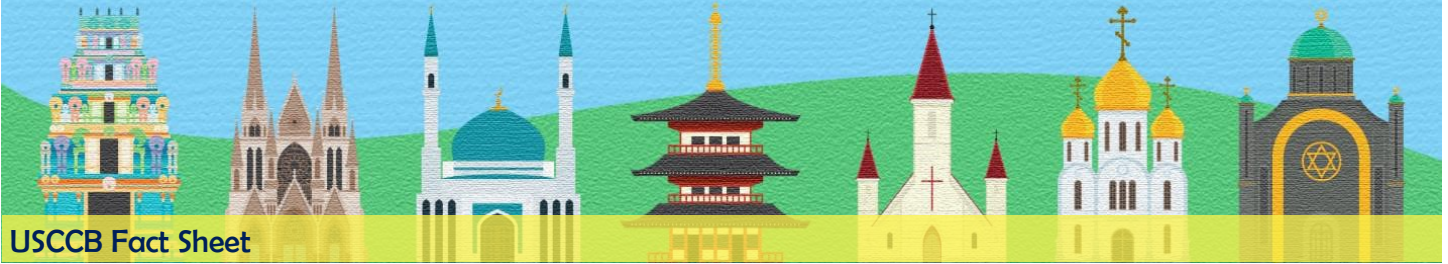


INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

Clamp Down on Religious Freedom in China

In December 2021, China held a national conference on religious affairs, the first since 2016. Not surprisingly, President Xi Jin-ping used that conference to reinforce the primacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and socialist principles to tighten control over all religious activities. He stressed that “religious activities should be carried out within the scope stipulated by laws and regulations, and should not impair the health of citizens, offend public order and good morals, interfere with educational, judicial and administrative affairs as well as social life.”

While the Chinese constitution grants its citizens “freedom of religious belief,” in reality that freedom is conditioned by what the government deems to be permissible. Applying the very broad criteria outlined by President Xi in December means that religious activities are increasingly subject to intense scrutiny. In his remarks, President Xi re-emphasized the need for “sinicization” of religion, “upholding the principle of developing religions in the Chinese context and providing active guidance for the adaptation of religions to socialist society.”

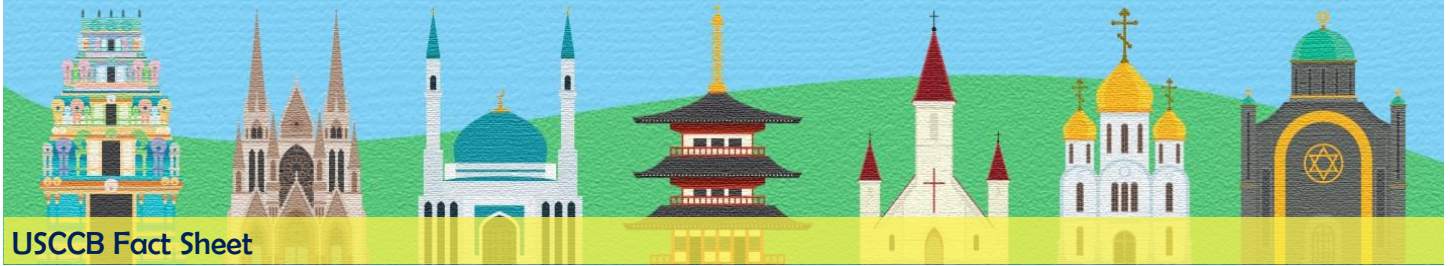
On May 1, 2021, China’s State Bureau of Religious Affairs implemented new “Measures for the Administration of Religious Teaching Staff,” detailing the rights and obligations of religious, strengthening the Chinese Communist Party’s management of all religious activity, and isolating religion in China from foreign influence. These measures require that religious teaching staff support the leadership of the Communist Party of China. One article of these measures prohibits religious teaching staff from accepting appointment to teaching posts offered by overseas religious groups without authorization, and from accepting foreign donations that are in violation of the relevant provisions of the State.

In March 2022, China also began regulating online activities of religious organizations or individuals, requiring approval by provincial religious affairs departments to ensure that online religious content would “not incite subversion of state power, oppose the Chinese communist party leadership, undermine national unity, or violate the principle of independence and self-management in religious undertakings.” It explicitly says religious groups “must not utilize the internet to induce minors to become religious.” This reinforces existing regulations that prevent any Chinese under 18 years from entering a religious site, whether church, mosque, temple, or other institution.

The case of Uyghur Muslims in China has been much publicized and with good reason. It is estimated that over 1 million Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region of China have been detained in what the Chinese call “re-education” camps but are basically prison camps. Human rights groups have found credible evidence of Uyghurs being tortured, placed in solitary confinement, and subjected to forced labor. For those not in the camps, the CCP uses extensive electronic surveillance (facial recognition, voice pattern sampling) and armed checkpoints to limit the movement of Uyghurs. There is systematic suppression of Uyghur language, culture, and religion so that Islamic holy days and rituals are prohibited.

Since 1999, China has been designated a “Country of Particular Concern (CPC)” in annual reports on religious freedom prepared by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. That CPC designation is for countries deemed to have engaged in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. However, the brutal treatment of Uyghurs led to accusa-

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tions that China was committing genocide. In response, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, and Estonia diplomatically boycotted the 2022 Beijing Olympics.

In December 2021 the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act became law with bipartisan support. This law ensures that all goods made in Xinjiang with forced labor would not be allowed to enter the United States. This followed the passage in June 2020 of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act that imposed U.S. sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for the detention and persecution of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities.

But the growing restrictions apply to all religions. Christian institutions and clergy/religious have been come under increased pressure to register with state-sanctioned religious bodies. For Catholics, this would be the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). There are an estimated 12 million Catholics in China, with half being part of CCPA registered congregations led by bishops selected with the approval of the Chinese Communist Party, the rest being members of the “underground” church who adhere to the authority of Rome.

In September 2018, the Vatican and China signed a provisional agreement concerning the appointment of bishops with the CCPA recommending candidates for bishops and the Pope having the final say. While the text of this agreement has not been made public, it was intended to pave the way for the unification of the underground and CCPA sanctioned Catholic communities. There are currently about 60 bishops recognized by both the CCPA and the Holy See. Under this agreement, seven CCPA

bishops were recognized by the Vatican, but China has reportedly only recognized three “underground” bishops whose numbers are estimated to range from 20 to 40. Two new bishops have been appointed with the approval of both China and the Vatican. The 2018 agreement was renewed in October 2020 for another two years, despite opposition from within and outside the Church from those who deemed that China’s continued crackdown on human rights and religion did not warrant the extension.

Notably, one of the May 2021 “Measures for the Administration of Religious Teaching Staff” specifically focused on the process of approving a new Catholic bishop but made no mention of the Vatican’s involvement. According to some experts, the vague wording does not necessarily mean that the Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement on the selection of bishops has been abrogated. Since many current bishops are rather old and as many as 40 dioceses lack a bishop, cooperation between China and the Vatican on filling these vacancies will be important as fall 2022 approaches when presumably the 2020 Sino-Vatican provisional agreement expires.

The Vatican has defended the agreement as a “point of departure for a more concrete and fruitful dialogue for both sides” and acknowledges the many problems of the life of the Catholic Church in China. It remains to be seen whether the Vatican’s hope of building trust and friendship through dialogue will bear fruit in improvements in religious freedom, not only for Catholics, but for all who want to exercise their “right to live in the truth of one’s faith and in conformity with one’s transcendent dignity as a person.”



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