

# INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

## “Sinicization” – Bringing Religion Under Government Control in China

Under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chinese citizens have limited religious freedom. Article 36 of China’s constitution grants citizens “freedom of religious belief” for “normal religious activities” as long as the activities do not “disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system.” There is also a ban on religious organizations that are “subject to any foreign domination.” This latter provision has often been used to prosecute various religious groups and individual believers.

Since Xi Jinping was appointed CCP General Secretary/President in 2013, religious persecution has intensified under a government campaign for the “sinicization” of religion—an effort to have religions conform to government-sanctioned interpretations of Chinese culture, thus bringing all religious groups under closer official control. Administrative Measures for Religious Groups that went into effect February 2020 require that religious groups obtain government permission for nearly every aspect of their operations. These measures violate international standards for religious freedom.

In recent years, Muslims in China have suffered particularly grievous human rights abuses. The State Department reports that since 2017, 800,000 to possibly two million ethnic Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Hui Muslims in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) have been arbitrarily detained in mass internment camps under the government’s anti-extremism program. The CCP initially denied the existence of these camps, but now insists that these mass detention camps are “vocational training centers” to combat terrorism. Most detainees are charged with “extremist” religious behavior such as simply having an “abnormal” beard, wearing a veil, or accessing religious materials online. Human rights groups have found credible evidence that detainees are subject to egregious violations of human rights in these camps, including torture, solitary confinement, medical neglect, and forced labor; some have died.

In Xinjiang, the CCP employs surveillance tactics including armed checkpoints, voice pattern sampling, and facial recognition to limit the movement of residents, effectively creating an “open-air prison.” Thousands of mosques have been closed; observance of Islamic holy days and customs, such as fasting during Ramadan, denied. The intrusive “Pair Up and Become Family” program launched in December 2017 saw more than one million local government workers tasked to live with Muslim families for

at least five days every two months in order to assess each family’s ideological views and report on their religious activities.

The severity of the ongoing abuses and the fact that those detained include public intellectuals, prominent doctors, professors, businessmen and other professionals have prompted two dozen governments to express grave concerns. At the 2018 UN General Assembly, they called for access to Xinjiang for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights which the Chinese government denied.

Other religions are impacted by the government’s “sinicization” campaign including the estimated 12 million Catholics in China. For historical reasons, about 6 million Catholics are part of the state-sanctioned congregations led by bishops selected with the approval of the CCP. The others are members of the “underground” church who avoid “official” churches because they believe that legitimate ecclesiastical authority can only be conferred by the Pope.

In September 22, 2018, the Vatican and China signed a provisional agreement that was intended to pave the way for the unification of the underground and state-sanctioned Catholic communities. While the text has not been made public, seven bishops of the “official” church who were previously excommunicated were recognized by the Vatican as part of the agreement. In return, China recognized only three of the estimated 20 “underground” bishops appointed by the Vatican. The agreement purportedly allows the CCP to choose bishops but the Pope has the right to veto their selections. The CCP called for all clergy to register with the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association that oversees the “official” church. In response, the Holy See issued “Pastoral Guidelines” allowing clergy to make their own decision on registration based on their conscience.

The Vatican official who negotiated the provisional agreement calls it a “point of departure for a more concrete and fruitful dialogue for both sides” and acknowledges that “the path of normalizing the life of the church is still long.” In the meantime, reports of persecution by the Chinese government persist as underground churches are closed and their priests detained, crosses destroyed, bibles confiscated, and children under 18 forbidden from attending Mass and receiving religious instruction. Surveillance cameras and pictures of President Xi are mounted in many churches. Ultimately time will tell if the faithful will be allowed to practice their religion independent of State control.



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