 2,207 individuals to prison (compared with 1,901 in 2022), including 1,094 individuals who received sentences of three years or more. Authorities subjected at least 5,832 to torture or forced indoctrination. The highest number of arrests occurred in Jiangsu, Anhui, Zhejiang, and Shandong Provinces.

According to the CAG, at least 20 members died as a result of persecution during the year. The CAG stated police subjected detainees who refused to renounce their faith to sleep deprivation for up to 10 days, being suspended with wrists handcuffed, prolonged standing or sitting, stress positions, electric shock, and beatings. According to family members, some individuals who died in custody appeared bruised, malnourished, and emaciated. According to *Bitter Winter*, an online publication that tracks religious liberty and human rights abuses in the country, one CAG member died three days after her arrest; police said she hanged herself but relatives viewing the body reported there were no marks from hanging on her neck and that she appeared to have head wounds. One woman, pursued by police, jumped to her death.

In September, *Bitter Winter* reported that early in the year, the government began a broad campaign to eliminate the CAG. Public security, national security, armed police, and special forces police carried out joint operations to arrest CAG members. Authorities reportedly surveilled church members for months or even years prior to conducting mass arrests. For example, on June 15, authorities in Zhejiang Province arrested at least 1,043 CAG members. Authorities transferred some of those arrested to reeducation centers or black sites where they subjected church members to physical and psychological torture and forced “deprogramming.” One Anhui Province public security officer told *Bitter Winter*, “This is a nationwide, coordinated purge; our focus this year is on cracking down on The Church of Almighty God.” One officer reportedly told a detainee during interrogation, “This time, we’re uprooting leaders from regions down to smaller districts, and then to local churches, and the intensity of the strike will continue to increase.”

CSW and ChinaAid reported that in July, authorities in Shanxi Province prosecuted three leaders of the Linfen Covenant House Church – Li Jie, Han Xiaodong, and Wang Qiang – as a criminal “clique” for establishing an illegal organization without official approval and “luring” individuals to pay tithes. ChinaAid said authorities began in February to harass members of the church, which refused to join the TSPM. Authorities pressured church members to sign statements declaring themselves to be victims of fraud and pledging not to attend the church in the future. According to CSW, authorities held Li and Han incommunicado and subjected them to coercion and abuse, including sleep deprivation.

According to *Bitter Winter*, authorities in April arrested Pastor Wang Changchun of the Bengbu Living Stone Reform Church in Anhui Province. Authorities first accused him of “illegal business operations” but in August changed the charges to fraud, which carries a maximum penalty of seven years. They also charged Wang’s wife and four co-workers with fraud. According to *Bitter Winter*, the charges were part of the government’s ongoing efforts to crack down on house churches that refused to join the TSPM. In 2018, Wang Changchun was among the house church leaders

who signed a statement drafted by Pastor Wang Yi of Chengdu's Early Rain Covenant Church protesting the 2017 regulations tightening control on religious activities. Pastor Wang Yi remained imprisoned and without access to a Bible for personal use, according to human rights advocates.

The Associated Press reported in December that authorities detained Ding Zhongfu and four other senior members of the Ganquan house church in Anhui Province on suspicion of fraud. Ding's wife said Ganquan church had been forced to move multiple times in the past decade to avoid police. Ding managed the church's finances, and the deed to the property where the congregation met was put under his and two other church members' names because the government did not recognize the church.

*Bitter Winter* reported that as part of an ongoing campaign against xie jiao groups among the Yi ethnic minority in the Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province, authorities in September sentenced Miao Xuqiong, a 75-year-old Falun Gong practitioner, to four years in prison. Authorities detained Miao in 2021 and held her incommunicado. Authorities previously detained her from 2016-2020 for her Falun Gong activity.

*Bitter Winter* and ChinaAid reported that authorities on September 18 again arrested street evangelist Chen Wensheng, this time in Hengyang, Hunan Province, for organizing and financing unlawful assemblies. According to ChinaAid, Chen has been a well-known traveling preacher for years since converting to Christianity and authorities constantly surveilled and harassed him and his family, including by arresting him seven times since 2021, to pressure him to stop evangelizing.

ChinaAid reported that on September 28, police raided the Sunday service of the Beijing Zion Church, the largest house church in the capital, and arrested the 31 individuals attending the service. Police subsequently released all but two individuals, Huang Duoia and Li Mingjie, whom they detained for more than 100 hours.

According to ChinaAid, in April, authorities released Guangzhou Bible Reform Church member Gao Heng after he served one year and 10 months in prison for "provoking trouble and picking quarrels." According to fellow parishioners, immediately upon his release, authorities took Gao to Huanggang, Hubei Province, his registered residence, and detained him there. A court in Guangzhou City, Guangdong Province, convicted Gao in 2022 in a secret trial after he held up a sign reading "pray for the country" in a Guangzhou metro station in June 2021. Church members said that following Gao's arrest, authorities pressured his family to cut ties with the church.

**Abuses Limiting Religious Belief or Expression**

Reports from human rights NGOs and religious groups, as well as government statements, indicated officials continued efforts to Sinicize religious doctrine and practice for the five officially recognized religions. According to the Pew Research Center, the government's Sinicization policy "requires religious groups to align their doctrines, customs, and morality with Chinese culture. The campaign particularly affects so-called 'foreign' religions – including Islam as well as Catholicism and Protestantism – whose adherents are expected to prioritize Chinese traditions and to show loyalty to the state." NGOs and religious groups said Sinicization policies continued to contribute to repression and harassment of religious practitioners who refused to participate in state-sanctioned religious organizations.

In August, Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported on the government's updates to the 2005 Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues, saying, "The ruling Chinese Communist Party is stepping up control over religious venues that will ban ties with overseas organizations while forcing them to deliver 'patriotic' education to believers." RFA said the rules formed part of an ongoing political campaign to Sinicize religious activity that already included the hanging of portraits of Xi Jinping in churches, a ban on religious Christmas services, and enforced demolition work at major mosques and churches to remove domes and crosses. Chang Chia-lin, a professor at the Institute of Mainland China at Taiwan's Tamkang University, said the new rules represented the triumph of politics over spirituality. One monk told RFA, "Buddhism is a religion of wisdom, which should train people to think independently. But Sinicized Buddhism is just a form of organizational brainwashing in disguise." The monk said authorities revoked his religious credentials and put him under close surveillance, including monitoring his phone, after he publicly criticized the Sinicization policy.

In March 20 remarks delivered at a provincial religious work conference in Guangzhou, Guangdong governor Wang Weizhong emphasized the Sinicization of religion, guiding religion to comply with socialism, strengthening management of the clergy and religious sites, strengthening management of religious content online, and nurturing "politically reliable" religious representatives.

The government reported officials and religious leaders in Fujian Province held several events during the year designed to promote the Sinicization of religion. State media reported that on May 31, the Fujian Taoist Association established an education center to promote the Sinicization of Taoism and encourage Taoists to "love the Party, the country, and socialism." According to the UFWD, the Central Institute of Socialism and the Fujian Two Christian Councils (composed of the TSPM and the China Christian Council) held a conference from August 15 to 16 at which attendees discussed how best to use Christian theology to promote peace, patriotism, and national unity. In Fuzhou, government officials and



religious leaders convened the 2023 Fujian Religion Sinicization Research Forum from August 15 to 17. Attendees included more than 60 Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant leaders from five regions.

The Guangdong Islamic Association reported that on March 12, it hosted a two-day training session for imams at the Shenzhen Mosque in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, to promote the Sinicization of Islam. Officials from the provincial religious affairs bureau and UFWD attended. At the event, Imam Wang Wenjie, vice president of the Islamic Association of China, called on provincial imams to “study and implement the spirit of the 20th Party Congress.”

*Bitter Winter* reported that on September 6, Yang Faming, president of the Islamic Association of China, spoke at the 3rd Jiangsu Provincial Forum on Adhering to the Sinicization of Islam held in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province. Yang said Muslims should “comprehensively and accurately study and understand the spirit of the 20th National Congress of the CCP, and deeply understand the decisive significance of supporting the Central Committee of the CCP and General Secretary Xi Jinping and adhere to their political guidance.” He also said Muslims should “further promote the Sinicization of Islam in our country and rely on the profound ideological resources and historical traditions of the Jinling School to do a good job in the application of Confucianism to Islam.”

The Guangdong Buddhist Association reported that in April, it convened 60 local Buddhist leaders at the Jiangmen Guanyin Temple in Jiangmen City to discuss the Sinicization of Buddhism in Guangdong Province. According to an account of the conference published on the Jiangmen government website, participants agreed they should be guided by Xi Jinping’s “important exposition on religious work” and “lead Buddhist believers to focus their will and strength on the new journey of comprehensively building a socialist country.”

*Tibet Press* reported that on September 5, the state-run BAC held a training course for 100 Buddhist leaders from all parts of the country, plus UFWD officials, at Mount Wutai in Shanxi Province, one of the country’s most sacred Buddhist sites. BAC president Master Yanjue urged participants to study and implement the spirit of the 20th National Congress of the CCP and Xi Jinping Thought. Attendees were also tasked with studying and implementing Xi’s views on religious work. *Tibet Press* noted Buddhism has existed in China for millennia and said the training course “was not aimed at preserving or enhancing the existing harmony between Buddhism and Chinese culture. Instead, it was yet another step in the CCP’s campaign to reframe Chinese Buddhism in its own image.” According to *Tibet Press*, the CCP’s Sinicization effort “raises concerns about the erosion of the unique spiritual identity of Chinese Buddhism, which has evolved over centuries. Monastic traditions, meditation practices, and philosophical teachings may be subsumed

under the umbrella of party ideology. Moreover, the risk of religious persecution and suppression looms large. The CCP's efforts to exert control over religious institutions and beliefs can stifle the freedom of religious expression, undermining the very essence of Buddhism as a path to spiritual enlightenment."

State media reported that at an event marking the seventieth anniversary of the BAC in October, Politburo Standing Committee member and chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Wang Huning called for developing Buddhist teachers who were "politically reliable" and said the Buddhist community must guide religious believers to "continuously enhance identification with the motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Chinese Communist Party, and socialism with Chinese characteristics."

The *South China Morning Post* reported in December that at the 11th National Chinese Christian Conference, where new leaders for the TSPM and CCPA were elected, Wang Huning said leaders of Christian groups "should adhere to the direction of Sinicization of Christianity" and "interpret the doctrines that conform to the development and progress requirements of contemporary China, the core values of socialism and the excellent traditional Chinese culture."

*Bitter Winter* reported that on July 25 and 26, the state-run Taoist Association of China and several Taoist temples and institutes around the country held a conference titled "Taoism on the Sea: The First Forum on the Theory and Practice of Sinicization of Taoism" in Shanghai. The director of the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs told attendees Taoism needed to be "rectified" and modernized. Presenters encouraged teachers of Taoist painting and calligraphy to produce works that expressed "thoughts of loving the Party, the country, and socialism." *Bitter Winter* said, "Taoism is quintessentially Chinese. The campaign confirms that 'Sinicizing' religion does not mean making it more Chinese, but more subservient to the CCP."

In September, *Bitter Winter* reported that during the year, the Propaganda Department and Civilization Office of the CCP Committee of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region instituted a pilot program in several villages that offered financial and in-kind incentives to farmers demonstrating they had rejected "illegal religious superstition." Conversely, authorities withheld subsidies from individuals whose rejection of such "superstitions" they deemed insufficient. For example, in Ejina Horo Banner (Chinese: Yijinhuoluo County), site of the Genghis Khan Mausoleum, authorities used the program to discourage shamanic practices associated with the Mongolian leader's religious worship. *Bitter Winter* said the program "explicitly aimed at eradicating traditional Mongolian culture and spirituality. In an area plagued by poverty and unemployment, those who resist may literally starve."

Authorities continued to require CCP members and members of the armed forces to be atheists and forbade them from engaging in religious practices. Members found to belong to religious organizations were subject to expulsion, although these rules were not universally enforced. Most public office holders are CCP members, and membership is widely considered a prerequisite for success in a government career. These restrictions on religious belief and practice also applied to retired CCP members.

### Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

Religious rights advocacy groups and media reported the government continued to prohibit or hinder the activities of religious groups not affiliated with the state-sanctioned religious associations, including unregistered Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists and others. At times, authorities said they shuttered a gathering because the group or its activities were unregistered; at other times, the place of worship lacked necessary permits. Local authorities tacitly allowed some unregistered groups to operate, but in other cases, authorities required unregistered religious groups to disband, leaving their congregants with the sole option of attending services under a state-sanctioned religious leader.

The SARA continued to maintain publicly available statistics on some, but not all, registered religious groups, but did not update that information annually. According to the SARA, there were 42,439 Buddhist temples and 8,349 Taoist temples registered in the country as of the end of 2021. The SARA did not publish the number of registered Islamic mosques, Catholic churches, or Protestant churches. According to 2014 SARA statistics (the most recent available), more than 5.7 million Catholics worshipped in sites registered to the CCPA. The SCIO's 2018 white paper on religion in the country stated that approximately 144,000 places of worship were registered to conduct religious activities in the country, among which were 33,500 Buddhist temples (including 28,000 Han Buddhist temples, 3,800 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, and 1,700 Theravada Buddhist temples), 9,000 Taoist temples, 35,000 mosques, 6,000 CCPA churches and places of assembly spread across 98 dioceses, and 60,000 TSPM churches and places of assembly. The SCIO white paper also estimated there were more than 384,000 religious personnel in the country: 222,000 Buddhist, 40,000 Taoist, 57,000 Muslim, 57,000 Protestant, and 8,000 Catholic.

ChinaAid and other sources said state-affiliated religious organizations continued explicitly to consider political "trustworthiness" in adjudicating licenses for clergy members. ChinaAid reported the Fujian Two Christian Councils held its annual conference to review/renew clergy members' licenses on April 13. Zhang Jiyou, vice president of the Fujian Christian Association, a parallel organization with the Fujian Two Christian Councils, told clergy members attending the conference to resist foreign infiltration and continue Sinicizing Christianity. According to ChinaAid, the TSPM used

the annual inspection and renewal of certificates to inculcate religious personnel with party ideology and encourage them to “put political loyalty above all else,” and eliminate “dissident” clergy whom authorities deem insufficiently “patriotic.” NGOs and media said they observed similar practices among provincial and local-level religious associations across the country.

The state media outlet *Xinhua* reported in February that the BAC and Taoist Association of China had launched a public, searchable database of “approved” religious leaders, citing “frequent cases in recent years of fraudsters posing as religious figures.” State media reported in May that similar databases had been launched for Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim religious workers. A UFDW official told the state-run *People’s Daily* the database was necessary because “criminals have been using their religious identities to recruit followers, attract support, build temples, and sell religious supplies at high prices.”

ChinaAid reported that in March, authorities in Shandong Province began a pilot program of assigning “social credit” scores to religious workers. The social credit scores were designed to measure an individual’s political consciousness and graded clergy as excellent, good, fair, poor, or very poor. ChinaAid stated the credit assessment program would “comprehensively curb the expression and practice of Christian faith among religious personnel,” and noted that clergy would be judged by nonbelievers. Officials stated they were implementing this system in furtherance of CCP policies regarding comprehensive “strict governance of religion.”

*Bitter Winter* reported that on August 8, authorities in Nanning, Guangxi Province, detained Park Kwang-Zhe, pastor of the New Life Christian Church, for “disturbing the social order in the name of religion” after he reportedly refused to join the state-run TSPM. House church members told *Bitter Winter* that when they complained “disturbing the social order” was a vague charge that allowed police to detain pastors and congregants for no reason whatsoever, police replied that being active in an “illegal” form of religion, such as a non-state-sanctioned church, “already ‘disturbs the social order.’”

During the year, there were numerous reports that authorities raided nongovernment-affiliated houses of worship and other unauthorized religious spaces, held clergy and parishioners in custody, and confiscated religious material.

Authorities in Foshan, Guangdong Province, raided two unregistered churches in May, according to RFA and ChinaAid. On May 7, officers forcibly entered a Fengsheng Gospel Church member’s home where several congregants were watching online Christian programming, charged those gathered with holding an “illegal assembly,” and fined each

person present RMB 200 (\$28). On May 24, police, security personnel, and religious affairs officers raided the Jiasheng Gospel Church premises, searched the personal belongings of everyone there, interrogated and filmed all those present, and confiscated furniture, computers, and books. Police also detained the pastor, Deng Yanxiang, and three other church workers on the charge of “illegal business operation” for printing religious texts. Authorities issued formal arrest warrants for the detainees on June 28.

International Christian Concern reported on July 11 that authorities in Xiamen, Fujian Province, fined Pastor Yang Xibo of the non-TSPM-affiliated Xunsiding Church RMB 400,000 (\$56,000) for holding church services without proper registration. Authorities disbanded the church, the largest house church in the city, in 2019 and expelled its members from their place of worship. According to RFA, the congregation continued to meet in alternative locations, despite police raids and large administrative fines. In April, RFA reported the Intermediate People's Court of Xiamen ruled against Pastor Yang in his appeal of a RMB 200,000 (\$28,000) fine he had received in 2021 for “organizing an illegal assembly.”

According to ChinaAid, on May 7, plainclothes police raided five congregations of the Guangzhou Bible Reformed Church in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, during Sunday services, detaining clergy members and church workers and interrogating them for hours, despite Pastor Huang Xiaoning protesting that such conduct violated the group's constitutional rights. ChinaAid said the church had been targeted for years for refusing to join the TSPM. On June 4, police interrupted the church's Sunday service in a rented hotel conference room, citing regulations requiring that religious activities be performed in registered religious sites. Police recorded the identities of each participant and seized books. ChinaAid reported that on June 21, authorities harassed Huang by cutting the power supply to his apartment and blocking the front door keyhole so he could not enter. On August 24, the Chinese Christian Justice Fellowship posted on social media that the Panyu District Civil Affairs Bureau in Guangzhou identified the Guangzhou Bible Reformed Church as an “illegal social organization.”

ChinaAid reported that on May 4, authorities raided the Renewal Christian Church in Heshan, Guangdong Province, during the church's ordination ceremony for its new pastor. They detained six church members, including Elder Xie Xudeng, teacher Huang Weihong, and the choir director, and questioned them for hours regarding “illegal religious activities” before releasing them. According to ChinaAid, unnamed sources had reported the congregation to police.

*Bitter Winter* reported that in August, three TSPM officials inspected the communities of Anhui and Shaanxi Provinces and Guangxi Autonomous Region to ensure Christian communities there were complying with the



new Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues that required such venues to uphold principles of Sinicization. Pastor Gao Feng, chair of the Board of Supervisors of the National Two Christian Councils, led the inspections. The board reminded local pastors that minors were not allowed in worship services and held study sessions devoted to the new administrative measures. *Bitter Winter* said the TSPM would likely target other provinces with short-notice inspection tours in future.

*Bitter Winter* reported in June that authorities in Sanhe, Hebei Province, raided the home of Yang Yingle after he allowed friends to use his home for a private prayer and Bible study gathering. Police interrogated participants and also confiscated Yang's computer and religious books. Authorities cut off Yang's water and electricity service for one day. They warned him that such gatherings were illegal and would result in further cuts to his water and electricity service if they continued, followed by potentially more serious consequences. *Bitter Winter* said, "It is not the first time that cutting water and electricity is used by the CCP authorities to terrorize and blackmail Christians."

ChinaAid reported that on August 20, police raided New Hope House Church in Meizhou, Guangdong Province, during its Sunday service for "illegal religious activities." Police detained Pastors Lan Yi and Zeng Hu, in addition to other parishioners. They subsequently released all the detainees with the exception of Pastors Lan and Zeng, whom they held for seven days and five days, respectively.

CSW reported that in the lead up to a December 9 online service of the Early Rain Covenant Church commemorating the fifth year anniversary of a government crackdown on the church, church members said Chengdu authorities in Sichuan Province subjected them to power cuts, telephone warnings, door-to-door threats, stalking, the stationing of police outside family homes, and being forcibly taken to police stations, all in an effort to prevent or deter them from participating. Authorities detained church subdeacon Jia Xuewei for 15 days, and also detained preacher Dai Zhichao on suspicion of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."

Catholic news outlet AsiaNews reported in January that authorities detained Catholic bishop Shao Zhumin to prevent him from attending the funeral of Father Chen Nailiang, a member of the "underground" (non-CCPA-affiliated) Catholic Church. Authorities also detained Shao's secretary, Father Jiang Sunian. Shao was ordained a bishop in 2011 with Vatican approval, but his appointment was not accepted by the two state-sanctioned church bodies, the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China and the CCPA. He was not among the Vatican-approved bishops recognized by the CCPA under the 2018 Sino-Vatican provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops. *AsiaNews* said authorities had detained Shao multiple times previously and pressured him to join the

CCPA. In 2022, they detained him to prevent him from joining Holy Week celebrations.

In August, *America*, a Jesuit Catholic magazine, reported that while the UFWD barred mainland Chinese bishops and Catholics from traveling to Mongolia to join events related to Pope Francis's August 31-September 4 visit to Ulaanbaatar, it permitted Catholic leaders from Hong Kong to make the trip. The magazine wrote, "The order makes clear that the mainland Chinese bishops do not enjoy the same freedom that bishops in other countries have today to meet the Pope or take part in universal church events." The magazine stated that "the order appears to reflect not only the uneasy current state of Sino-Vatican relations but also the Chinese Communist Party's fear of religion in general, and Christianity in particular."

Authorities continued to severely restrict Muslims from participating in the Hajj. NPR reported in August that the government dispatched public security officials to airports to screen outbound travelers to Muslim-majority countries and coerced pilgrims already outside China to return home. The NPR report found that in Qinghai Province, home to a significant number of Hui Muslims, authorities largely stopped issuing passports to Hui and Uyghur residents. Authorities required individuals who did receive passports to sign letters promising not to complete the Hajj while abroad. Individuals found to have made the Hajj privately without authorization were arrested or detained on return. The government made available a limited number of slots to Muslims to join government-sanctioned Hajj tours, but waiting lists stretched beyond five years.

*UCA News* reported in September that authorities in several provinces banned traditions and worship activities associated with the Hungry Ghost festival, a major folk religious celebration, calling them "uncivilized."

The government continued to label many religious groups, including the CAG, Shouters, All-Sphere Church, Guanyin Method, and others as cults or "xie jiao" organizations. It outlawed membership in such groups and continued to conduct anticult campaigns in public venues and schools. For example, the government newspaper *Guangxi Daily* reported that in April, the Ningming County Political and Legal Affairs Committee held an anti-xie jiao lecture attended by more than 1,300 teachers and students at a primary school in Chengzhong Township in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

On May 9, the NGO Dui Hua wrote in its *Human Rights Journal*, "The number of women incarcerated in Chinese prisons has grown faster than the population of incarcerated men over the past decade, and women are disproportionately represented in criminal cases involving unorthodox religious groups." In an April submission to the UN Committee on the

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the human rights group reported that while women accounted for 8 percent of the country's prison population, they constituted more than 40 percent of persons incarcerated between 1998 and March 31 for violations of the criminal code's Article 300 anticult/antisuperstition provisions. Dui Hua's Political Prisoner Database held historical records on 11,400 women subject to coercive measures for violating Article 300, including 1,400 active cases. The majority of women were Falun Gong and CAG adherents, followed by other "unorthodox" Protestant groups, Buddhist groups, qigong organizations, and others. In its submission to the committee, Dui Hua said women continued to be the main target of PRC "anticult" propaganda, which relied on stereotypes of women as "weak willed and psychologically vulnerable, with a propensity to succumb to coercion or monetary enticements from cults."

The Dui Hua submission to CEDAW said women continued to receive harsh sentences for Article 300 violations. For example, one unnamed female Falun Gong practitioner received a 15-year prison sentence in late 2022, to be followed upon her release in 2036 by four years of "supplemental deprivation of political rights," during which time she would be deprived of voting and free speech rights and subject to "intense police monitoring and travel restrictions as a 'targeted person.'" Dui Hua stated this was among the longest prison sentences observed for a Falun Gong member convicted solely of an Article 300 offense. Dui Hua reported that one woman CAG leader in Shaanxi Province received a 15-year prison sentence for her membership in the church.

Dui Hua's submission to CEDAW also highlighted a continued drop in transparency for cases brought against members of religious organizations charged under Article 300. Authorities largely purged Article 300-related judgments and judicial decisions from public databases in 2021 and published few new judgments, even as arrests and convictions continued, Dui Hua reported, significantly impairing the NGO's ability to understand the scope of legal action against religious groups and practitioners.

The Guangdong Anticult Network website continued to publish articles during the year with titles such as "Twenty-five years of being imprisoned by Falun Gong," "Exposing the doomsday lies of the Almighty God cult," and "Accidentally enter a cult and regret it for a whole lifetime." It also continued to publish cartoons and animated videos with anticult messages aimed at children. Guangzhou city authorities in Guangdong Province also continued the multiyear practice of distributing anticult educational literature. Media reported that in April, the Political and Legal Affairs Committee of the Baiyun District Committee of Guangzhou collaborated with multiple municipalities to distribute anticult literature, conduct anticult training, and participate in anticult publicity activities with the goal of "creating a good social atmosphere ... to fight against evil."

Media further reported that local authorities in Guangzhou's Nansha District sponsored a street fair in September with the aim of "making everyone deeply aware of the serious harm brought by cult organizations to individuals, families, and society" and encouraging the public to report suspected cult activities.

According to media and human rights NGOs, authorities maintained near-ubiquitous surveillance of religious sites through the development and widespread deployment of advanced technology such as artificial intelligence, closed-circuit television and facial recognition software, and social media applications that tracked individuals' movements. Human rights groups stated authorities increasingly relied on surveillance to monitor and intimidate political dissidents, religious leaders and adherents, Tibetans, and Uyghurs. The technology included facial recognition and "gait recognition" video surveillance, allowing police not only to monitor a situation but also to identify individuals in crowds quickly.

RFA reported in October that authorities continued to expand use of the "grid management" surveillance system, in which neighborhoods were divided into units of 15-20 households each and "grid workers" assigned "to comprehensively collect basic information on people, events, places, objects, emotions, etc., within their grid." A social media post by the Sichuan provincial government in March said such grid work was aimed at "discovering and reporting hidden risks, reactionary propaganda, cult-related activities, illegal preaching, and other political and security risks." A separate report by CSW found that in Yunnan Province alone – home to approximately 47 million individuals, less than 4 percent of China's population – the government employed 12,473 grid workers across 9,370 "ethnic and religious management grids."

In March, ChinaAid reported authorities required individuals in Henan Province to register online in an app called "Smart Religion" and to make advance reservations in the app to attend services in churches, mosques, or Buddhist temples. The provincial religious affairs bureau developed the app, which purported to use advanced comprehensive databases and artificial intelligence in its operation. Applicants had to provide detailed personal information, including occupation and date of birth, and show a reservation code before entering the place of worship. ChinaAid said the cumbersome application procedures had reduced the number of individuals attending church.

The physical security technology firm IPVM reported in November that state-owned technology company Hikvision won an approximately \$9 million "Smart Campus" government project in mid-2022 that "alerts administrators to any ethnic minority students 'suspected of fasting' during Ramadan based on 'dining records.' The alerts are part of a larger surveillance system against ethnic minority students that tracks what

books they borrow, their holiday destinations, family information, and more.” IPVM said, “Hikvision responded by admitting it won the project but alleging, without evidence, that these alerts were never actually developed/deployed.” Minjiang University, a public university with approximately 16,000 students in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, announced the successful completion of the project’s first phase in December 2022.

ChinaAid reported in September that the CCP influenced major telecommunication companies to censor religious groups and individuals attempting to post religious content on social media platforms such as WeChat, pursuant to regulations controlling religious content on the internet. The CCP stated that religious content could only be published if the publisher possessed an “Internet Religious Information Service License.” Only organizations registered with the government qualified to obtain such licenses. The government instructed the telecommunication companies to suspend the accounts of individuals who did not have a license.

Authorities continued to restrict the printing and distribution of the Bible, the Quran, and other religious texts. In June, *Bitter Winter* reported that authorities commonly treated nonauthorized religious and “superstitious” books, including unauthorized editions of Bibles, in the same way as pornography with regard to penalties for their production, distribution, and possession. According to *Bitter Winter*, in June, police and Market Supervision Bureau officers in Shangcheng County, Henan Province, searched bookstores for unauthorized religious or “superstitious” publications. Authorities particularly targeted bookstores near schools and colleges. *Bitter Winter* said local believers “resented a policy that puts non-authorized religious books and pornography in the same category.”

In March, the UN Economic and Social Council’s Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights expressed concern about “reports of systematic and massive destruction of religious sites, such as mosques, monasteries, shrines and cemeteries, particularly in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and in the Tibet Autonomous Region.”

Authorities continued to require religious buildings and sites deemed insufficiently “Chinese” to remove religious symbols or significantly modify their architecture to resemble Buddhist pagodas and Confucian temples. In some cases, this led to significant property destruction. The *New York Times* reported in June that the predominantly Hui Muslim residents of Tonghai County, Yunnan Province, resisted local officials’ plans to remove the dome and minarets of the fourteenth century Najiaying Mosque and replace them with more “Chinese” architectural features. Resulting protests, which *Al Jazeera* reported involved thousands of demonstrators, led to the arrest of more than 30 persons. According to an article in *Foreign Affairs* in September, “The mosques of Najiaying and nearby Shadian have stood as relics of the Chinese state’s past tolerance of Islam



and Muslims in Yunnan. They are the last two mosques in the province to still boast traditionally Arab features, namely domes and minarets." The *Foreign Affairs* analysts said the protests in Yunnan "highlight one of the last bastions of Muslim resistance against religious repression." The analysts reported that after a delay, work continued to remove the dome and minarets, adding that local authorities had visited Hui families to compel their signatures on "consent" forms sanctioning the "reforming" of the mosque. Media reported throughout the year that authorities ordered similar changes to several mosques across a range of Hui Muslim communities.

According to Voice of America (VOA), in July, the Gansu provincial government began demolishing the Xiguan Mosque in Lanzhou. The mosque was built in the late 1500s during the Ming dynasty, demolished during the Cultural Revolution, and rebuilt in the 1980s. Scholars told VOA the mosque's demolition marked the end of freedom of religion for the country's Muslims. One local university professor told VOA, "The mosque is a support for the Muslim faith, and other things cannot substitute for it." She said that in the next few years, the religious space for Hui Muslims would become "increasingly closed and narrow, extending from mosques to all aspects."

According to RFA, VOA, and *Bitter Winter*, in April, authorities completed the large-scale Sinicization of Beijing's Songyu and Doudian Mosques, the largest mosques in Northern China, demolishing their minarets and replacing Arab-style rounded cupolas with sloped-roof Chinese-style spires, although they reportedly did not alter the interiors. Media coverage contained before and after photographs showing that both mosques' exteriors were completely transformed. The progovernment *Sing Tao Daily* reported placards in the mosque displayed political slogans such as "Study and implement the spirit of the 20th Party National Congress" and "Adhere to the direction of Sinicization of religions in China."

Human Rights Watch said in November that the government was significantly reducing the number of mosques in Ningxia and Gansu Provinces under its "mosque consolidation" policy. The NGO said authorities had decommissioned, closed down, demolished, and converted mosques for secular use as part of the government's efforts to restrict the practice of Islam.

ChinaAid reported that on August 3, authorities in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, announced they would remove the cross from the Dongqiao Church. Sources told ChinaAid that in July, authorities in Shanxi Town, Yongjia County, and Lucheng District ordered local churches to remove plaques and characters from their walls that contained "Christian phrases" such as "Emmanuel," "Jesus," "Christ," and "Jehovah."

According to SARA data last updated in 2022, religious groups ran 94 schools in the country, compared with 87 in 2021. These included 43 Buddhist (37 in 2021), 11 Taoist (10 in 2021), 10 Islamic, nine Catholic, and 21 Protestant. Authorities continued to bar students younger than 18 from receiving religious instruction, but multiple local sources said enforcement and implementation of the prohibition varied widely across and within regions. According to the SARA, there were six national-level religious colleges.

Individuals seeking to enroll at an official seminary or other institution of religious learning continued to be required to obtain the support of the corresponding state-sanctioned religious association. The government continued to require students to demonstrate “political reliability,” and political issues were included in examinations of graduates from religious schools. Both registered and unregistered religious groups reported a shortage of trained clergy.

ChinaAid reported in March that authorities required parents of preschoolers in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, to sign a “Pledge of Commitment for the Family Not to Hold Religious Beliefs.” The pledge included promises to uphold CCP laws and not to hold religious beliefs, participate in religious activities, propagate religious information, or join Falun Gong or other “cults.” While officials had asked teachers to make similar commitments in the past, ChinaAid said this was the first instance in which they imposed such a requirement on students’ families. The NGO said that on February 15, CCP cadres in Xiaoshan, Zhejiang Province, held an event at which kindergarten teachers signed a similar pledge.

According to ChinaAid, during the year, the government continued to raid and outlaw house church schools, academies, and summer camps in rural and urban parts of the country. The NGO said, “Suppression of Christian education relates closely to the Chinese government’s ideological control by brainwashing children.” ChinaAid estimated 50,000 families in the country, the vast majority of them Christian, illegally homeschooled their children to “counter the ideological indoctrination.” ChinaAid reported that on July 25, 15 police officers in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, raided the summer camp of the Zion Reformed Church and administratively detained four members, including Pastor An Yankui, for 15 days on charges of “carrying out activities in the name of an illegal social organization.” Police confiscated children’s Bibles, teachers’ mobile phones, books, and other personal belongings. On August 20, police in Handan, Hebei Province, raided a Christian children’s summer camp. Police detained two teachers and summoned other Sunday school teachers for interrogation. On October 11, police in Luliang, Shanxi Province, raided Lishi Church Academy, confiscated school supplies, Bibles, psalm books, and Bible commentaries, and arrested Liu Cui, a member of the church who was tutoring six children. Authorities sentenced Liu to 10 days of administrative detention. ChinaAid said her

husband, a nonbeliever, disapproved of his wife's church activities and informed on her.

In September, *Bitter Winter* reported that authorities raided the Christian school Yabo Academy in Zhengzhou, Henan Province, and ordered it to cease operations. Authorities fined the academy administrators the maximum penalty of RMB 200,000 (\$28,000) for conducting religious education and training without authorization.

## Transnational Repression

In February, the Uyghur Human Rights Project published a report titled "*On the Fringes of Society: Humanitarian Needs of the At-Risk Uyghur Diaspora*." The report stated, "The Chinese state actively interferes with the ability of Uyghur exiles to meet their basic humanitarian needs, often with the help of foreign governments, subjecting them to harassment, intimidation, surveillance, enforced statelessness, family separation, and community and cultural trauma." Uyghurs living abroad faced refoulement and forcible deportation back to China.

International media and NGOs reported that PRC authorities or their representatives continued to pressure Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, and other Muslims and members of ethnic and religious minority groups from Xinjiang living abroad to spy on fellow expatriates. They also reportedly pressured individuals to return to China or cease advocacy on behalf of residents of Xinjiang and threatened retaliation against family members still in Xinjiang if the individuals living overseas did not comply. In July, the BBC reported that in one instance, a PRC officer facilitated a video call between a Uyghur refugee living in the United Kingdom and his mother in Xinjiang. In addition to arranging the call, the officer overtly listened in on the conversation, limiting their ability to speak freely. The Uyghur refugee said the officer subsequently called him and offered to pay him to spy on Uyghur rights activists in London. The refugee said there was an implicit threat against his family if he refused.

During the year, Sheffield University in the United Kingdom published a report titled "*We know you better than you know yourself: China's Transnational Repression of the Uyghur Diaspora*." The report stated that "the scale of transnational repression in the Uyghur diaspora is universal, and its impact severely restricts their rights to free speech and associations, and the capacity to maintain their culture." Tactics included "increased use of Uyghur informants to gather intelligence ... harassing isolated individuals, placing community figures under surveillance, quietly intimidating Uyghurs from speaking publicly, and even enlisting them to create positive images of China." Two-thirds of the 48 UK-resident Uyghurs interviewed reported PRC authorities directly threatened them or their families if they failed to cooperate and, conversely, offered to allow them contact with family in Xinjiang if they ceased rights advocacy or agreed to collect information on other Uyghur expatriates.

RFA reported in February that PRC police coerced Uyghurs who migrated to Turkey – which had the largest Uyghur population outside Central Asia – to spy on their own community. Several Uyghur expatriates told RFA that after they downloaded PRC communication and social media applications to their phones to stay connected with friends and relatives in Xinjiang, PRC officials attempted to manipulate those digital ties to try to coerce them into spying on their communities abroad.

In August, the NGO Safeguard Defenders published a report titled *Targeted in Türkiye: China's Transnational Repression against Uyghurs*. The report stated that PRC officials surveilled and harassed Uyghurs living in Turkey and utilized networks of expatriate Uyghur informants – themselves often victims of transnational repression – to collect information for use in coercing family members abroad to cease criticism of the PRC or to take part in pro-PRC propaganda. According to the report, PRC police called individuals and overtly threatened to harm their relatives living in Xinjiang if they did not cooperate.

On November 11, *Bitter Winter* reported that Turkey-based Uyghur activist Yidiresi Aishan (also known as Idris Hasan) remained in custody in Morocco and under threat of extradition to China. Aishan, originally from Xinjiang, fled to Turkey in 2012 after PRC authorities increasingly harassed him. In Turkey, he was known for advocating the rights of Uyghurs in the PRC. According to media reports, Moroccan authorities detained Aishan at the airport in Casablanca after he arrived from Turkey in July 2021 because of a PRC-filed 2017 Interpol red notice identifying him as a “terrorist” that Interpol subsequently cancelled on the grounds that it was “of a political, military, religious, or racial character.” In December 2021, the Court of Cassation in Rabat issued a favorable opinion on the extradition request. In 2022, a panel of experts in the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and international NGOs advocated Aishan’s release, stating that if returned to China, Aishan risked serious human rights violations including arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, or torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

In May, the Geneva-based human rights NGO Alkarama reported the whereabouts of Uyghurs Nurmamet Rozi and Hamidulla Wali were unknown following their transfer to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in March, possibly in preparation for their deportation to China. The PRC sought the refoulement of Rozi and Hamidulla, along with Abula Buheliquemu and Buheliquemu’s 13 year-old daughter, Miremaiti Baibure. Saudi authorities detained Rozi and Wali in 2020 at the Chinese embassy’s request after they traveled to Mecca from Turkey on *Umrah* pilgrimag and detained Abula and her daughter in 2022 near Mecca. In 2022, foreign governments, Amnesty International, other NGOs including the World Uyghur Congress, and legal experts from the United Nations called on the Saudi government in this case to uphold its international commitment not

to refool individuals who would face torture, cruel punishment, or persecution upon returning to their home country.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) reported in March that the relatives of ethnic Kazakhs who leave China become hostages, giving the government leverage in forcing the emigres into silence. Activist Erbol Dauletbekuly told RFE/RL, "For each person who decides to go abroad, at least three relatives must register as 'hostages.' Authorities warn that if they give interviews or criticize China after going abroad, the relatives will be held accountable." RFE/RL reported that a naturalized Kazakh citizen of Chinese origin, Rahima Sembaiqzy, visited her relatives in Xinjiang while pregnant with her fifth child. Authorities arrested her, forced her to have an abortion, and incarcerated her for two months in prison, followed by 10 months in a reeducation camp. They finally allowed her to return to Kazakhstan after she registered her parents as "hostages." When she subsequently spoke to the media about her experience in Xinjiang, authorities arrested her brother. She also lost contact with her parents. Sembaiqzy told RFE/RL they were likely ordered not to communicate with her.

Sources reported PRC authorities engaged in transnational repression against the approximately 150,000 Tibetans living outside the Tibet Autonomous Region and Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties, many as refugees in India and Nepal. They frequently subjected the Tibetan overseas community to harassment, monitoring, and cyberattacks. In a March statement, Tenzin Dorjee of the Tibet Action Institute said government authorities continued to pressure and threaten China-resident families of Tibetans living in other countries to dissuade their relatives from criticizing PRC policies towards Tibetans. A wide range of diaspora and civil society sources reported PRC embassies and consulates frequently required ethnic Tibetans seeking consular services to provide detailed information on family members and personal connections in China. As this information was generally not requested of other travelers or citizens living abroad, many viewed it as an implied threat that the PRC government would punish relatives in retaliation for criticism of PRC policies.

Sources reported that the PRC continued to pressure Nepal to implement a border systems management agreement and a mutual legal assistance treaty that could result in the refoulement of Tibetan refugees to China and to decline to register or issue identity documents to Tibetan refugees. Nepal did not take additional steps to implement the agreements, but also continued not to register Tibetans. Nepal last registered and issued documentation to Tibetan refugees in 1995.

Transnational repression targeting members of banned religious groups continued, in particular against members of Falun Gong. In a May report, the Falun Dafa Information Center stated that PRC authorities conducted



physical and digital surveillance on Falun Gong members who attended college in the United States. One student studying in Illinois reported PRC diplomats in the United States ordered the Chinese Student and Scholars Association at his university to expel him from the group for publishing information on Falun Gong on his personal website. Multiple students cited in the report said PRC authorities had harassed, detained, or otherwise persecuted their family members in China to discourage their Falun Gong-related activities in the United States, or to coerce the students to return to China.

In April, a U.S. federal prosecutor in the Eastern District of New York charged two defendants in connection with opening and operating an undeclared overseas “police station” in lower Manhattan for the PRC’s Ministry of Public Security. The complaint said one defendant, a New York City resident, had assisted the PRC government by participating in counterprotests in Washington, D.C. against members of Falun Gong and helping locate persons of interest to the PRC government.

In May, a U.S. federal prosecutor in the Southern District of New York charged two individuals with acting and conspiring to act in the United States as unregistered agents of the PRC. The U.S. Department of Justice said the individuals allegedly furthered the PRC government’s transnational repression campaign against Falun Gong practitioners by attempting to bribe a purported Internal Revenue Service official who was actually an undercover law enforcement agent.

In October, the Falun Dafa Association of Canada reported the CCP used political infiltration, disinformation, manipulation, intimidation, assault, surveillance, and harassment to silence Falun Gong adherents and suppress Canadian public support for Falun Gong.

The Falun Dafa Association reported the PRC government pressured foreign entertainment venues in multiple countries to refuse to host or cancel already scheduled performances of the U.S.-based Falun Gong-affiliated dance troupe Shen Yun. Many of the performers are Falun Gong practitioners and, in addition to traditional Chinese dances, some dances portray present-day religious persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in China.

Media outlets and NGOs reported in March that immigration authorities in Thailand detained 63 members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church – a group of Christians originally from China – for overstaying their visas. The group had applied in Thailand with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for refugee status, stating that they had experienced harassment and surveillance from suspected PRC authorities pressuring them to return since leaving China, and that they feared being forcibly deported without asylum status. In April, the Thai government facilitated their departure for resettlement in a third country.

## Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

In November, Freedom House published its *Freedom in the World 2023* report analyzing political rights and civil liberties in China. According to the report, “The political system is dominated in practice by ethnic Han Chinese men. Societal groups such as women, ethnic and religious minority groups, and LGBT+ people have no opportunity to gain meaningful political representation.” Their presence in government or party organizations was largely “symbolic.”

## Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

The PRC government and the Holy See do not have formal diplomatic relations, and the Holy See continued to have no official representative to the PRC despite its requests to open a liaison office in Beijing. The two-year provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops between the government and the Holy See, originally signed in 2018 and renewed in 2020 and 2022, remained in effect through October 2024. The agreement, the text of which has never been made public, regulates appointments and transfers of bishops in China. Some Catholic Church leaders viewed the agreement as an exception to government regulations prohibiting foreign involvement in religion. During the year, the Holy See publicly indicated the PRC had violated the agreement on multiple occasions, with Foreign Minister-equivalent Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher saying in April it was “not the best deal possible” and that Holy See diplomats were attempting to negotiate “improvements.”

Media reported that on April 4, PRC authorities unilaterally transferred Bishop Joseph Shen Bin from the Haimen Diocese in Jiangsu Province to serve as bishop of the vacant Shanghai Diocese, without consulting the Vatican. On April 4, Director of the Holy See Press Office Matteo Bruni told *Vatican News*, “The Holy See had been informed a few days ago of the decision of the Chinese authorities” to transfer the bishop and “learned from the media of the installation this morning.” On July 15, the Pope decided to accept the PRC’s unilateral installation by officially appointing Shen as bishop of Shanghai within the Catholic Church’s organizational structure. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican Prime Minister-equivalent, told *Vatican News* the Pope “decided to rectify the canonical irregularity, in view of the greater good of the diocese” but said China’s unilateral action “seems to disregard the spirit of dialogue and cooperation” of the bishops agreement. The bishopric of Shanghai had been vacant for 10 years following the death of Bishop Jin Luxian in April 2013. Media reported no change in the status of Auxiliary Bishop of Shanghai Thaddeus Ma Daqin, whom authorities placed under house arrest following his resignation from the CCPA in 2012. The Vatican had previously expressed its wish that Ma replace Bishop Jin. In October, Bishop Shen told the diocesan magazine he supported both “independence and autonomy in running the Church” and “the direction of the Sinicization of the Catholic Church in China.”

As of year's end, the trial of 91-year-old Cardinal Joseph Zen, the former Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong and an outspoken defender of civil rights in Hong Kong and mainland China, on charges that he violated Hong Kong's National Security Law by "colluding with foreign forces" remained pending and Zen remained free on bail. Zen had to surrender his travel documents, including his passport, to Hong Kong authorities as condition of his bail; however, in January, the Hong Kong government allowed Zen to travel to the Vatican for three days to attend the funeral of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and media outlets reported Zen met privately with Pope Francis while in Rome.

### Section III.

## Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because the government and individuals closely link religion, culture, and ethnicity, it was difficult to categorize many incidents of societal discrimination as being solely based on religious identity. Christians, Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Falun Gong practitioners reported societal discrimination in employment, housing, and business opportunities. There were also reports that Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and members of other religious minority groups continued to face difficulties in finding accommodation when they traveled.

Discrimination against potential or current tenants based on their religious beliefs reportedly continued. Falun Gong practitioners continued to report difficulties in finding landlords who would rent them apartments. Sources stated government enforcement of provisions on "suspicious activity" in the Public Security Administration Punishment law continued to move the country further away from informal discriminatory practices by individual landlords towards a more formalized enforcement of codified discriminatory legislation.

International media outlets reported that antisemitic content on domestic social media platforms increased during the year. In July, the China Media Project reported that some nationalist social media accounts promoted antisemitic conspiracy theories accusing Jews of promoting the Opium Wars in the 19th century and collaborating with Imperial Japan by financing its military industry during World War II. The report noted such theories built on stereotypes long common in China that characterized Jews as "inherently intelligent, clever, business savvy, and wealthy." In September, one foreign social media user who engaged with PRC counterparts wrote in the *Diplomat* magazine that even online comments supportive of Jews often contained antisemitic tropes "praising Jews for their business acumen and ability to make money."

After the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, the *New York Times* reported that "a surge of antisemitism and anti-Israeli sentiment [had proliferated] across the Chinese internet and state media" despite

heavy state-directed censorship of other sensitive topics. The *Times* said a state media outlet hosted a social media discussion stating that Jews controlled a disproportionate amount of U.S. wealth, which drew responses that included antisemitic stereotypes and attempts to downplay the Holocaust. VOA also reported that at one point following the October 7 attack, the hashtag “3 percent Jewish population in the U.S. controls over 70 percent of American wealth” became one of the top trending topics on social media. On November 13, Deutsche Welle reported, “Anti-Jewish hate is sweeping across Chinese online platforms. People are praising both Hamas and Adolf Hitler, for example, and posting anti-Israel abuse. In a country that normally heavily censors its internet, those comments largely are being allowed to stay up.”

#### Section IV.

### U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Secretary of State, U.S. Ambassador to the PRC, and other senior Department of State officials, as well as embassy and consulate general representatives, repeatedly and publicly expressed concerns about abuses of religious freedom in the country, including in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong.

On November 15, during the Summit meeting with President Xi, the U.S. President directly raised concerns regarding PRC human rights abuses, including in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong.

The U.S. Ambassador to the PRC publicly called for the PRC to respect religious freedom and the rights of members of religious minority groups, including in posts on social media on the anniversaries of the detention of Uyghur doctor Gulshan Abbas in September and Uyghur tech entrepreneur Ekpar Asat in April. In April, the Ambassador hosted an iftar to demonstrate respect for Islam and express support for religious freedom and interfaith dialogue.

During his meetings with senior PRC officials on October 26-27 in Washington, D.C. and June 18-19 in Beijing, the Secretary of State raised concerns about human rights violations in the PRC, including Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, as well as individual cases of concern.

On May 15, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom said at the release of the 2022 *Report on International Religious Freedom*, “The People’s Republic of China seized, imprisoned, and banished predominantly Muslim Uyghurs to re-education camps. They continue the repression of Tibetan Buddhists, Chinese Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners – many of whom are fleeing the PRC’s abuses.” The Ambassador added, “Uyghurs have witnessed the PRC government destroy or repurpose their mosques or cemeteries. Authorities also

destroy the monasteries of Tibetan Buddhists and expelled monks and nuns.”

In April, the Secretary of State joined other G7 foreign ministers in issuing a joint communique, stating, “We continue to raise our concerns with China on reported human rights violations and abuses, including in Xinjiang and Tibet. We reiterate our concerns over the continued erosion of Hong Kong’s autonomy rights and freedoms and call on China to act in accordance with its international commitments and legal obligations, including those enshrined in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law.”

In a July 20 social media statement, the State Department spokesperson recognized 24 years since the PRC launched a campaign of repression against Falun Gong and its practitioners, advocates, and human rights defenders and expressed solidarity with this community.

Embassy and consulate general officials regularly sought meetings with a range of government officials managing religious affairs to obtain more information on government policies and to advocate greater religious freedom and tolerance. Some government officials, such as the Guangzhou Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission in Guangdong Province, continued their practice of declining multiple requests to meet. Embassy and consulate general officials, including the Ambassador and Consuls General, urged government officials at the central, provincial, and local levels, including those at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries, to stop abuses of religious adherents and to implement stronger protections for religious freedom. The Ambassador regularly highlighted religious freedom concerns in meetings with senior officials. The Department of State, embassy, and consulates general regularly called upon the government to release prisoners of conscience and advocated on behalf of persons imprisoned for religious reasons in individual cases.

Embassy and consulate general representatives, including the Ambassador, Consuls General in Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Wuhan, and other officials, met with religious groups, as well as academics, NGOs, members of registered and unregistered religious groups, and family members of individuals imprisoned on account of religion to reinforce U.S. support for religious freedom. Embassy and consulate general officials met with religious leaders to convey the importance of religious pluralism in society and to learn about issues facing religious communities. PRC authorities consistently harassed and intimidated religious leaders to dissuade them from speaking with U.S. officials. Authorities continued to prevent members of religious communities from attending events at the embassy and consulates general, and security services questioned individuals who did attend.



The embassy continued to amplify Department of State religious freedom initiatives directly to local audiences through postings to the embassy website and to its Weibo, WeChat, and Twitter accounts. Over the course of the year, the embassy published more than two dozen messages promoting religious freedom, including videos, statements, images, and infographics.

Embassy social media accounts highlighted National Religious Freedom Day in January and the Secretary of State's speech at the civil society-led International Religious Freedom Summit in February. In May, embassy posts on the Secretary of State's remarks announcing the 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom received more than 250,000 impressions on Weibo, WeChat, and Twitter. In November, an embassy Weibo post reporting that the U.S. President had raised concerns over PRC human rights violations in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong with President Xi received more than 1.7 million views. A December 10 statement by the Ambassador on International Human Rights Day stressed U.S. support for fundamental rights, including religious freedom. In total, embassy posts amplifying religious freedom initiatives garnered more than 6.3 million views and nearly 85,000 engagements. The tone of the comments from PRC social media users was largely critical of embassy posts, especially concerning Xinjiang and Tibet issues.

On August 22, the Secretary of State announced visa restrictions on unspecified PRC officials "for their involvement in the forcible assimilation of more than one million Tibetan children in government-run boarding schools." In an accompanying statement, the Secretary of State said, "These coercive policies seek to eliminate Tibet's distinct linguistic, cultural, and religious traditions among younger generations of Tibetans. We urge PRC authorities to end the coercion of Tibetan children into government-run boarding schools and to cease repressive assimilation policies, both in Tibet and throughout other parts of the PRC."

On December 8, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Gao Qi and Hu Lianhe under the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act for their connection to serious human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Gao led the Yili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture Public Security Bureau and served as prefectural vice governor. Hu served as deputy office director for the Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group of the Central Committee, which was closely involved in the "de-extremification" through re-education campaign.

In addition, on December 8, the Department of Homeland Security-led interagency Forced Labor Enforcement Task Force added three PRC entities – COFCO Sugar Holding Company, Ltd., Sichuan Jingweida Technology Group Company, Ltd., and Anhui Xinya New Materials Company, Ltd. – to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act Entity List for

participating in forced labor transfers of Uyghurs and members of other religious and ethnic minority groups in the Xinjiang region.

Since 1999, China has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State redesignated China as a CPC and identified the following sanction that accompanied the designation: the existing ongoing restriction on exports to China of crime control or detection instruments and equipment, under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1990 and 1991 (Public Law 101-246), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the act.

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