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China: Treatment of Patriotic Christian Churches and church members by authorities, including the Public Security Bureau (PSB) (2016-August 2019) [CHN106341.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

According to the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2018*, "only religious groups belonging to one of the five state-sanctioned 'patriotic religious associations'" can register with the government and are allowed to hold worship services (US 21 June 2019, 1). A report on religion in China by Freedom House indicates that the "'patriotic' associations" affiliated with each of the five officially recognized religions are the "foundation" of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s control over religious activities (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 15). Sources state that the patriotic organizations for Christianity include the following:

- the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) [which is Protestant (DW 6 Aug. 15)];
- the [China (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a)] Christian Council [also Protestant (DW 6 Aug. 15)]; and
- the Catholic Patriotic Association [also called the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a)] (DW 6 Aug. 2015; CFR 11 Oct. 2018a).

Sources indicate that these organizations are overseen by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a; US 21 June 2019, 6). According to sources, the SARA was merged into the United Front Work Department (UFWD) [in March 2018 (US 21 June 2019, 6)], which places the SARA under CCP control (ChinaAid 10 July 2019; Koesel, et al. 1 Apr. 2019, 76; US 21 June 2019, 6).

According to Freedom House, the government is often involved in managing the activities of registered churches, including choosing sermon topics (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 45). The same source states that registered churches are required to provide their membership list to government officials (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 45). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor of comparative politics at the Université de Montréal, who conducts research on state control of religious groups, including [underground] house churches [1] in China, explained the following:

State-sanctioned church leaders cannot proselytize in public. They can only preach within the confines of their state-sanctioned religious venue. They cannot travel outside their locality or the country without government authorization. They are required to be patriotic, and this means showing some form of allegiance to the [CCP] during services. Their religious leaders need to have been trained in one of the state's seminaries. (Assistant Professor 18 July 2019)

Similarly, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a New-York-based independent, non-partisan think tank and publisher (CFR n.d.), states that in order to register as a state-sanctioned Christian organization, religious leaders are required to receive training to "'adapt' doctrine to government and CCP thinking" (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a).

According to Freedom House, not all state-sanctioned clergy are "party mouthpieces"; some are "knowledgeable religious practitioners who have tried to work within the system to defend the interest of their constituents" (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 16). The same source adds that there are also "numerous instances in which [religious] leaders whom the [CCP] sought to cultivate as loyal 'models' subsequently 'defected'" (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 16). According to research on Protestants in four Chinese cities by Ray [Yun] Wang, assistant professor of the Graduate Institute of East Asian Studies at National Chengchi University (Wang n.d.), cited in a journal article on official Protestantism in China, TSPM churches in one city "regularly complain" to local authorities about the "'illegal religious activities'" of house churches, while TSPM leaders in neighbouring cities have supplied resources to unregistered Protestant groups (Koesel, et al. 1 Apr. 2019, 78).

2. New Regulations on Religious Affairs and Restrictions on State-Sanctioned Churches

According to sources, under Xi Jinping, there has been a shift in policy on religion towards the "sinicization" of religion (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 50; Vermander 25 Feb. 2019, 3; US 10 Oct. 2018, 1-2). Sources indicate that the "sinicization" of Christianity calls for making the religion compatible with Chinese socialism (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 50; CFR 11 Oct. 2018a). New regulations on religious affairs, which came into effect in February 2018 (Vermander 25 Feb. 2019, 4; ChinaAid 10 July 2019; US 10 Oct. 2018, 3), represent a stronger call to sinicize religion (Vermander 25 Feb. 2019, 4) or a nation-wide "enforcement" of sinicization (ChinaAid 10 July 2019). Sources indicate that the new regulations limit religious activities to approved venues and church leaders to those with official qualifications (*Church Times* 29 June 2018; US 10 Oct. 2018, 3).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the President of the ChinaAid Association (ChinaAid), a US-based international Christian human rights organization "committed to promoting religious freedom and the rule of law in China" (ChinaAid n.d.), stated that under the new regulations, religious personnel appointed at state-sanctioned churches are required to make public pledges of loyalty to the communist ideology and party leaders and, in "some areas," place Xi Jinping's portrait in the church (ChinaAid 10 July 2019). The same source added that a new requirement is for congregations in state-sanctioned churches to sing the national anthem before worship

(ChinaAid 10 July 2019). Similarly, the US *2018 Religious Freedom Report* states that authorities "pressured" church congregations to "recite" the national anthem before singing Christian hymns and to perform other acts to demonstrate their loyalty to the CCP "over" the church (US 21 June 2019, 25).

According to the Assistant Professor, the rules in the new religious regulations are "not that different from what they were" before, and "most" state-sanctioned churches do not have "major issues" with the state (Assistant Professor 18 July 2019). According to the ChinaAid President, implementation of the new regulations has been stricter in areas where ethnic tension is high or where there is a high concentration of Christians, including Xinjiang, Henan, Guizhou, Beijing, Guangdong and Anhui (ChinaAid 10 July 2019). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an associate professor of political science at Loyola University Maryland, who conducts research on state-sanctioned and unregistered Protestant churches in China, indicated that there are "hardening" restrictions on state-sanctioned churches, while noting that there is significant variation between regions (Associate Professor 29 July 2019).

According to the 2018 report of the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), citing sources by ChinaAid and Radio Free Asia, under Xi Jinping's sinicization campaign, measures that have been implemented to increase control over state-sanctioned Protestant churches in "some local areas" include the installation of surveillance cameras, removal of crosses from church buildings, and the establishment of "official village-level groups" to monitor religious activities (US 10 Oct. 2018, 6). The ChinaAid representative added that cameras with facial recognition technology, covering "all" parts of the church, have to be installed in state-sanctioned churches and that state-sanctioned churches in Zhejiang are required to keep offices for the local party leader, who can conduct "correction preaching" if the preacher's sermon is "incompatible" with party ideology (ChinaAid 10 July 2019). However, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, an author and journalist based in Beijing, who has written about Chinese society and religion, including Christianity, indicated that sinicization primarily targets underground churches, and that the "only problem" faced by state-sanctioned churches are surveillance cameras placed at the entrance of churches (Author 8 July 2019).

Sources indicate that there are increased restrictions on children's ability to participate in religious activities and education (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 2, 7; ChinaAid 10 July 2019). According to the US *2018 Religious Freedom Report*, authorities in Liaoning began to monitor registered churches more closely in July 2018, including "pressuring" young adults over the age of eighteen not to attend church services (US 21 June 2019, 23). Without naming the provinces in question, in an article in the *Church Times*, a UK-based newspaper focusing on Anglican affairs (*Church Times* n.d.), Chloë Starr, an associate professor of Asian Christianity and theology at Yale Divinity School, states that children have been "barred" from state-sanctioned churches in four separate provinces, while churches elsewhere continue to run Sunday schools without interference, "although they are not allowed to baptise anyone under the age of 18" (*Church Times* 29 June 2018).

3. Treatment of Registered Churches by Authorities

Freedom House indicates that, under Xi Jinping, the "targets of religious persecution" have expanded to include state-sanctioned religious leaders and places of worship (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 7). Similarly, the CFR states that "state repression" against both house churches and state-sanctioned Christian organizations have increased in recent years, including removal of rooftop crosses, forced demolitions of churches, and harassment and imprisonment of pastors and priests (CFR 11 Oct. 2018b). The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)'s *Annual Report 2018* indicates that while "most persecution occurs outside the official TSPM," state-sanctioned churches have also been subject to property destruction and cross removal (US 25 Apr. 2018, 5).

According to sources, there was a campaign to remove church crosses in Zhejiang from 2013 to [2016 (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 47)], including from state-sanctioned churches (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 47; Assistant Professor 18 July 2019). According to Freedom House, "[at] least" 1,500 churches were targeted, "most" of which were Protestant; however, "several dozen Catholic sites of worship" were also affected (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 47). The Assistant Professor explained that the churches that were targeted in Zhejiang attracted a lot of attention and gave the impression that the Christian population was "significant" and "seem[ed] to have been targeted because they were too visible, rather than for political reasons" (Assistant Professor 18 July 2019). Similarly, without providing further details on the exact source of the government document, Fenggang Yang, Director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, in an interview with Deutsche Welle (DW), stated that an internal government document issued in 2013 showed the purpose of the campaign was to "reduce Christianity's public profile" (DW 6 Aug. 2015).

The ChinaAid President indicated that the number of government agencies who are authorized to take action against irregular religious activities have been expanded from five to forty, including the Institute of Earthquake Forecasting; in some instances, state-sanctioned churches have received orders from the Institute of Earthquake Forecasting to remove crosses (ChinaAid 10 July 2019). Further and corroborating information, including the list of agencies authorized to take action against religious activities, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.1 Treatment of Members

The US CECC report states that PSBs are "generally responsible for enforcement of laws against religious activity authorities deem illegal" (US 10 Oct. 2018, 3). The Assistant Professor indicated that unless there is an "incident," PSBs do not deal with the state-sanctioned churches, as they are under the jurisdiction of the SARA, noting that incidents "seem rather rare" (Assistant Professor 18 July 2019). The Beijing-based author stated that state-sanctioned churches are "not under too much pressure," while noting that this does not preclude "individual cases of persecution" (Author 8 July 2019). The Associate Professor stated that he is not aware of reports of arrest or harassment of ordinary church members by the PSB (Associate Professor 29 July 2019). The same

source indicated that the CCP treats church leaders differently from ordinary members and that there may be "pressure" "behind the scenes" that ordinary members may not know about because the system is designed to insulate ordinary church members from knowledge of processes at the leadership level (Associate Professor 29 July 2019). However, the source also stated that the implementation of the new regulations on religion is a "signal" from the central government to officials at lower levels that there is an interest in "cracking down on religion at all levels" (Associate Professor 29 July 2019). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Associate Professor stated that treatment is "typically" worse in rural areas where local officials are less worried about international media coverage, are less trained to follow policy, or feel they can avoid consequences, but added that treatment may also vary in major cities (Associate Professor 29 July 2019). The same source noted that there is also a class difference, with "white collar intellectual churches" being treated more lightly than churches with congregations of lower status (Associate Professor 29 July 2019). The same source indicated that these are "general principles" and that situations may vary when there is a "concentrated campaign from the top," including the current campaign (Associate Professor 29 July 2019). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.2 Treatment of Churches of the Catholic Patriotic Association by Authorities

Sources indicate that the Vatican and China reached a [provisional (US 21 June 2019, 21)] agreement in 2018 to [jointly (*The Wall Street Journal* 28 June 2019)] select bishops (*The Wall Street Journal* 28 June 2019; Reuters 28 June 2019; US 21 June 2019, 21). According to sources, the Vatican supports Catholic bishops and priests registering with the state authorities (Associate Professor 29 July 2019; *The Wall Street Journal* 28 June 2019). The Associate Professor indicated that this agreement may be the impetus behind further restrictions on registered Catholic churches (Associate Professor 29 July 2019). According to Vatican guidelines to clergy in China quoted in a Reuters article, Catholic clergy who refuse to sign official registration forms have been "intimidat[ed]" (Reuters 28 June 2019).

Sources indicate that the Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs issued a letter on 11 June 2018 to the Shijiazhuang parish [or diocese] in Hebei and to the [local (Fu 2 Oct. 2018, 5)] Catholic Patriotic Association [or Commission] calling for the removal or disqualification of a priest who led a pilgrimage to Shanxi province (Fu 2 Oct. 2018, 5; UCANews.com 11 July 2018). According to the Union of Catholic Asian News (UCANews.com), an "independent Catholic news source in Asia" (UCANews.com n.d.), officials cited the sinicization campaign and the new religious regulations as the basis of the decision (UCANews.com 11 July 2018). Corroborating information and information on the outcome of this case could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. Further information on treatment of members of churches of the Catholic Patriotic Association by authorities could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.3 Treatment of State-Sanctioned Protestant Churches by Authorities

According to Freedom House, the campaign to remove crosses in Zhejiang included the "large-scale targeting of TSPM-affiliated churches" (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 47-48). The same source states that pastors from state-sanctioned churches and religious leaders from patriotic associations who resisted the cross removal in Zhejiang were detained or imprisoned, including Bao Guohua, a member of the China Christian Council and a pastor at a state-sanctioned church; in February 2016, he was jailed and sentenced to fourteen years in prison (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 47-48). Another case was that of Gu (Joseph) Yuese, the president of the Zhejiang Christian Council and pastor at a state-sanctioned "megachurch," who was removed from the Christian Council and TSPM and detained from January to March 2016 (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 48). According to the USCIRF report, Gu was released from prison in December 2017 after authorities arrested him multiple times; the source also mentions that he was dismissed from his post as pastor and removed from the local China Christian Council (US 25 Apr. 2018, 5). The ChinaAid representative also indicated that two church leaders in Zhejiang were arrested, including Joseph Gu (ChinaAid 10 July 2019). Freedom House states that prior to 2013, it was "exceedingly rare" for TSPM church leaders to face such treatment (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 48).

The ChinaAid representative, without providing additional details, noted that a TSPM church leader in Qinghai was detained (ChinaAid 10 July 2019). Bitter Winter, an Italy-based online magazine that publishes "news, documents, and testimonies about persecutions against all religions in China" (Bitter Winter n.d.), indicates that six preachers from a TSPM church in Qinghai who had travelled to Ürümqi in Xinjiang to preach were beaten and detained (Bitter Winter 1 Sept. 2018). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources state that a woman who protested the demolition of a TSPM church in Luyi County in Henan in December 2018 was beaten by two police officers (US 21 June 2019, 14; Bitter Winter 8 Jan. 2019).

Further information on the treatment of members of state-sanctioned churches by the authorities could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] House churches are unregistered church communities (US 10 Oct. 2018, 7).

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ecoi.net summary:

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