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CHINA

Key Findings

In 2014, the Chinese government took steps to consolidate further its authoritarian monopoly of power over all aspects of its citizens' lives. For religious freedom, this has meant unprecedented violations against Uighur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and Falun Gong practitioners. People of faith continue to face arrests, fines, denials of justice, lengthy prison sentences, and in some cases, the closing or bulldozing of places of worship. Based on the alarming increase in systematic, egregious, and ongoing abuses, USCIRF again recommends China be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The State Department has designated China as a CPC since 1999, most recently in July 2014.

Background

The Chinese Constitution states that it guarantees freedom of religion. However, only so-called "normal religions" – those belonging to one of the five state-sanctioned "patriotic religious associations" associated with the five officially-recognized religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism) – can register with the government and legally hold worship services and conduct religious activities. The government and Chinese Communist Party are officially atheist, with more than 700 million persons unaffiliated with any religion or belief. However, religious followers are strong and reportedly on the rise: more than 294 million practice folk religions, more than 240 million Buddhism, 68 million Christianity, and nearly 25 million Islam. The Chinese government monitors strictly religious activities, including by those recognized by the state, but unregistered groups and their members are especially vulnerable. For example, although Christianity is state-sanctioned, the government continues to engage in severe violations of reli-

gious freedom against both registered and unregistered Catholics and Protestants. Some have characterized the new wave of persecution against Christians that swept through China in 2014 as the most egregious and persistent since the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, the number of religious followers, of Christianity in particular, is considered to be growing.

In the name of fighting terrorism, Chinese officials' increased religious persecution of Uighur Muslims in the autonomous region of Xinjiang has gone hand-in-hand with the growing number of violent episodes there, creating a perpetual cycle of government repression, violent Uighur reprisals, and deadly force by the Chinese police. Both central and regional government officials have undertaken pre-emptive security and punitive legal measures.

The Chinese communist regime, which celebrated its 65th anniversary in October 2014, views ideologies that promote freedom of speech, civil society, genuine rule of law, and human rights as directly undermining

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its control. As a result, all-around repression in China worsened in 2014, including the government's aggressiveness in controlling Tibet, Xinjiang, and even Hong Kong, as well as stricter controls on the Internet and social media and targeting of human rights defenders, civil society activists, journalists and academics. For example, Pu Zhiqiang, a prominent human-rights lawyer, was charged in June 2014 with creating a disturbance, inciting ethnic hatred, and separatism based

on his postings on Sina Weibo, a popular blog service; he was detained just prior to the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square incident. Other human rights defenders also face arbitrary detention, harassment, intimidation, or imprisonment. Another human rights lawyer, Gao Zhisheng, was finally released in August 2014 but remains under constant surveillance and has been denied freedom of movement to seek proper medical care or to be reunited with his family, who fled to the United States.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2014–2015

Uighur Muslims

On May 25, 2014, just days after Uighur suicide bombings at an Urumqi marketplace killed 39 people and injured nearly 100, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a campaign against terrorism in Xinjiang that has led to a wide-scale crackdown on religious expression. Hundreds or thousands of Uighur Muslims have been detained in security sweeps, and many prosecuted on charges of “endangering state security,” which potentially carry the death penalty. Local authorities’ efforts to suppress so-called “religious extremism” also have resulted in Uighur Muslims being detained and sentenced to jail

fasted were arrested and detained. Also in 2014, a Chinese court sentenced Ilham Tohti, a respected Uighur Muslim scholar, to life in prison for alleged separatism. Central and regional government authorities conflate religion with extremism, assigning the terrorist label to all Uighur Muslims in an attempt to justify their draconian and extrajudicial actions with what they assert is a legitimate war against terrorism.

Tibetan Buddhists

Since 2008, the Chinese government has imposed harsh policies of repression on Buddhists across the Tibetan plateau, including harassment, imprisonment, and torture. In March 2014, Goshul Lobsang died shortly following his release from prison after suffering extreme malnourishment and brutal torture, such as regular injections and stabbings; he was imprisoned for his role in organizing a protest in 2008. Also in 2014, religious leader Khenpo Kartse was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison for allegedly protecting a fugitive monk. The government’s campaign of repression also has involved the destruction of religious structures and restrictions that have forced younger monks out of monasteries. Self-immolations have continued, and in

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for religious attire, unofficial publications of Islamic teachings, religious gatherings, and religious activities. In addition, during the year numerous mosques were raided, “illegal” imams and religious personnel detained or dismissed, and unofficial Islamic publications confiscated. In 2014, Xinjiang authorities again banned the observance of Ramadan throughout that region, and reportedly enforced the ban more thoroughly than in past years. In some locations, local authorities forbade party officials and public servants from holding *iftar* dinners breaking the day’s fast or held festivities unrelated to Ramadan as a test to determine if Muslims would comply with the fasting ban; in some cases, individuals who

recent years more than 130 Tibetan Buddhists, including monks and nuns, have set themselves on fire in acts of protest. Moreover, the Chinese government continued its ongoing vilification of the Dalai Lama, including accusing him of seeking Tibetan independence, which he has repeatedly denied. While there were indications the Chinese government may allow him to visit Tibet, its insistence on selecting the next Dalai Lama continued to strain the relationship.

Protestants and Catholics

In a striking development, at least 400 churches were torn down or had crosses forcibly removed and/or

demolished in 2014, a notable increase over previous years. Most of these incidents occurred in Zhejiang Province and included both underground and state-sanctioned churches, though incidents were reported in other places as well. In Zhejiang Province, these actions can be attributed to the “Three Rectifications and One Demolition” campaign, the provincial government’s March 2013 plan purportedly aimed at building code violations and illegal structures. Many religious believers in Zhejiang, particularly Christians, regarded the campaign as directly targeting their religion. The city of Wenzhou, home to China’s largest Christian community, known as “China’s Jerusalem,” saw a particularly high number of demolitions. Registered churches in Wenzhou also faced demolitions, including the Protestant Wuai Church and the Liushi and Longgangshan Catholic Churches. In general, conditions faced by registered and unregistered churches across the country vary widely and are often subject to the inconsistent discretion of local and/or provincial officials.

Leaders and members of both registered and unregistered churches have faced increased harassment and

(In the past, China has refused to allow papal aircraft to fly through its airspace; it is common practice for sitting popes to send messages to the countries over which they fly.) However, shortly thereafter, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson reiterated calls for the Vatican to cut ties with Taiwan and to stop interfering in China’s internal affairs in the name of religion. Moreover, according to a 2015 working plan of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, China still insists on electing and ordaining bishops completely independent of the Holy See.

Falun Gong

The year 2014 marked the 15th anniversary of the Chinese government’s ban on Falun Gong, a practice officials consider to be an “evil cult.” In fact, Falun Gong heads the expanded list of cults the government issued in 2014. Since the ban, Falun Gong practitioners have been imprisoned and subjected to torture, such as psychiatric experiments and organ harvesting from executed prisoners. In October 2014, Falun Gong practitioner Wang Zhiwen was released after 15 years in prison, but was immediately detained in what the

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arbitrary arrests. Typically leaders of house churches are more vulnerable to these types of charges, but in 2014 pastors of sanctioned churches also faced detention or arrest. The Chinese government generally claimed these actions were to maintain social order, but there were multiple reports that Christians and religious activists were unfairly targeted. In July 2014, Pastor Zhang Shaojie of the Nanle County Christian Church, a registered church in Henan Province, was convicted on trumped-up charges and sentenced to 12 years in prison. The government also began classifying house church leaders as alleged “cult” leaders.

Pope Francis has opened the door for improved relations with China, reportedly inviting President Xi Jinping to the Vatican. Additionally, the Chinese government granted the Pope permission to fly through Chinese airspace following his January 2015 trip to the Philippines.

Chinese government refers to as a “legal education center.” (In these centers, also referred to as brainwashing centers, torture reportedly is common.) Although this extrajudicial detention was temporary, his freedom of movement is still restricted, impacting his ability to seek proper medical treatment for the effects of the torture he endured while in prison. Li Chang, Yu Changxin and Ji Liewu are among the countless Falun Gong practitioners who remain imprisoned. While China in 2014 reportedly ended its deplorable system of “re-education through labor,” a form of extrajudicial detention used for many Falun Gong practitioners, other forms of extralegal detention remain, including secretive “black jails.”

Targeting of “Cults”

Under Article 300 of China’s Criminal Law, those who participate in so-called “superstitious sects or secret

societies or weird religious organizations” or other similar activity are subject to imprisonment. In 2014, the Chinese government took its broadest steps yet to designate and criminalize some groups as “cult organizations.” On June 3, 2014, the government published a list of 20 “cults” and began a sweeping crackdown against these organizations. House churches were targeted because they lack any official protection. In September 2014, more than 100 Christians were arrested during a raid on a house church in Foshan City, Guangdong Province, with eyewitnesses claiming that more than 200 officials took part in the raid. As part of the “anti-cult” effort, China’s government issued a directive to “eradicate” unregistered churches over the course of the next decade, resulting in unregistered church members facing an increased number of arrests, fines, and church closures in 2014.

Forced Repatriation of North Korean Refugees

The release in 2014 of the report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (COI) brought swift and sustained international condemnation of North Korea’s abysmal human rights record. China fared little better in the report’s findings due to its longstanding position that North Koreans entering China without permission are economic migrants ineligible for refugee status. The COI found that North Koreans repatriated from China experience persecution, torture, arbitrary detentions, and other unspeakable atrocities. By undertaking forced repatriations, the COI determined that China violates its international obligations regarding the principle of non-refoulement. At the 69th session of the UN General Assembly in fall 2014, China was one of the few countries to side with North Korea during both debates and votes on a resolution condemning North Korea’s human rights record. The resolution expressed concern about the violations documented in the COI report, including religious freedom violations, and noted the ill-treatment of North Koreans repatriated from other countries.

U.S. Policy

There are several strategic bilateral and multilateral issues that influence the U.S.-China relationship. For example, the ongoing maritime territorial disputes in

the East China and South China Seas impact how the two countries relate to one another as well as with other regional stakeholders in East and Southeast Asia. The relationship is also influenced by the Obama Administration’s Asia “pivot” or “rebalance”, particularly on issues such as trade, the economy, military, and commerce. Mistrust exists on both sides: China is skeptical of U.S. intentions on Taiwan, the Dalai Lama, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership; and the United States is wary of Chinese cyber-espionage, military modernization, and troubling human rights record. As the United States seeks to integrate China more fully into a rules-based global economy, China continues to tightly control its domestic and foreign markets, and tension between the two countries remains in their trade relationship.

In a noteworthy example of cooperation between the two powers on a global issue, the United States and China in November 2014 announced a joint agreement to reduce carbon and other emissions in an unprecedented climate change and clean energy plan.

The United States approaches foreign assistance to China as a means to support programs that protect U.S. interests, such as promoting human rights and the rule of law, supporting environmental protection, addressing pandemic diseases, and assisting Tibetan communities. These programs are primarily administered through the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development through its regional mission in Bangkok, as well as other U.S. agencies. The Chinese government remains suspicious of any foreign funding, particularly support to local non-governmental organizations.

The regular meetings of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) provide another avenue for cooperation and frank discussion between the two countries. At the sixth session of the S&ED held in July 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry reportedly raised human rights concerns in a number of discussions, including the issues of religious freedom and repression of ethnic minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang, noting the linkages between human rights and counterterrorism.

The United States has raised a number of human rights issues with China both publicly and privately, including individual cases. However, human rights advocates urge the United States to do more, and to do so publicly. The United States has publicly expressed concern on several key issues, including: government censorship

and crackdowns on press freedoms and free speech, including on the Internet and social media, and often under the rubric of fighting terrorism; the denial of rights to ethnic and religious minorities; excessive detentions and arrests; and Beijing's proposed counterterrorism law and its potential impact on U.S. technology companies. In return, the Chinese government has criticized human rights in the United States in light of racial tensions and the release of the U.S. Senate report on torture.

China regularly condemns U.S. reports critical of its religious freedom and human rights record, including the CPC designation assigned by the State Department since 1999. Secretary Kerry re-designated China as a CPC in July 2014, thereby also extended the existing sanctions under section 423 of IRFA relating to exports of certain items.

Recommendations

The U.S.-China relationship is complex, nuanced, and continuously impacted by ever-changing bilateral and global dynamics. Navigating diplomacy within this ebb and flow is challenging, but this underscores the importance of delivering a consistent, recurring message on religious freedom and related human rights in China. In addition to recommending the U.S. government continue to designate China as a CPC, USCIRF recommends the U.S. government should:

- Continue to raise consistently religious freedom concerns at the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue and other high-level bilateral meetings with Chinese leaders, encourage Chinese authorities to refrain from conflating peaceful religious activity with terrorism or threats to state security, and use the U.S.-China Human Rights Dialogue as a mechanism to further high-level discussions and reach concrete agreements;
- Urge the Chinese government to release prisoners of conscience who have been detained, sentenced, or placed under house arrest for the peaceful exercise of their faith, and continue to raise individual prisoner cases;
- Initiate a “whole-of-government” approach to human rights diplomacy with China in which the State Department and National Security Council staff develop a human rights action plan for implementation across all U.S. government agencies and entities, including developing targeted talking points and prisoner lists, and providing support for all U.S. delegations visiting China;
- Increase staff attention to U.S. human rights diplomacy and the rule of law, including the promotion of religious freedom, at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and U.S. consulates in China, including by gathering the names of specific officials and state agencies who perpetrate religious freedom abuses;
- As permitted by IRFA and to more directly convey U.S. concerns about severe religious freedom violations in China, impose targeted travel bans and other penalties on specific officials who perpetrate religious freedom abuses;
- Press China to uphold its international obligations to protect North Korean asylum seekers crossing its borders, including by allowing the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and international humanitarian organizations to assist them and by ending repatriations, which are in violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol and/or the Convention Against Torture; and
- Encourage the Broadcasting Board of Governors to use appropriated funds to advance Internet freedom and protect Chinese activists by supporting the development and accessibility of new technologies and programs to counter censorship.