

The State of the World's Human Rights; China 2025

Background

Nine military leaders were removed from their posts, nominally as part of President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Secretary Xi Jinping's "anti-corruption" agenda. In September, Xi Jinping launched the Global Governance Initiative, the most recent in a suite of development and cooperation plans underpinning his claims to be a leader in "genuine multilateralism". Chinese businesses, often with close ties to the government, were involved in sustaining conflict globally, including in Myanmar and Sudan, and in facilitating violations by other states, such as Pakistan.

Several incidents indicated growing transnational repression by Chinese authorities, including surveillance, censorship, harassment, legal actions and exerting leverage over other states to forcibly return people to China. These incidents targeted human rights defenders, activists, artists, and the Uyghur and Tibetan diaspora.¹ There were also reports of researchers or advocates in other countries facing funding cuts linked to their work and spurious defamation charges from Chinese companies for publishing material critical of their business practices.

Freedom of expression and association

The authorities intensified control over information, public discourse and freedom of association through new regulations, censorship and intimidation.

On 5 February, the National Radio and Television Administration introduced a new licensing system for all online micro dramas (short-form scripted videos), requiring prior approval before publication. The measure extended to content on major social media platforms including WeChat, Douyin and RedNote. On 8 February, the Cyberspace Administration of China, together with 11 other agencies including the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of State Security, issued the Internet Military Information Dissemination Management Measures, prohibiting the online production or sharing of any undisclosed information about national defence or the armed forces.

Journalists and media outlets continued to face censorship. In June, news outlet Caixin and weekly newspaper Southern Weekly published investigative reports about an alleged death in police custody; both reports were swiftly deleted from official websites and social media platforms.

On 22 September, the Cyberspace Administration of China launched a two-month nationwide campaign targeting content on social media and short-video platforms that “incited hostility” or “spread pessimism”. Platforms were warned to delete such material and any other material deemed to discredit public institutions. In another example of tightened control, after the death of actor Yu Menglong, his fans’ posts of expressions of grief and criticism of online censorship were quickly removed from social media.

Workers and their advocates remained unable to exercise freedom of association. On 10 February, the ILO’s 2025 annual report raised concerns about the continued prohibition of independent trade unions and other restrictions on freedom of association in China.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Authorities continued to restrict peaceful assembly through use of force by police and online censorship.

During April and May, workers in several provinces, including Sichuan, Shaanxi, Hunan and Hebei, staged protests demanding payment of overdue wages. Labour rights monitors documented removal of related online posts and harassment of organizers, reflecting the authorities’ intolerance of collective action.

In August, reportedly more than 1,000 people gathered outside government offices in Jiangyou, Sichuan province, after video footage of a school bullying incident went viral. Police used batons and electric prods to disperse protesters; verified videos showed officers dragging and beating participants. Online discussion of the incident was swiftly censored, and residents reported being warned not to speak to foreign media.

That same month, a projection protest in the city of Chongqing displayed anti-government slogans for nearly an hour before police intervened. Videos of the projection were quickly deleted from social media platforms.

Freedom of religion and belief

Authorities intensified control over religious activities through surveillance, raids and prosecutions under anti-“cult” and security provisions. On 5 March, the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Department forcibly took over a church in the city of Huainan, Anhui province. Pastor Zhao Hongliang was sentenced to one year and one month in prison. On 10 March, police in Anhui province detained two Christians on suspicion of “organizing and using a cult to undermine law enforcement”.

Throughout the year, practitioners of Falun Gong, a spiritual practice banned in China, continued to face imprisonment, including an 80-year-old woman in Beijing sentenced to five years in March.

In October, authorities launched a nationwide operation against the unofficial Zion Church network, detaining nearly 30 pastors and members in at least seven cities, including Beijing and Shanghai. At least 18 individuals remained in criminal detention at the end of the year. The campaign reflected continued efforts to eliminate unregistered religious activity and enforce state control over belief and worship.

Human rights defenders

Authorities continued to target human rights defenders, lawyers and activists under vague national security and public order provisions. Such measures were routinely used to suppress legal advocacy and activism, with prolonged pretrial detention, closed proceedings and restricted access to legal counsel.² Authorities continued to use “residential surveillance at a designated location”, a form of secret detention amounting to enforced disappearance, particularly against human rights defenders, rights lawyers and individuals investigated for national security offences.

Human rights lawyers and their families faced ongoing attacks. Activist Xu Yan was released from prison in early January after completing her one-year-and-nine-month sentence for “inciting subversion”. The appeal by her husband, human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng, against his sentence for the same offence was rejected on 6 January.³ Lawyer Lu Siwei was sentenced to 11 months in prison in April for “illegally crossing national borders”. After his release in August, he continued to face restrictions on overseas travel. On 30 July, after more than three years in pretrial detention, lawyer Xie Yang was tried behind closed doors on charges of “inciting subversion of state power”.

Labour and social rights defenders remained under tight surveillance. On 18 March, labour rights advocate Wang Jianbing was released after completing a three-and-a-half-year sentence. However, he was subjected to “deprivation of political rights” – an ambiguous, so-called supplemental sentence that violated international standards – and remained under surveillance. In April, vaccine safety campaigner He Fangmei’s appeal against her criminal sentence was dismissed.

Writers, journalists and artists continued to face criminal prosecution for exercising their right to freedom of expression and their human rights work. On 6 January, film director Chen Pinlin was convicted under the ill-defined crime of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” and sentenced to three and a half years in prison. On 19 September, journalist Zhang Zhan was tried, convicted and sentenced to a second four-year prison term for her human rights work.⁴ Prominent artist Gao Zhen, detained since August 2024 on charges of “slandering China’s heroes and martyrs”, remained in detention at year’s end, awaiting trial.

Students and younger people were also targeted. On 31 July, 22-year-old student Zhang Yadi (Tara) was taken into custody by state security officials in Yunnan province after returning from university studies in France. She was reportedly being held on suspicion of “inciting separatism” for her peaceful volunteer work overseas. On 28 December, Uyghur university student Kamile Wayit was released from prison after completing her three-year imprisonment for purportedly “promoting extremism” by sharing social media posts.

Women's rights

Authorities continued to suppress feminist activism and online discussion of gender equality. In August and September, the accounts of a number of feminist and women's rights activists were permanently removed from the social media platform Weibo for "inciting gender antagonism". State-linked media reported that the closures targeted content discussing sexual harassment and discrimination.

In October, Beijing hosted the Global Leaders' Meeting on Women to mark the 30th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, where officials promoted what they called "historic achievements" in gender equality and women's participation. Independent feminist voices were excluded from the event.

LGBTI people's rights

In January, cancellations of shows by renowned performer and transgender woman Jin Xing raised concerns around tighter government control over public performances by LGBTI performers. Police in several provinces detained or questioned female authors of "boys' love" (*danmei*) fiction for publishing homoerotic stories online. Media outlets and monitors reported that at least 30 writers were fined or placed under administrative detention as part of a campaign in June.

In September, the mainland release of the film *Together* was halted by its distributors after social media users discovered that a same-sex wedding scene had been digitally altered using AI to appear heterosexual. The decision drew widespread criticism on social media before related posts were censored.

That same month, the Cyberspace Administration of China ordered the lifestyle and social media app RedNote to "rectify" alleged failings to manage posts about LGBTI topics and women choosing to remain single. The regulator said such content "distorted values" and undermined "online civility".

Online platforms, including Douyin, Bilibili and RedNote, continued to remove LGBTI-related groups and discussions under broad prohibitions of being "vulgar" or having "unhealthy" content, reflecting ongoing suppression of queer expression in digital spaces. In November, authorities ordered the removal of two popular gay dating apps from online platforms.

Death penalty

China continued to impose death sentences and carry out executions for a wide range of offences, including several that did not meet the threshold of the "most serious crimes" under international human rights law and standards. Official data on death sentences and executions remained classified as a state secret, making it very difficult to assess the government's claim that the death penalty was being applied "prudently".

Despite the state's restrictions over information on the death penalty, the authorities continued to publicize selected cases in the media as a deterrent. In January, the Guizhou Provincial Higher People's Court confirmed the execution of Yu Huaying, convicted of child trafficking, a case widely publicized in state media as evidence of "zero tolerance" for trafficking of women and children. On 29 September, the Intermediate People's Court in the city of Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, sentenced to death 11 members of a family for offences including "telecommunications fraud", "running an illegal gambling operation", "drug trafficking" and "intentional homicide" connected to cross-border scam operations in Myanmar. Authorities continued to use the death penalty for cases of corruption, executing a former financial executive in December for large-scale bribery.

Right to a healthy environment

China remained the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, despite unprecedented growth in renewable energy. Between January and May, solar and wind capacity increased by 198 and 46 gigawatts respectively. Coal consumption continued to rise.

In May, national carbon emissions declined year-on-year for the first time outside the pandemic period, a change attributed by analysts to a structural shift, rapid expansion of renewables and nuclear energy displacing coal. Reports also continued to highlight risks of forced labour in the solar-panel supply chain, raising questions about the sustainability of the transition to renewable energy.

Environmental protection was framed within the government's policy of building an "ecological civilization" and the 14th Five-Year Plan, which reaffirmed pledges to peak carbon emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. However, the Climate Action Tracker rated China's 2060 "carbon neutrality" target as "poor", noting the lack of a comprehensive long-term strategy and uncertainty over whether the target covers only CO₂ or all greenhouse gases. Participation in environmental decision making and transparency over major infrastructure projects remained tightly restricted.

Ethnic autonomous regions

The government maintained strict political and cultural control over ethnic populations, continuing ideological campaigns that promoted "ethnic unity" and "national identity". Policies continued to suppress space for expression of cultural and religious distinctiveness, particularly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Uyghur region) and the Tibet Autonomous Region (Tibet), as well as in other autonomous areas.

On 8 September, authorities released a draft Ethnic Unity Law requiring a comprehensive ideological education to "forge a strong sense of the Chinese national community". It established extensive mechanisms to supervise and report on "unity promotion" at all administrative levels. The same month, proposed revisions to the Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language appeared to place greater emphasis on the nationwide use of

Mandarin Chinese, particularly in “ethnic minority, rural and marginalized regions”. This reinforced state-led linguistic homogenization and narrowed the space for cultural diversity.

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

Uyghurs continued to face severe restrictions of their rights, including freedom of movement. Official policies reportedly discouraged Uyghurs from travelling overseas, while compelling Uyghurs abroad to choose between seeing family in China and exercising their right to freedom of expression.

In March, June and September, OHCHR, the UN human rights office, reiterated concerns regarding ongoing violations in Xinjiang. It urged China to implement its recommendations from 2022, including ending arbitrary detention, clarifying the fate and whereabouts of those held, and ensuring accountability. The government rejected these calls and took no steps towards accountability or an independent follow-up mechanism.

In September, UN experts sent an official communication to the authorities raising concerns over the reported enforced disappearance of Uyghur academic Rahile Dawut and the arbitrary detention of artist Yaxia'er Xiaohelaiti. The UN experts stated that these cases reflected broad systematic repression of Uyghurs' cultural and academic expression.

Tibet

In March, the State Council Information Office released a white paper, *Human Rights in Xizang in the New Era*, which explicitly promoted “bilingual education” with Mandarin as the main medium of instruction. The paper promoted schooling as a means of “strengthening national unity”, including via political education. During a rare visit to Tibet in August, President Xi emphasized “unity and development” and presided over the start of construction of a controversial dam linked to forced displacement and harmful environmental impacts on local communities.

Authorities continued to interfere in Tibetan Buddhist religious affairs. In July, following the Dalai Lama's announcement of plans for his eventual succession, Chinese state officials and media asserted that any reincarnation process must proceed “in accordance with Chinese law” and under the authority of the Communist Party.⁵

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

On 26 November, a fire at the Wang Fuk Court housing complex in Tai Po district killed 168 people, making it Hong Kong's third deadliest fire on record. Authorities swiftly suppressed calls for accountability, arresting at least four individuals and hampering or intimidating efforts to report publicly on the incident and the government's response.⁶

LGBTI people's rights

Lack of legal recognition persisted for same-sex marriage and partnerships. Following a 2023 ruling by the highest court, which required the government to establish a framework for legal recognition of same-sex partnerships by October 2025, the government proposed a Registration of Same-Sex Partnerships Bill, granting narrow rights tied to partnerships registered overseas. The legislature rejected it in September.⁷

Freedom of expression

Authorities continued to weaponize and expand the scope of the National Security Law (NSL) and related laws to criminalize the exercising of the right to freedom of expression. Among cases prosecuted under national security-related legislation between July 2020 and June 2025, 85% of those involved the legitimate right to freedom of expression which should not have been criminalized; bail was denied in 89% of cases; and the average duration of pretrial detention was 11 months.⁸

In April, the father and brother of exiled activist Anna Kwok were arrested by the national security police. Her father was later charged under the 2024 Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO) for "directly or indirectly" dealing with the finances of an absconder. The case was widely seen as retaliation for Anna Kwok's critical speech and activism abroad.

In May, the Hong Kong government enacted subsidiary legislation under the SNSO, introducing six new offences. The legislation also declared six locations of the Chinese national security offices as "prohibited places", barring people from approaching or passing through them. Also in May, the Education Bureau updated its policy to integrate national security across primary and secondary school curricula, imposing strict oversight on teaching materials and activities, significantly restricting freedom of expression on campuses.

In June, jailed activist Joshua Wong faced a new charge under the NSL of "conspiring to collude with foreign forces". This was for his advocacy allegedly urging foreign governments to impose sanctions on Hong Kong or China.⁹ In July and August, two young people (aged 18 and 19) were charged with sedition for, respectively, writing "seditious" slogans on the wall of a shopping centre toilet and filming promotional videos for the overseas-based group Hong Kong Parliament, which the authorities had labelled "subversive".

On 15 December, Jimmy Lai, the 78-year-old founder of the pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily, was convicted in a landmark national security case. The High Court found him guilty of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces and to commit sedition, despite his not-guilty pleas. Lai had spent more than five years behind bars before the conviction, much of it in solitary confinement. During the 156-day trial, Lai argued that Apple Daily's outspoken stance was protected expression. The judges rejected his defence and described him as a "mastermind" behind conspiracies to destabilize the Chinese government. He faced a maximum sentence of life imprisonment, with sentencing expected in early 2026.

Court rulings also impacted on freedom of expression with respect to other laws. In March, the High Court upheld the legality of section 27A of the Elections (Corrupt and Illegal Conduct) Ordinance, finding that the criminalization of public incitement to abstain or cast invalid votes during elections was constitutional on grounds of preserving “election integrity”.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Authorities continued to obstruct peaceful public assembly. On 4 June, police deployed heavy patrols and conducted searches around Victoria Park, a traditional site for the commemorations of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. Police arrested two individuals and took another 10 people to police stations for their attempts to mourn, with some carrying flowers or candles.

In July, Pink Dot Hong Kong cancelled its annual Pride event, citing the government’s refusal to allow use of the usual event venue.

Freedom of association

The city’s two remaining major pro-democracy parties, the Democratic Party and the League of Social Democrats, officially disbanded in April and June respectively, amid political pressure. Also in June, the Legislative Council passed the Trade Unions (Amendment) Bill. The bill banned anyone convicted of national security offences from serving in trade unions; empowered the government to reject union registrations based on national security grounds; and required unions to seek approval before receiving foreign funding.

In July, police issued arrest warrants and bounties on 15 overseas-based activists for their involvement in the group Hong Kong Parliament. Also in July, four people, including a 15-year-old boy, were arrested under the NSL for “conspiring to subvert state power” due to alleged connections with Taiwan-based Hong Kong Democratic Independence Union. On 2 December, authorities officially imposed a ban on the two groups from operating in the city, citing them as a threat to national security under the SNSO.

Inhumane detention conditions

In July, the government amended the Prison Rules, granting the Correctional Services Department broad powers to restrict prisoners’ visits and meetings with lawyers on vague “national security” grounds.

Interviews with nine former prisoners revealed a series of human rights violations in custody during their incarceration across 11 correctional facilities. These included physical violence, prolonged solitary confinement, poor sanitary conditions and dangerously high summer temperatures.¹⁰

In October, Chow Hang-tung was held in solitary confinement for 18 days after she made an online speech on having been nominated for the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize.

Workers' rights

In June, the Court of Final Appeal (CFA) dismissed a judicial review filed by a migrant domestic helper, who argued that the absence of a dedicated forced labour law in Hong Kong had led the police to fail to investigate effectively her complaint of forced labour. The CFA held that the enactment of bespoke legislation criminalizing forced labour was not necessary to provide practical and effective protection of the rights of foreign domestic helpers.

Macao Special Administrative Region

In Macao, authorities applied its Safeguarding National Security Law for the first time to arrest former legislator Au Kam-san in July for alleged "collusion with foreign forces", raising serious concerns about the criminalization of peaceful political activity. Ahead of the September Legislative Assembly election, 12 candidates were disqualified for "not upholding the Basic Law" and "not pledging allegiance to Macao" after being vetted by the authorities. This further narrowed political participation and mirrored Hong Kong's clampdown on dissent.

