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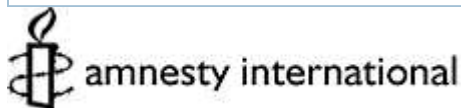
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Why China must scrap new laws that tighten the authorities' grip on religious practice
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Why China must scrap new laws that tighten the authorities' grip on religious practice

By **Roseann Rife, East Asia Research Director**

31 August 2017, 09:56 UTC

As millions of Muslims worldwide prepare for the Hajj, those hoping to independently undertake the journey from China are more likely to end up in jail than in Saudi Arabia.

Earlier this year, the Chinese authorities detained more than 200 Uighur Muslims for joining religious tours to the Middle East, as the government strengthens state control over religious activities.

Chinese authorities have long justified the heavy-handed restrictions on religious practice in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) by claiming they are necessary to combat terrorism and otherwise address outbursts of violence in the region. But the failure to uphold religious freedom risks fuelling rather than lowering discontent in the region towards Beijing's policies.

Total control

President Xi Jinping's is pushing curbs on religious practice under the guise of "guard(ing) against foreign infiltration by religious means". A raft of changes to the Regulations on Religious Affairs are likely to be implemented this year which will codify total state control over every aspect of religious practice.

Even before the National People's Congress rubber stamps the changes to this national law, provincial authorities are moving ahead with their own regulations. In March, the XUAR "De-extremification Regulation" was passed, with a clear nod to national security-related laws. The regulation prohibits "extremist" behaviour which includes wearing burkas, having "abnormal" beards, and refusing to take part in state cultural and recreational activities.

A local state newspaper, recently equated the local religious custom of not smoking among religious people as giving into "extreme religious thought". It criticized a local government official for not daring to smoke in front of religious leaders as "a sign of his timidity in fighting against religious extremism" which was also grounds for his demotion.

Many Catholics, Protestants, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and Falun Gong practitioners have been harassed or even imprisoned in the struggle to freely practice their religion or beliefs, but these new regulations and amendments only tighten the Chinese government's grip on religious practice.

Draconian changes

Behind the national law's bureaucratic title is a series of draconian amendments that will see more state interference, more religious activities banned, more financial penalties on religious organizations and encourage officials to ramp up persecution of those practicing their religion or beliefs outside of officially sanctioned organizations or churches.

More people are likely to face a similar fate as Pastor Bao Guohua. He was vocal in opposing his local government's removal of crosses from Christian churches in Zhejiang province, southern China. Bao and his wife Xing Wengxiang's efforts landed them 14 years' and 12 years' imprisonment respectively in February 2016.

Eager-to-please local officials can ban protestant "house" churches and bring criminal and administrative sanctions against practitioners who carry out activities outside of state-approved "patriotic religious associations".

People organizing unauthorized religious travel abroad, which could include Catholics attending Papal Masses and Muslims attending the Hajj, could face fines of up to 200,000RMB (30,000 USD).

Under other laws in the national security legal architecture, some individuals who make "unsanctioned" religious trips abroad, such as Tibetans attending teachings by the Dalai Lama, even risk being accused of "extremism", "separatism", or "endangering national security". These notoriously vague and overly broad charges are favoured instruments for the authorities to persecute Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims.

The proposed changes to the Regulations on Religious Affairs will be prone to the same misuse. Authorities will be able to revoke the religious standing of a monk or mullah, stop their teachings or performances of rituals, confiscate donations or other property, as well as invalidate registrations of their monasteries or mosques, all under claims of "extremism", "separatism", or even "terrorism".

In addition to these harsh punishments on targeted religious groups, the authorities seem intent on suffocating all religious practice through onerous bureaucracy in the new changes. For example, individuals who want to set up a Bible study group but do not have a state sanctioned place of worship, need the agreement of officials at the county-level, township-level and residents' committee simply to register a temporary location for their meeting.

Once the changes to the Regulations on Religious Affairs are passed, we can only expect an increase in the persecution of people attempting to practice their beliefs in ways unsanctioned by Chinese authorities. Better that Chinese authorities scrap these proposed changes and instead revise the law to guarantee freedom of religion.

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