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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - China

Executive Summary

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

The People's Republic of China's constitution states citizens have freedom of religious belief but limits protections for religious practice to "normal religious activities" and does not define "normal." The government continued to exercise control over religion and restrict the activities and personal freedom of religious adherents when these were perceived to threaten state or Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interests, according to nongovernmental organization (NGO) and international media reports. Only religious groups belonging to one of the five state-sanctioned "patriotic religious associations" (Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant) were permitted to register with the government and officially permitted to hold worship services.

There continued to be reports that the government physically abused, detained, arrested, tortured, sentenced to prison, or harassed adherents of both registered and unregistered religious groups for activities related to their religious beliefs and practices, including members of unregistered Christian churches (also known as "house churches"). Falun Gong reported dozens of its members died in detention. A pastor of an unregistered church and his wife were reportedly buried alive while protesting the demolition of their church; the wife died while the pastor was able to escape. There were also reports of the disappearance of a Catholic priest, and the death of a rights activist for Hui Muslim minorities and others that the government said was suicide.

The government cited concerns over the "three evils" of "ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism" as grounds to enact and enforce restrictions on religious practices of Uighur Muslims. The government sought the forcible repatriation of Uighur Muslims from foreign countries, many of whom sought asylum in those countries on the grounds of religious persecution.

According to media and NGO reports, three Tibetans, one monk and two laypersons, self-immolated during the year and three nuns committed suicide in protest of restrictive government policies, including those restricting religious freedom. Authorities often justified official interference with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries by associating them with separatism and pro-independence activities. In July Sichuan provincial officials demolished over 2,000 residences and expelled 2,000 or more monks and nuns from Larung Gar, the world's largest Tibetan Buddhist institute, located in Ganzi (Kardze), Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

Authorities in Zhejiang Province continued their destruction of Christian structures as part of a campaign against "illegal structures" that began in 2014, according to NGO and press reports. Over 2,000 structures, including 600 crosses, had been destroyed or demolished by the end of the year. Many Zhejiang pastors and

congregants openly resisted the campaign, resulting in the detention, prosecution, or conviction of several church leaders and activists.

During the year, the government released for public comment draft regulations that would govern the activities of religious groups. Religious leaders and groups reported that the proposed regulations would increase restrictions on their ability to practice their religions, including a new requirement for religious groups to seek approval to travel abroad and a prohibition on “accepting domination by external forces.” Christian churches stated as a result of the proposed regulations, the government increased monitoring, causing many churches to cease their normal activities.

There were reports that improved relations between the Vatican and the government created a better operating environment for Vatican-backed Catholic bishops and priests, although disputes remained and the authorities reportedly blocked a bishop approved by the Vatican from becoming the Bishop of Wenzhou.

Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists reported severe societal discrimination in employment, housing, and business opportunities. In Xinjiang, tension between Uighur Muslims and Han Chinese continued.

The President, the Secretary of State, the Ambassador, and other embassy and consulates general representatives repeatedly and publicly expressed concerns about abuses of religious freedom in China, including the need for tolerance, especially for oppressed religious groups. The President stressed the need for the government to protect the religious freedom of all its citizens. U.S. officials consistently urged the government to adhere to internationally recognized rights of religious freedom and urged the release of those imprisoned for their religious beliefs. Embassy officials met with members from diverse religious communities and protested the imprisonment of individuals on charges related to religious freedom.

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 October 31, 2016, 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 and 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 (July 2016 estimate). According to the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), there are more than 200 million religious believers in the country. Many experts, however, believe that official estimates underestimate the total number of religious adherents. The U.S. government estimates that there are 657 million religious believers in the country, including 250 million Buddhists, 70 million Christians, 25 million Muslims, 301 million observers of folk religions, and 10 million observers of other faiths, including Taoism (July 2010 estimate). According to 2014 data from the Jewish Virtual Library, the country’s Jewish population is 2,500.

The *2014 Blue Book of Religions*, produced by the Institute of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a research institution directly under the State Council, reported the number of Protestants to be between 23 and 40 million. A June 2010 SARA report estimated there are 16 million Protestants affiliated with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), the state-sanctioned umbrella organization for all officially recognized Protestant churches. According to SARA more than 5.5 million Catholics worship in sites registered by the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), the state-sanctioned organization for all officially recognized Catholic churches. According to the most recent outside surveys by Pew in 2010 and 2012, respectively, there are nine million Catholics and 68 million Protestants, of which 5.7 million Catholics and 23 million Protestants are affiliated with state-sanctioned umbrella organizations. Accurate estimates are difficult to make, however, because many adherents practice exclusively at home.

According to SARA, there are more than 21 million Muslims in the country, with 10 ethnic minorities practicing Islam. Hui Muslims are concentrated primarily in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan provinces. Uighur Muslims live primarily in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. The State Council’s *2015 White Paper on Xinjiang* reports Hui, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uighur, and other predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities constitute 14.63 million residents in Xinjiang, or 63 percent of the total population.

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

Some ethnic minorities retain traditional religions, such as Dongba among the Naxi people in Yunnan Province and Buluo-tuo among the Zhuang in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Media sources report Tibetan Buddhism is growing in popularity among the Han Chinese population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states citizens have “freedom of religious belief,” but limits protections for religious practice to “normal religious activities.” The constitution does not define “normal.” It says 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 hold a religious belief and states that state organs, public organizations, and individuals may not discriminate against citizens “who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion.” The law does not allow for legal action to be taken against the government on the basis of 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.

CCP members and members of the armed forces are required to be atheists and are forbidden from engaging in religious practice. Members who are found to belong to religious organizations are subject to expulsion, although these rules are not universally enforced. The vast majority of public office holders are CCP members, and being a member is widely considered a prerequisite for success in a government career.

Certain religious or spiritual groups are banned by law. The criminal law defines banned groups as “cult organizations,” and those belonging to them can be sentenced up to life in prison. There are no published criteria for determining, or procedures for challenging, such a designation. A national security law explicitly bans “cult organizations,” and the CCP maintains an extralegal, party-run security apparatus to eliminate the Falun Gong movement and other such organizations. The government continues to ban Falun Gong, 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 considers several Christian groups to be “evil cults,” including the Shouters, 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, Lord God religious group, Established King Church, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Family of Love, and South China Church.

The Counterterrorism Law effective January 1 describes “religious extremism” as the ideological basis of terrorism that uses “distorted religious teachings or other means to incite hatred, discrimination, or advocate violence.” In August the regional People’s Congress in Xinjiang passed its own counterterrorism law.

Regulations require religious groups to register with the government. Only religious groups belonging to one of the five state-sanctioned “patriotic religious associations” (Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant) are permitted to register with the government and legally hold worship services. These five associations operate under the direction of the CCP United Front Work Department. Other religious groups, such as Protestant groups unaffiliated with the official patriotic religious association or Catholics professing loyalty to the Vatican, are not permitted to register as legal entities. The government does not recognize Judaism as an ethnicity or religion. The country’s laws and policies do not provide a mechanism for religious groups independent of the five official government patriotic religious associations to obtain legal status.

All religious organizations are required to register with SARA or its provincial and local offices. Registered religious organizations are allowed to possess property, publish approved materials, train staff, and collect donations. According to regulations, religious organizations must submit information about the organization’s historical background, doctrines, key publications, minimum funding requirements, and government sponsor, often a “patriotic religious association.” According to the SARA, there are more than 360,000 clergy, 140,000 places of worship, and 5,500 registered religious groups in the country. Also according to SARA, there are 60,000 registered Protestant churches and 23 Christian theological colleges, as well as approximately 35,000 mosques and 40,000 imams.

Religious regulations also vary by province, with many provinces updating their regulations during the year following the National Work Conference on Religion in April.

In addition to the five nationally recognized religions, local governments permit certain religious communities and practices, such as Orthodox Christianity in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and Heilongjiang, Zhejiang, and Guangdong provinces. Worship of Mazu, a folk deity with Taoist roots, has been reclassified as “cultural heritage” rather than religious practice.

The government and the Holy See do not have diplomatic relations, and the Vatican has no representative in the country. The CPA does not recognize the authority of the Holy See to appoint Catholic bishops; approximately 30 Catholic bishops remain independent of the CPA and operate unofficially. In some locations,

however, local authorities reportedly pressured unregistered Catholic priests and believers to renounce all ordinations approved by the Holy See. The Regulation on the Election and Consecration of Bishops requires candidate bishops to pledge publicly support for the CCP.

SARA states through a policy posted on its website that family and friends have the right to meet at home for worship, including prayer and Bible study, without registering with the government.

According to the law, inmates have the right to believe in a religion and maintain their religious beliefs while in custody.

Tibetan Buddhists in the country, including outside the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), are not free to venerate the Dalai Lama openly. Proselytizing in public or meeting in unregistered places of worship is not permitted.

The religious and social regulations permit 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 United Front Work Department, SARA, and the Ministry of Civil Affairs provide policy guidance and supervision on the implementation of these regulations.

An amendment to the criminal law and a judicial interpretation by the national Supreme People's Procuratorate and the Supreme People's Court published in November criminalizes the act of forcing others to wear "extremist" garments. Neither the amendment nor the judicial interpretation defines what garments or symbols are considered "extremist." Regulations in Urumqi prohibit residents from wearing veils that cover the face. A separate regulation approved by the Xinjiang People's Congress Standing Committee in January bans the practice of religion in government buildings and the wearing of clothes associated with "religious extremism."

National printing regulations restrict the publication and distribution of literature with religious content. Religious texts published without authorization, including Bibles and Qurans, may be confiscated and unauthorized publishing houses closed. The government allows some foreign educational institutions to provide religious materials in Chinese, which are used by both registered and unregistered religious groups.

The government offers some subsidies for the construction of state-sanctioned places of worship and religious schools.

By regulation, if a religious structure is to be demolished or relocated because of city planning or construction of key projects, the party responsible for demolishing the structure must consult with its local Bureau of Religious Affairs (administered by 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 provide compensation equal to its appraised market value.

Under national regulations, parents are permitted to instruct children under 18 in the beliefs of officially recognized religious groups, and children may participate in religious activities. Xinjiang officials, however, require minors to complete nine years of compulsory education before they can receive religious education outside of school. In Xinjiang, regulations forbid minors from participating in religious activities and impose penalties on organizations and individuals who "organize, entice, or force" minors to participate in religious activities. According to press reports, a new regulation in effect November 1 further bans any form of religious activity in Xinjiang schools and stipulates that parents or guardians who "organize, lure, or force minors into religious activities" may be stopped by anyone and reported to the police. The new Xinjiang law also amended its regional version of the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency Law to require children taking part in religious activities to be sent to "specialized schools for correction."

The teaching of atheism in schools is mandated and a CCP directive provides guidance to universities on how to prevent foreign proselytizing of university students.

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

Birth limitation policies remain in force, but Chinese authorities further relaxed the one child policy on January 1 to allow all married Chinese couples to have two children. Chinese authorities ended the exemption from birth restrictions on the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, including the Muslim-majority Uighurs.

The law permits domestic NGOs, including religious organizations, to receive donations in foreign currency. The law requires documented approval by SARA of donations from foreign sources to domestic religious groups of more than one million renminbi (RMB) (\$144,000).

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). With respect to Macau, the national government notified the UN Secretary General, in part, that residents of Macau shall not be restricted in the rights and freedoms that they are entitled to, unless otherwise provided for by law, and in case of restrictions, the restrictions shall not contravene the ICCPR. With respect to Hong Kong, the national

government notified the secretary general, in part, that the ICCPR will also apply to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Government Practices

Throughout the country, there continued to be reports of deaths, in detention and otherwise, of religious adherents and that the government physically abused, detained, arrested, tortured, sentenced to prison, or harassed adherents of both registered and unregistered religious groups for activities related to their religious beliefs and practices. Religious affairs officials and security organs also scrutinized and restricted the religious activities of registered and unregistered religious groups, including assembling for religious worship, expressing religious beliefs in public and in private, teaching youth, and publishing religious texts. Falun Gong reported that dozens of its members died in detention. In Henan Province, a government-sponsored demolition crew buried alive a pastor of an unregistered church and his wife who were protesting the demolition of their church; the wife died of suffocation while the pastor was able to dig his way out. There were also reports of the disappearance of a Catholic priest and a Protestant pastor – the pastor resurfaced during the year – and the death of an activist for Hui Muslim minorities and others that the government said was suicide. The government cited concerns over the “three evils” of “ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism” as grounds to enact and enforce restrictions on religious practices of Uighur Muslims. The government’s repression of religious freedom remained most severe in Xinjiang and in Tibetan areas, according to media and NGO sources. According to reports, the government continued to extract unpaid labor, conduct indoctrination sessions, and closely monitor and restrict the movements of Uighurs to counteract what it considered religious extremism in Xinjiang.

According to Falun Gong, 80 practitioners died either in custody or shortly following their arrest during the year. On March 13, Falun Gong practitioner Yan Guoyan reportedly died shortly after being released from detention, reportedly due to maltreatment while in custody. She was arrested on January 15 in Hebei Province for suing former CCP leader Jiang Zemin. On March 27, a Falun Gong practitioner identified as Sun reportedly died of injuries suffered on November 9, 2015, when security personnel outside a military academy in Yanggu County, Shangdong Province, severely beat him for talking to students about the persecution of Falun Gong, reportedly leaving a hole in his skull.

On April 14, a demolition team reportedly buried alive the pastor of an unregistered or house church, Li Jiangong, and his wife Ding Cuimei while they protested the government-ordered demolition of their Beitou Church in Zhumadian, Henan Province. According to reports from the NGO ChinaAid, Li and Ding stepped in front of a bulldozer as a government-supported local developer crew shoved them into the pit and covered their bodies in soil. Ding died of suffocation while Li was able to dig his way out. Authorities reportedly detained two crew members and opened a criminal investigation.

On April 15, “underground” Catholic priest Yang Jianwei reportedly disappeared from a government building in Baoding, Hebei Province. Local police said they lacked sufficient manpower to investigate the case and said they would review security footage from the building with Yang’s family once they had enough men. Activist organizations said the arrests of Catholics in Baoding were in possible connection to authorities’ demolition of a prayer venue the previous year. According to the Union of Catholic Asian News, at least five underground priests were detained by authorities in Hebei that month. Two were subsequently released. A Protestant pastor in Henan Province who disappeared reportedly escaped.

In May Pastor Han Zhonglie was found dead in a mountainous area near Changbai County, Jilin Province. South Korean media reported that he was killed by agents from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea due to his work assisting North Korean defectors and helping them go to South Korea through a third country.

According to the human rights monitoring NGO Dui Hua Foundation, as of the end of the year, at least 232 Protestants, 73 Muslims, 25 Buddhists, and 11 Catholics were imprisoned as a result of religious activities, while two Buddhists, six Catholics, and 49 Protestants were detained on charges related to religious activities. Dui Hua reported that at least 3,403 Falun Gong practitioners were imprisoned and 330 were detained for the same reasons during the year, but Falun Gong itself reported significantly higher numbers of its members were arrested and sentenced.

The arrest and harassment of church leaders in Zhejiang Province, where the government conducted its “Three Rectifications and One Demolition” campaign, continued. Church pastors and members of their congregations openly resisted cross removals, including by forming human chains, and replacing or reattaching crosses, resulting in repeated clashes and standoffs with police. Some observers estimate as many as 2,000 crosses and buildings may have been demolished in Zhejiang since 2014 when the campaign began.

Authorities released Wen Xiaowu, the pastor of an unregistered church in Zhejiang, in September after he and his wife and son were detained in April for protesting church demolitions. Wen had provided legal assistance to churches affected by the cross takedown campaign and was charged with “gathering a crowd to disturb social

order.” Authorities detained Wen after he contacted foreign journalists and foreign diplomats to discuss Zhejiang’s cross demolition campaign. Wen remained under residential surveillance through the end of the year.

In January authorities detained Joseph Gu Yuese, the Pastor of Chongyi Church in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, one of the country’s largest Protestant churches, on embezzlement charges his supporters said were fabricated to punish him for publicly opposing Zhejiang’s cross demolition campaign. On February 4, Gu released what was said to be a confession letter to his congregation saying the investigation was for his “own benefit” and asking Christians to “have faith in our government and judicial department.” Although authorities released Gu for nine months during the year, they confined him to his home and barred him from meeting or communicating with others without permission during that time.

In February a court convicted Bao Guohua, a pastor in Jinhua, Zhejiang Province who refused to remove a cross from his church’s roof, on charges of “corruption” and “gathering people to disturb social order” and sentenced him to 14 years in prison. The court also convicted Bao’s wife, Xing Wenxiang, of the same charges and sentenced her to 12 years in prison. Authorities detained Bao and his wife in August 2015 and charged them with embezzlement shortly afterwards. Their supporters stated they believed Bao and his wife were among several from government-approved religious groups punished for protesting the removal of their church crosses.

In Guizhou Province, authorities in February detained and charged Zhang Xiuhong, a deacon at Guiyang Huoshi Church (Living Stone Church) in charge of the church’s finances, with running an illegal business. On December 30, a court sentenced another leader of Huoshi Church, Pastor Yang Hua, also known as Li Guozhi, to two and a half years in prison for leaking state secrets. Attorneys for Zhang and Li reported that authorities tortured and mistreated Li in detention, leading to “serious health problems,” and said authorities also repeatedly threatened to kill Li and harm his family if he did not confess. Authorities reportedly harassed and detained Huoshi Church’s leaders because they were unwilling to register the church under the TSPM, and authorities shut down the church in December 2015.

Police arrested a member of the unregistered Zhongfu Tongxin Church in Shantou, Guangdong Province, on Lunar New Year’s Day while they were distributing Christian pamphlets on the streets, according to a congregant. The church member had been detained for refusing to attend a TSPM church.

According to news reports, a court tried Hong Kong church minister Ng Wah at the Guangzhou Intermediate People’s Court on February 19 on charges of illegal fundraising involving more than RMB 100 million (\$14.4 million). Ng, who focused on Mainland church development, was reportedly arrested by Mainland authorities in July 2015 for printing Christian books and raising money. Authorities prosecuted Ng, saying that he did not have a license to raise money. According to church members, Ng had raised donations from members to print Christian books. Ng was reportedly released without sentencing, although his church refused to comment publicly on Ng’s status.

On September 27, more than 100 law enforcement officers from the local police bureau and religious affairs bureau reportedly raided a Zhuhai, Guangdong unregistered church during the church service and detained all members. The authorities forced the church members to provide their personal identity information. Police detained eight church staff for questioning and subsequently released all of them in the early morning of September 28.

In December a Xinjiang court sentenced a Christian woman, Ma Huichao, to three years in prison for “gathering a crowd to disturb public order” after holding a Bible study in her home in Urumqi. A fellow congregant said that the Bible study was not a formal gathering – there were no pastors present and there were only a few people reading the Bible in Ma’s home.

In March authorities arrested and detained for 10 days Zhou Jinxia, a Christian from Dalian, for illegal petitioning and “disturbing social order.” Zhou had travelled to Zhongnanhai (the headquarters of the CCP) in Beijing and held up a banner with Chinese characters saying “God calls to Xi Jinping and Peng Liyuan,” referring to the president and his wife, “God So Loved the World,” and “The Kingdom of Heaven is close.”

Pastor Zhang Shaojie, a TSPM pastor in Nanle County, Henan Province remained in prison after a court sentenced him to 12 years for “picking quarrels and disturbing public order” and “fraud” in July 2014. Zhang and several members of his congregation had been involved in a land dispute between the church and the Nanle County government.

In Guangdong Province, founder of the Buddhist Huazang Dharma group Wu Zeheng, also known as Master Xingwu, remained in prison after being sentenced to life in prison in 2015 on charges including rape, fraud, producing and selling toxic food, and organizing a “cult.” Some human rights organizations and media reports stated that authorities targeted Wu for his religious beliefs and his human rights activism and that the criminal charges were spurious.

Buddhist monks reported that authorities harassed them and their family members. Zen Buddhist monk Lin Bin (also known as Master Wangyun) of Fujian Province was reported incommunicado by friends and family members in October after being released from detention in September, according to Radio Free Asia (RFA). Initially detained in July 2015 on subversion of state power charges, police arrested Lin while visiting Sichuan Province during a nationwide operation targeting rights lawyers.

In some parts of the country, authorities charged religious believers not affiliated with any of the five patriotic religious associations with various crimes, including “illegal religious activities” or “disrupting social stability.”

Relations between the Vatican and the Chinese government reportedly improved over the year, leading to a decrease in the harassment of unregistered bishops and priests. Some unregistered bishops and priests, however, reported continued government surveillance and repeated detentions. According to AsiaNews, authorities detained Peter Shao Zhumin, the Coadjutor Bishop of Wenzhou, in September shortly before the funeral of the Bishop of Wenzhou Vincent Zhu Weifang. Local worshippers said authorities wanted to prevent Shao from taking possession of the diocese after Zhu’s death, in accordance with canonical tradition, as the Vatican-backed Shao is not a member of the government-backed Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. Although authorities released Shao, he was prevented from taking over the diocese as of year’s end. Authorities also prevented members of the underground Catholic community from attending Bishop Zhu’s funeral. Some local authorities also reportedly pressured unregistered Catholic priests and believers to renounce all ordinations approved by the Holy See.

Religious groups continued to report that “patriotic religious associations” were subjected to various forms of CCP interference in matters of doctrine, theology, and religious practice. Local authorities pressured religious believers to affiliate with patriotic associations and used administrative detention, including confinement and abuse in administrative detention centers, to punish members of unregistered religious or spiritual groups. Patriotic religious associations regularly reviewed the sermons of churches and sometimes required church leaders to attend education sessions with religious bureau officials. They also closely monitored and sometimes blocked the ability of religious leaders to meet freely with foreigners. While re-education-through-labor camps were officially abolished in 2013, advocacy groups and international media continued to report some camps simply had been relabeled and continued to hold members of religious and spiritual groups.

International Falun Gong-affiliated NGOs and international media reported detentions of Falun Gong practitioners continued to increase around “sensitive” dates, such as in the lead-up to the Lianghui (the annual meetings convened by the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference). Authorities instructed neighborhood communities to report Falun Gong members to officials and offered monetary rewards to citizens who informed on Falun Gong practitioners. Reports from overseas Falun Gong-affiliated advocacy groups estimated thousands of adherents in the country had been given terms of up to three years in administrative detention.

According to Ming Hui, during the year there were a series of cases in which prosecutors, courts, and police departments declined to press charges against arrested Falun Gong practitioners. On December 23, Ming Hui reported a public prosecutor in Chongqing, overseeing the case of Falun Gong practitioner Zhang Jun charged with “using a cult to undermine law enforcement,” said “We have not found any laws or statutes and don’t have any evidence that can prove that Falun Gong is a ‘heretical cult.’”

Hezhou’s Babu District Court sentenced in May three Falun Gong members to from one to two years and six months in prison for allegedly sabotaging law enforcement by organizing as a “heretical cult.” According to the indictment, the three individuals publicly distributed and posted Falun Gong pamphlets and posters in a residential area.

Authorities continued to subject Falun Gong practitioner Wang Zhiwen to heavy surveillance after his October 2014 release from prison. Following his 15-year sentence for “cult-related” activities, authorities continued to prevent him from traveling overseas to reunite with family members; Wang in August said authorities had cancelled his passport and banned his travel until 2018. He was reported to be in poor health and lacking adequate medical care.

Human rights lawyers defending religious adherents reportedly continued to be subject to harassment and detention, often being forbidden to meet with clients and threatened with revocation of their professional licenses. During the year, authorities tried and convicted several prominent Christian legal rights activists and lawyers on charges of subversion of state power.

In March authorities released Christian rights lawyer Zhang Kai on bail after he was held for six months on suspicion of “gathering a crowd to disturb the social order” and leaking state secrets to foreign entities. Zhang had provided legal counsel to churches facing cross removals and church demolitions as part of Zhejiang Province’s campaign against “illegal structures.” His release came after a February televised interview on state-controlled Wenzhou TV in which Zhang confessed to violating the code of conduct for lawyers and endangering state security. He later recanted his confession, saying it was coerced, and authorities reportedly detained him

again in August, according to his lawyer. In December authorities reportedly again detained Zhang for two days before releasing him. Zhang had been initially detained in August 2015 before a scheduled meeting with the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom during the latter's visit to Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province.

In June human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng, who had defended religious groups including Christians and Falun Gong members, released a memoir published in Taiwan detailing reported abuses he had suffered during six years of harassment from authorities including abductions, followed by five years of detention and physical abuse in prison, such as beatings to his face with an electric baton. Gao and his family said after his release in 2014, government agents continued to subject him to intrusive visits at home and deny him permission to travel for medical treatment.

The government continued not to renew the professional licenses of a number of attorneys who advocated for religious freedom, and it imprisoned other religious freedom activists or otherwise impeded their work on behalf of religious clients. Authorities also harassed or detained the family members, including children, of religious leaders and religious freedom activists. Some family members also received travel bans, restricting their movement.

Authorities detained or harassed journalists reporting on actions against Catholics and other Christians in Zhejiang Province. Christian newspapers reported authorities often temporarily shut down their websites when they reported on Zhejiang Province. Authorities physically prevented other journalists from reporting on cross demolitions in the region by both denying them access to and deporting them from Zhejiang.

Security officials frequently interrupted outdoor services of the unregistered Shouwang Church in Beijing and detained people attending those services for several days without charge. Church Pastor Jin Tianming continued to be closely monitored and harassed by security services, according to reports from advocacy groups.

In Guizhou Province, authorities' harassment and intimidation of parishioners of an unregistered church reportedly became more systematic, with arrests of prominent church leaders, and anecdotal reports of threats from authorities to suspend social welfare payments to attendees of local unregistered churches. In June a Huaqui Church official said local authorities in Huaqiu, Guizhou Province sent notices to all parents that if their children did not cease to attend the house or unregistered church or failed to join the TSPM, they would be barred from taking the *gaokao* college entrance examination and thus attending college or entering the military. Authorities also reportedly coerced church members to sign a document saying that they would no longer take minors to church; violators who brought their children to church would be sued. In July police detained and subsequently released approximately 30 students in Guizhou for attending a student religious camp.

In January a Xinjiang court sentenced Zhang Haitao, a rights activist based in Xinjiang, to 19 years of imprisonment on state security charges. Despite requests to appeal, the court had delayed the appeal in September, according to the *Hong Kong Free Press*. Zhang, a Han Chinese who was reportedly in poor health, had criticized government policy against Uighur Muslims.

The government sought the forcible return of Uighur Muslims living outside the country, many of whom had sought asylum from religious persecution, according to human rights organizations. The government continued to state the Uighurs were criminals and not refugees, and some countries complied with the government's requests for the forcible return of Uighur asylum seekers. In December authorities in Xinjiang detained the brother, father, and sister of a Uighur Muslim man seeking asylum in Turkey to coerce him to return.

Authorities successfully forced some prisoners and detainees to recant their beliefs (particularly Falun Gong practitioners, whom the government reportedly subjected to "transformation through re-education"), or failed to provide adequate access to religious materials, facilities, or clergy. For example, in Zhejiang Province, detention centers denied family members' requests to deliver Bibles and food to the detained. Prison authorities reportedly subjected detained Falun Gong practitioners to various methods of physical and psychological coercion, such as sleep deprivation, in attempts to force them to renounce their beliefs.

Chinese authorities frequently tightened security in both the TAR and the Tibetan plateau in advance of major Tibetan holidays and the birthday of the exiled Tibetan religious leader, the Dalai Lama.

The government did not recognize house or unregistered churches and closely monitored their activities. Some officials reportedly denied the existence of house churches or unregistered churches. Although SARA has said family and friends had the right to worship together at home, including prayer and Bible study, without registering with the government, authorities still regularly harassed and detained small groups that did so.

Despite an overall tightening in spaces for unregistered churches to operate, in some areas, members of unregistered churches said they had more freedom than in the past to conduct religious services, as long as they gathered only in private and kept congregation numbers low. In some areas, however, authorities also shut

down churches that tried to maintain a low profile. According to RFA, authorities in Guangdong Province targeted unofficial house churches not regulated by the CCP through its TSPM. In February the Dongguan local religious affairs bureau sent an official “cease all illegal religious activities” letter to the Zhongfu Wanmin Church in Tangxia Township, forcing the church to leave its location, according to Pastor Li Peng. On May 29, authorities shut down the Zhongfu Wanmin Church, telling the pastors to register at the local Religion Administration Authority and join the TSPM. On June 13, authorities spent hours trying to persuade Li to register with the TSPM, RFA reported. This was reportedly the seventh time during the year officials pressured Li to join the TSPM. In September local authorities shut down a six-year-old unregistered church in Sichuan Province’s Jiuzhaigou County for not registering officially.

Some unregistered churches reported authorities harassed and pressured their landlords to break property leases with the churches. Authorities shut down the unregistered Guangfu Protestant Church in Guangzhou’s Baiyun District on June 23 after the landlord terminated a 10-year lease. The church’s property was sealed, and local authorities told the church to leave Guangzhou and to provide the personal information of the church’s staff to authorities. According to a church member, over the past five years, the authorities had repeatedly tried to force the church to move out.

According to ChinaAid, on August 8, police broke into the Renyi Church, an unregistered church in Xinhui Township, Jiangmen Municipality, Guangdong Province, during a church service attended by more than 100 church members. The landlord was reportedly pressured by police to expel the group, and police officers ordered the church to relocate immediately. Police confiscated all church property including Bibles and other equipment, and evicted the church members. According to the pastor, the action stemmed from the church’s refusal to join the TSPM or to disclose church members’ identities to the authorities.

Nationwide, churches reported stricter requirements on the design of their buildings, sermon content, and the management of their finances. Some local governments continued to restrict the growth of unregistered Protestant church networks and cross-congregational affiliations. According to *Christian Daily*, in Pingyang County, Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, local authorities told churches to submit all their monetary donations and income to the government as part of new regulations. Any purchases for churches, including equipment or decor, would require permission for the government. Other churches reported they were unable to organize prayer meetings without first obtaining permission from authorities.

According to RFA, in August Zhejiang Province authorities issued a public notice banning all forms of religious activities at Central Hospital in Wenzhou. The new rules banned both patients and clergy from holding prayer meetings or reading the Bible in the hospital.

In the lead-up to the September Group of 20 (G20) Summit in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, authorities banned large-scale religious activities in Hangzhou from late August until the end of the G20. Local religious affairs officials sent a notification to a Hangzhou unregistered church of approximately 2,000 members to “reform its illegal gathering activities” and banned the church from meeting, according to the church’s lawyer.

Religious leaders and groups reported the proposed new regulations governing religious activities affected their ability to practice their religions. Unregistered Christian churches reported that the release of draft new regulations caused officials to take a more systematic approach to monitoring their behavior such as increased contact and issuing explicit warnings against conducting certain activities, causing many churches to cease their normal activities.

In Xinjiang, the government continued to cite concerns over the three evils – “ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism” – as a reason to enact and enforce repressive measures against the religious practices of Uighur Muslims. Authorities typically characterized these operations as targeting “separatists” or “terrorists.” Such police raids and restrictions on Islamic practices were part of “strike hard” campaigns, which began in 2014. Many incidents related to pressure on Uighurs, however, went unreported.

According to an international legal expert, the new Counterterrorism Law, which prohibits the broadcasting of “terrorist activity,” grants “discretionary powers to a government that already has broad, intrusive competences.” Human rights groups said the vague definition of “terrorism” and “religious extremism” could be used to criminalize peaceful expressions of religious belief. Authorities often failed to distinguish between peaceful religious practice and criminal or terrorist activities, according to human rights organizations. It remained difficult to determine whether particular raids, detentions, arrests, or judicial punishments targeted those pursuing political goals, the right to worship, or criminal acts.

According to RFA, in a period of three months during the year, authorities demolished 5,000 mosques in Xinjiang under the government’s “Mosque Rectification Campaign”. Several officials said the demolitions were for residents’ “safety.” The head of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee in Kashi (Kashgar) City said authorities demolished nearly 70 percent of the city’s mosques. The deputy police chief in Mush Township said authorities destroyed 46 of the 65 mosques there.

According to the *New York Times*, Kashi (Kashgar) officials in Xinjiang banned mosques from broadcasting the call to prayer, forcing *muezzins* (individuals who perform the call to prayer) to shout out the invocation. In Hetian (Hotan), authorities banned two dozen names as “too Muslim,” according to the report.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to deny international media reports stating Uighur Muslims were banned from Ramadan fasting, and maintained that Uighurs’ religious freedoms were guaranteed by the country’s constitution. Reports published on the official websites of local governments in Xinjiang, however, indicated authorities restricted or banned certain groups of Uighurs from observing Ramadan, including CCP members, their relatives, students, and the employees of state-owned enterprises and state-run organizations, and hosted “atheist education events.” Authorities ordered restaurants and grocery stores to remain open and serve alcohol during Ramadan, according to the website of the Qapqal County, Yili (Ili) Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture government.

Reportedly, official campaigns in Xinjiang increased pressure to dissuade women from wearing religious clothing and men from growing beards. Restrictions across Xinjiang that required worshippers to apply for mosque entry permits remained in place. Beginning in October, authorities in several prefectures in Xinjiang further restricted movement by requiring that residents turn their passports into their local police station for an annual review. Ethnoreligious minorities also reported increased screening at airport and train station security checks.

The media reported Muslims could apply online or through local official Islamic associations to participate in the Hajj. According to government reports, more than 14,500 Muslim citizens participated in the Hajj, consistent with 2014 and 2015 numbers. In July the Chinese government also applied to the Saudi Arabian government to allow for 1,000 more participants from China to reduce the long waiting time to make the Hajj, according to the state-run *China Daily*. These figures included China Islamic Association and security officials sent to monitor Muslim citizens and prevent unauthorized pilgrimages. Uighur Muslims reported difficulties taking part in state-sanctioned Hajj travel due to their inability to obtain travel documents in a timely manner and difficulties in meeting criteria required for participation in the official Hajj program run by the China Islamic Association. The government prohibited Uighur Muslims from making private Hajj pilgrimages outside of the government-organized program. Uighurs allowed to attend the Hajj were reportedly forced to participate in political education every day during the Hajj. Ethnic and religious committee staff from across Xinjiang were again sent to international airports in China in June and July to ensure Uighurs were not making private Hajj pilgrimages outside of government-sanctioned programs, a government source reported. Organizations reported that the government favored Hui Muslims over Uighur Muslims in the Hajj application process. Muslims that chose to travel outside of legal government channels reportedly often risked deportation when they tried to travel through third countries. According to RFA, on June 27 Saudi police, in cooperation with Chinese diplomats, repatriated approximately 100 Uighur and 10 Hui Muslims participating in the Hajj. The Chinese Muslims had reportedly made the Hajj outside of official China Islamic Association channels on work visas. In Turkey, 98 Chinese Uighurs were detained on May 17 while attempting to travel to the Hajj on false passports due to lack of permission from the Chinese government, according to the World Uyghur Congress (WUC).

Hui Muslims in Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, and Yunnan provinces engaged in religious practice with less government interference than did Uighurs, according to local sources. Hui Muslims reported they were free to practice as they wished with regard to family customs such as fasting during Ramadan, clothing, prayer, and performing the Hajj. They reported, however, they did not receive special accommodations for time to pray during their work day nor were they given time off for Islamic holidays but said they were treated in the same way as others in their community.

Authorities continued to restrict the printing and distribution of religious materials. The government limited distribution of Bibles to CPA and TSPM/Chinese Christian Council entities such as churches, church bookshops, and seminaries. Individuals could not order Bibles directly from publishing houses. Members of unregistered churches reported the supply and distribution of Bibles was inadequate, particularly in rural locations. There were approximately 11 provincial TSPM Christian publishers. Only the national TSPM was legally allowed to publish the Bible in the country. According to reports, while there were no independent domestic Christian booksellers, nonreligiously affiliated publishers could publish Christian books. Approximately 20 distribution centers and bookstores were linked to the national TSMP. In addition, churches with over 2,000 members reportedly were allowed to sell books at their church facilities. Approximately 700 churches had such bookstores. During the year, authorities continued to limit the number of Christian titles that could be published annually, with draft manuscripts closely reviewed. Authorities also restricted the ability of some bookstores to sell Christian books. Christian organizations seeking to use social media and smartphone applications, however, reported that the government did not generally censor such materials.

Authorities often confiscated Bibles in raids on unregistered churches. In June Shenzhen authorities shut down a Christian house church, or unregistered church, in Bao'an District, Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, and confiscated its “illegal publications,” including Bibles. Authorities said the church infringed on religious regulations by mailing its publications to its members. Authorities also continued to fine individuals for studying the Quran in unauthorized sessions and detained people for carrying “illegal” religious materials.

The People's High Court, Public Security Bureau, Bureau of Culture, and Bureau of Industry and Commerce in Xinjiang continued to implement restrictions on videos and audio recordings the government defined as promoting terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism. Authorities prohibited dissemination of such materials on the internet, social media, and online marketplaces. As part of these measures, police randomly stopped individuals to check their mobile phones for any sensitive content. According to RFA, in January Uighur Muslims and local authorities reported police in three prefectures of Xinjiang increased and extended security checks of Uighurs who used smartphones. An ethnic Uighur officer said police manned checkpoints in Hetian (Hotan) Prefecture for 24 hours when the new year began to check residents' smartphones and other electronic devices capable of connecting to the internet for Islamic extremist or religious texts and videos. Uighur residents in Kashi (Kashgar) and Akesu (Aksu) Prefectures also reported increased police smartphone checks. According to an RFA source, in May authorities in Hetian (Hotan) cut services to 17 social media platforms, which an official notice said, was in order to "clean" religious content and other material deemed extremist.

Due to the difficulty of fulfilling registration requirements, many religious organizations either remain unregistered or registered as commercial enterprises. Unregistered groups reported they were vulnerable to coercive and punitive action by SARA, the Ministry of Public Security, and other party or government security organs. In some parts of the country, local authorities allowed or at least did not interfere with the activities of some unregistered groups, while in other areas, local officials restricted events and meetings, confiscated and destroyed property, physically assaulted and injured participants, or imprisoned leaders and worshippers, according to reports.

SARA conducted training for Muslim leaders at the local and national levels to train them on religious regulations and their rights under the constitution. SARA officials stated they acknowledged the importance of cultivating the talents of religious leaders to promote the country's social development.

There were widespread reports of prohibitions on children participating in religious activities in various localities throughout Xinjiang, but observers also reported seeing children in mosques and at Friday prayers in some areas. Xinjiang authorities prohibited children from attending Islamic schools, banned Uighur Muslim youth under the age of 18 from attending mosque, and discouraged parents from teaching religion to children at home.

Authorities continued their "patriotic education" campaign, which in part focused on preventing any illegal religious activities in Xinjiang and prioritizing Chinese language and culture over Uighur language and culture. Patriotic education, in general, promoted loyalty to the Communist Party as the most important value. Reportedly, authorities encouraged thousands of Uighurs to participate in ceremonies wearing traditional Han Chinese clothing and to perform taichi and sing the national anthem.

The government asked students in northwestern Xinjiang to report to teachers information on their family's religious practices, including who in their family prayed, attended religious ceremonies, or wore a hijab or beard. Such surveys were conducted annually, passed to security authorities, and meant to stop religious ideology from entering schools, according to media reports.

The government continued to restrict religious education in institutions across the country. Muslims and Christians also reported restrictions on their ability to speak about their faith among university students; the government strictly banned meetings of student religious organizations. Local public security bureau officials regularly warned religious student groups against meeting.

Individuals seeking to enroll at an official seminary or other institution of religious learning had to obtain the support of the official patriotic religious association. The government continued to require students to demonstrate "political reliability," and political issues were included in examinations of graduates of religious schools. Protestant representatives reported that in seminaries controlled by the TSPM, officials directed faculty to engage in "theological reconstruction" to make Protestant doctrine conform to socialism. Both registered and unregistered religious groups reported a shortage of trained clergy due in part to government controls on admission to seminaries.

Officials continued to hold "anticult" education sessions and propaganda campaigns affecting school children and their families. Some officials required families to sign statements guaranteeing they would not take part in unregistered churches and "cult organization" activities related to Falun Gong as a prerequisite for registering their children for school. The media reported government employees in Xinjiang were forced to sign guarantees they would refrain from religious or political expression. The penalty for not signing could be barring their children from entering university or being subject to administrative investigation.

Authorities continued to allow some patriotic religious association-approved Catholic and Protestant seminarians, Muslim clerics, and Buddhist monks to travel abroad for additional religious study. Religious workers not affiliated with a patriotic religious association stated they faced difficulties in obtaining passports or official approval to study abroad.

According to reports, authorities continued to increase restrictions on teaching methods and other activities in private Muslim schools in Xinjiang following the new education law in November banning minors from participating in religious activity in schools.

Authorities sometimes prevented professors from lecturing on topics relating to religion. In September a renowned Chinese American scholar of social and religious studies from a U.S. university had planned to deliver a lecture at the Public Administration School of South China University of Science and Technology. The authorities suddenly cancelled his engagement, saying that the “power of speech shall not sit in the hand of foreign hostile forces.”

There were reports that authorities restricted the acquisition or use of buildings for religious ceremonies and purposes. The demolition of church buildings continued in Zhejiang Province, where authorities said that the buildings were “illegal” structures. Christian communities reported many churches that were targeted had building permits and other official documents demonstrating their building had been approved by the proper authorities.

In September the *New York Times* reported that members of the Kaifeng Jewish community in Henan Province came under pressure from authorities. Approximately 1,000 Kaifeng citizens claim Jewish ancestry. Media reports stated that the only Jewish learning center in the community was shut down. Two hospital employees said city officials ordered that an inscribed stone marking the site of the historic synagogue be removed from the front of a hospital and that an ancient well behind the hospital be buried.

In April the government and CCP convened its first National Work Conference on Religion in 15 years. During the conference, President Xi Jinping told authorities to “guide religious believers to be patriotic, protect national unity, and serve the overall interests of the Chinese nation,” and emphasized that religious groups “must adhere to the leadership of the CCP and support the Chinese socialist system,” according to official state media Xinhua News Agency. Xi also said the government “must guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means and prevent ideological infringements by extremists.” He said religions should localize by accepting Chinese traditions and socialist core values and that the legitimate rights of religious people should be respected. Other provinces also held local work conferences on religion, including Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces.

Government policy continued to allow religious groups to engage in charitable work. Regulations specifically prohibited faith-based organizations from proselytizing while conducting charitable activities. Faith-based charities, like all other charitable groups, were required to register with the government. Once registered as an official charity, they were allowed to raise funds publicly and to receive tax benefits, in accordance with the law. The government did 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 required faith-based charities to obtain official cosponsorship of the registration application by the local official religious affairs bureau. These groups often were required to affiliate with one of the five patriotic religious associations.

Registered religious groups continued to provide social services throughout the country. For example, the TSPM/Chinese Christian Council created the Department of Social Service in 2003. According to the 2015 *Annual Report of the Social Service Ministry*, the most recent available, the department provided financial and technical assistance in eight categories of service ministries, such as education assistance and child care, community development, and medical and health care throughout the country.

Authorities allowed certain overseas faith-based aid groups to deliver services in coordination with local authorities and domestic groups. Some unregistered religious groups reported local authorities placed limits on their ability to provide social services. In some provinces, such as Hebei, some registered charitable religious groups reported a positive working relationship with their local religious affairs bureau officials, allowing them to engage in disaster relief and social service activities. Following the passage of a new law on foreign NGOs, however, some faith-based foreign organizations chose to leave the country, believing authorities would not allow them to register, given their religious affiliations.

Buddhist religious groups reported increased ability to fundraise for their charitable activities. The Anshan City Buddhist Association used social media to receive donations, using the money to provide supplies and scholarships to the children of migrant workers, according to a government report.

Foreign residents belonging to religious groups not officially recognized by the government reported being permitted to worship although, according to policy, foreigners could not proselytize, conduct religious activities at unregistered venues, or conduct religious activities with local citizens at religious venues. In many cases, authorities prohibited citizens from attending the services of religious organizations permitted to operate for foreign residents. In some cases, authorities reportedly expelled foreign residents who attempted to conduct religious activities with Chinese citizens outside government approval. Some foreign residents whose appeals for registration were denied still met without government approval. On several occasions, police raided those meetings, with increased pressure reported during sensitive holidays.

The government also tried to restrict the movement of the Dalai Lama. In September the Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the visit of the Dalai Lama to the European Parliament “mistaken actions” that supported the Dalai Lama’s “spiritual terrorism.” The government in September warned Taiwan’s new administration not to allow the Dalai Lama to visit. In October the Chinese government openly rebuked India for inviting the Dalai Lama to visit a contested stretch of land on the China-India border. The government also demanded that Mongolia not allow the Dalai Lama to visit in November, saying that economic relations between the two countries would be harmed if the visit took place.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion, culture, and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents of societal discrimination as being solely based on religious identity. Religious and ethnic minority groups, such as Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims, experienced institutionalized discrimination throughout the country both because of their religious beliefs and their status as ethnic minorities with distinct languages and cultures.

In Xinjiang, tension between Uighur Muslims and Han Chinese migrants continued, exacerbated by government policies discriminating against Uighurs. Tensions also continued among ethnic and religious groups in Tibetan areas, particularly between Han Chinese and Tibetans, and, in some areas, between Tibetans and Hui Muslims. Comments on social media often disparaged Muslims, with many criticizing what was perceived as too favorable treatment toward Muslim populations. Because of the perception that Muslims were terrorists, online commentators were upset by government policies in certain provinces that were seen as favorable toward Muslim practices, such as the building of more mosques.

Despite labor law provisions against discrimination in hiring based on religious belief, some employers openly discriminated against religious believers. Some Protestant Christians reported employers terminated their employment due to their religious activities. Muslims in Xinjiang faced discrimination in hiring, lost their positions, and were detained by authorities for praying in their workplaces. There were also reports from Falun Gong practitioners who were dismissed for practicing Falun Gong. One source reported that the ability to pray in the workplace was negotiated between the employee and his or her employer, preventing a consistent policy being implemented nationwide and leaving it up to the discretion of employers. In some instances, landlords discriminated against potential tenants based on their religious beliefs.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. officials repeatedly and publicly expressed concerns and pressed for the expansion of religious freedom. The President reiterated the importance of upholding religious freedom for all people in the country, including for ethnic and religious minorities, and noted restrictions on churches during his discussions with President Xi. The Secretary of State raised religious freedom concerns during the Strategic and Economic Dialogue in June.

Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, regularly urged government officials at the central and local levels to implement stronger protection for religious freedom and to release prisoners of conscience. This included officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Council. The Ambassador highlighted religious freedom in public speeches and private diplomacy with senior officials. The Department of State, the embassy, and the consulates general regularly called upon the government to release prisoners of conscience, including religious prisoners.

The Ambassador met with religious groups and other embassy officials continued to meet regularly with academics, NGOs, members of registered and unregistered religious groups, and family members of religious prisoners to reinforce U.S. support for religious freedom. The Ambassador hosted events for religious leaders and practitioners to convey the importance of religious pluralism in society. The embassy supported a number of religious leaders and scholars to participate in exchange programs related to the role of religion and religious tolerance. The embassy arranged for the introduction of religious officials to members of U.S. religious communities and U.S. government agencies that engaged with those communities. The embassy and consulates general regularly hosted events for the public to promote understanding and tolerance.

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 October 31, 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 and 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.

