

UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on*
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET: CHINA'S PERSECUTION OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Overview

Religious leaders in China—both independent and state sanctioned—must conform to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political ideology and submit to the state's intrusive system of control in order to legally engage in religious activities. Those who refuse face severe punishments, including surveillance, fines, retribution against family members, detention, political reeducation, forced labor, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, and other forms of mistreatment and abuse.

This report provides an overview of the Chinese government's persecution of religious leaders from various religious denominations and highlights recent cases.

State Control of Religion

Chinese authorities attempt to exert *total control* over religion through an extensive, complicated web of laws, regulations, and policies that the CCP and various government agencies enforce. The government officially recognizes Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Taoism as religions and has established seven state-controlled organizations to manage the affairs of affiliated religious communities. These seven state-controlled organizations—the Buddhist Association of China, the Chinese Taoist Association, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China, the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement and China Christian Council, and the Islamic Association of China—are under the supervision of the government's State Administration for Religious Affairs and the CCP's *United Front Work Department*. Religious groups that belong to one of the five recognized religions must register with the government to practice legally.

Religious leaders are compelled to uphold the government's regulations on religion. The *2021 Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy* require clergy to support CCP leadership and the Chinese socialist political system, among other CCP values. They prohibit clergy from engaging in undefined "illegal religious activities," "religious extremism," and "foreign infiltration using religion." The measures allow state-controlled religious organizations to vet, recognize, and ordain candidates for clergy positions and moreover require these organizations to submit clergy information to government religious affairs bureaus to surveille and control clergy. The measures explicitly target high-level Tibetan Buddhist and Catholic clergy by outlining ordination or recognition requirements specifically for them.

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The purpose of such stringent regulations on religious leaders is to implement the government's coercive *"sinicization of religion" policy*. Sinicization is a political indoctrination process that seeks to entrench the CCP's control and vision for the modern Chinese state into every aspect of religious life by forcing groups from the five officially recognized religions to conform their beliefs, activities, expression, attire, leadership, language, houses of worship, and more to CCP ideology. The objective of this policy is to transform religious sites and communities into extensions of the CCP, eliminate non-CCP influences—which the government often disparages as "foreign"—and forcibly assimilate ethnic minorities. The government's approach to enforcing sinicization has resulted in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, including against religious leaders.

Muslims

Law enforcement has targeted Uyghur and other Turkic religious leaders because of their roles as transmitters of local religion, language, and culture, thus threatening the government's goal to sinicize Islam and forcibly assimilate the population in Xinjiang. Chinese authorities have committed *genocide* and *crimes against humanity* against predominately Muslim Uyghurs and other Turkic ethnic groups in Xinjiang under the guise of combating "religious extremism, terrorism, and separatism." Since 2017, authorities have placed an estimated one million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Hui, and others in political reeducation camps, forcing them to pledge support to the CCP and renounce their language, culture, and religious traditions. Officials also subjected detainees to many other abuses in the camps, including torture, forced labor, rape, forced sterilization, and forced abortion. As of February 2025, Chinese authorities were reportedly still detaining at least half a million Turkic persons in Xinjiang, if not more, while also expanding its forced labor programs and residential boarding schools used to forcibly assimilate Turkic minorities.

A 2021 nongovernmental report identified more than a thousand Turkic imams and other religious figures from Xinjiang detained or imprisoned since 2014 in relation to their religious leadership or religious teaching. Religious leaders have reportedly faced severe prison sentences, including 21 years for Kazakh imam *Erjan Quwash* and 20 years for Uyghur imam *Dadihan*, both of whom presumably remain imprisoned. In February 2024, 96-year-old Uyghur imam Abidin Damollam died in prison while serving a nine-year sentence reportedly tied to his religious activities, including educating students. Authorities had arrested him in 2017 for allegedly "promoting religious extremism."

Chinese authorities have also cracked down on Uyghur women over their religious leadership roles. A February 2024 nongovernmental report highlighted China's imprisonment of Uyghur women on religious grounds, including for teaching religion, language, and culture to children and leading religious and cultural activities for women. Among those still imprisoned are *Tursungul Ghopur*, whom authorities sentenced to 14 years and 11 months in prison, and *Buwihelchegul Sidiq* and *Ezizigul Memet*, whom authorities sentenced to 10 years in prison each. In June 2024, authorities reportedly sentenced a Uyghur woman, *Heyrinisa Memet* to 14 years in prison for teaching religious content, including the Qur'an, to minors back in 2014. Memet had reportedly completed a 10-year prison sentence on unrelated charges shortly before receiving her new sentence.

The government has also targeted Muslim religious leaders outside of Xinjiang. In May 2024, authorities had reportedly ordered Hui imam *Ma Yuwei* of Yuxi Daying Mosque in Yunnan Province to stop his Qur'an study class. In December 2024, plainclothes officers reportedly detained Ma for illegal religious activities, including preaching the Qur'an.

Tibetan Buddhists

Similar to Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims, authorities target Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders because of their role preserving Tibetan religion, language, and culture, which imperils the government's sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism and forced assimilation of the population. China has ruthlessly repressed its Tibetan Buddhist religious communities for their devoutness to the Dalai Lama, whom the government views as a political threat but the vast majority of Tibetan Buddhists recognize as the true leader of Tibetan Buddhism.

Authorities continue to put in place restrictions on monks and monastic institutions. In January 2024, independent media reported that authorities had prohibited the Khyungbum Lura Monastery in eastern Tibet from enrolling new monks of any age. In April 2024, independent media reported that authorities in Gansu Province had begun taking steps to prohibit monks from engaging in certain religious activities in the event of the Dalai Lama's passing. In February 2025, independent media reported that authorities had expelled more than a thousand monks and nuns from the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy in Sichuan Province in an effort to shrink the academy's monastic population. The academy has reportedly served as a major center of Tibetan Buddhist learning and a symbol of resistance to Chinese control over Tibetan Buddhism.

Chinese authorities have long imposed bureaucratic oversight and regulation of the Tibetan Buddhist reincarnation process, stipulating that reincarnations must be approved by the state and born within China's borders. The most consequential reincarnation the government has attempted to exert authority over is the Panchen Lama, the second-highest-ranking figure in Tibetan Buddhism who is tasked with finding the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. In May 1995, the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso recognized six-year-old *Gedhun Choekyi Nyima* as the 11th Panchen Lama. Three days later, Chinese authorities kidnapped Nyima and his family, and in November 1995, the Chinese government oversaw the installation of another child, Gyaltsen Norbu, as the Panchen Lama. Since then, no independent observers have been able to confirm the wellbeing and whereabouts of Nyima, and the state-controlled Panchen Lama has pursued the CCP's agenda, including the sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism. The Chinese government intends to interfere in the Dalai Lama's succession in a similar manner, as government officials have argued that the Dalai Lama's reincarnation must comply with Chinese law.

Tibetan Buddhist monks who resist state efforts to control religious practice or otherwise fall out of favor with the government risk grave consequences. In March 2025, Humkar Dorje Rinpoche, the abbot of Qinghai Province's Longen Monastery and a prominent educator and advocate for the preservation of Tibetan language and culture, died under mysterious circumstances while in Vietnamese custody. Humkar Dorje had disappeared in China in late 2024, and nongovernmental organizations have raised concerns about potential Chinese government involvement in his detention and death in Vietnam.

Go Sherab Gyatso, a prominent Tibetan monk, scholar, and advocate for Tibetan language, religion, and culture, remains imprisoned on a 10-year prison sentence after law enforcement arrested him in 2020. Authorities had previously detained him for criticizing government controls on monastic education and literature. Tibetan monks and Tengdro Monastery leaders *Choegyal Wangpo*, *Lobsang Jinpa*, and *Norbu Dondrub* presumably remain imprisoned after receiving harsh prison sentences of 20, 19, and 17 years, respectively, in 2020 for possessing images of and religious texts related to the Dalai Lama, sending religious offerings to a Tibetan monastery in Nepal, and communicating with Tibetans in exile. Monks are often subjected to political reeducation, torture, medical neglect, and other mistreatment while imprisoned.

Protestants

The government imprisons independent Protestant religious leaders for refusing to bring their congregations under the fold of the state-controlled Protestant religious organizations. As part of the government's campaign to sinicize Protestantism, authorities over the years have instructed clergy to preach CCP ideology, ordered the removal of crosses from churches, and required the display of CCP slogans at the entrances of churches, among other requirements that purportedly contradict the religious values of many Protestant communities. Law enforcement routinely targets unrecognized house church Protestant pastors and other senior-ranking church members on dubious financial crimes tied to their communities' collection of donations or selling of religious goods.

In January 2025, the People's Court of Shunde District in Foshan City, Guangdong Province, sentenced a pastor, two deacons, and two other community leaders of the house church Shengjia Church to terms ranging from one year and two months to two years in prison. Authorities detained the church members in May and August 2023 and charged them with illegal business operations reportedly for printing and selling Christian literature. In March 2025, authorities sentenced *Wan Changchun*, the pastor of house church Living Stone Reformed Church in Bengbu, Anhui Province, to five years in prison for fraud. Law enforcement had detained Wan in April 2023. He had previously signed onto a letter in 2018 criticizing China's policies toward Christians.

In or around June 2025, authorities in Linfen City, Shanxi Province, reportedly sentenced around a dozen members of the house church Golden Lampstand Church to prison for alleged fraud, including 15 years for its pastor *Yang Rongli* and nine years and two months for church leader *Li Shuangping*. Law enforcement had arrested Yang, her husband and pastor *Wang Xiaoguang*, and other church leaders and members in 2021. Authorities had demolished the community's multimillion-dollar megachurch in 2018 and previously imprisoned Yang, Wang, Li, and other church members for their religious activities.

In recent years, authorities have also targeted Protestant house church leaders under China's anti-cult provision of the Criminal Code more commonly used to target unrecognized religious groups. In January 2024, Dalian's Ganjingzi District People's Court sentenced six Protestants affiliated with the online preaching platform Home Discipleship Network on cult charges, including 14 years in prison for its pastor *Kan Xiaoyong*. Law enforcement arrested the six in October 2021 and allegedly tortured Kan and his wife *Wang Fengying* to elicit a false confession.

In May 2025, local authorities in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, reportedly detained 10 religious leaders from the house church Zion's Light Church, including the church's supervisor and pastor *Gao Quanfu*, on cult charges. Gao had reportedly signed onto that same 2018 letter Wan Changchun signed denouncing the government's treatment of Christian communities. In June 2025, law enforcement detained on cult charges *Mingdao*, pastor of the Shenyang Youth Fellowship in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, and allegedly physically assaulted and abused him while in custody to elicit a false confession. Authorities also reportedly arrested four other prominent community members around the same time.

Catholics

Chinese authorities target underground Catholic religious leaders for refusing to join the state-controlled Catholic religious organizations. Underground Catholics do not recognize the spiritual authority of government-backed religious clergy and instead view the Vatican as the sole legitimator of spiritual authority, which the CCP views as a threat. While the Vatican and China signed an undisclosed agreement in 2018 reportedly to cooperate on the appointment of bishops in the country, the Chinese government has unilaterally installed CCP-aligned bishops without the Vatican's consultation and approval. Most recently, Chinese authorities reportedly appointed two bishops, one in Shanghai and another in Xinxiang, following the death of Pope Francis in April 2025, in violation of Catholic Church protocols.

Despite increased engagement between the Vatican and China, underground Catholic clergy still face immense pressure to align with state-backed religious entities. In February 2025, authorities reportedly fined underground bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of the Diocese of Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, 200,000 yuan ($27,880) for celebrating Mass in public with hundreds of worshippers. In March 2025, police detained Shao for a week reportedly for refusing to pay the fine. In April 2025, authorities detained Shao again and another priest shortly before Holy Week to prevent him from celebrating Mass during the holidays.

In July 2025, reports emerged that authorities were attempting to force Shao to accept the authority of the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association by arresting religious and lay members from his diocese, closing underground places of worship, and threatening underground clergy family members' government employment.

The whereabouts and wellbeing of several detained and disappeared underground Catholic leaders, including bishops *James Su Zhimin*, and *Joseph Zhang Weizhu*, remain unknown. Authorities targeted them for their religious activities as Catholic leaders unrecognized by the government.

Unrecognized Religious Groups

China persecutes several peaceful religious groups as so-called cults. While the leadership of many of these groups lacks a formal clerical structure, members whom the state accuses of being religious leaders have received harsher sentences in comparison to their fellow co-religionists. The government has reportedly sentenced Church of Almighty God religious leaders and more prominent community members to heavier sentences than other lay members.

Conclusion

Government policies and mechanisms managing religious affairs do not protect freedom of religion or belief and are instead used to perpetrate particularly severe violations of religious freedom, including against religious leaders. China continues to imprison unjustly religious leaders and lay members alike, many of whom are documented in USCIRF's *FoRB Victims List*, such as *Jimmy Lai* and *Wang Yi*. In 2025, USCIRF *recommended* that the U.S. Department of State redesignate China as a "Country of Particular Concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The State Department has designated China as a CPC since 1999.



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