

China: Children, education and freedom of religion or belief

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Over recent months there have been a number of worrying developments concerning education, children's rights, and the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in China. These include:

- Prohibitions against under 18s entering places of worship.
- Pressure from schools on children and parents to stop 'believing in religion'.
- Blocked access to education on the basis of religious belief or practice (child or parents).
- Forced closure of faith-based educational facilities.
- Detention of minors in connection with their religion or belief.

These incidents are part of a new government focus on the control and management of religious activities, exemplified by the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) which came into effect on 1 February 2018 and include articles pertaining to religion in education.¹ Unregistered communities are being forcibly shut down, while religious groups registered with the government are being managed more tightly. Additionally, some Christian groups have been accused of belonging to 'evil cults' which are banned by the government under vaguely-worded anti-cult legislation. In each case the government's focus is on the control of religious life, rather than the protection of FoRB.

A child's right to FoRB is guaranteed under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as well as Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which China has ratified. Furthermore, the child's right to education without discrimination is guaranteed by Article 26 of the UDHR and Articles 28 and 29 of the CRC. The right to education is guaranteed in Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which China has also ratified.

Under 18s prohibited from engaging in religious activities

Various authorities across China have prohibited children under 18 from attending religious activities at mosques and churches. In Henan Province both Catholic and Protestant churches have been warned not to allow under 18s to enter the church and participate in services;² officials have also posted notices outside churches with this instruction.

Authorities in Linxia County, Gansu Province have banned children from attending religious activities during school

holidays. According to a notice posted by a district level education office, students were banned from entering religious buildings during their break.³ The area has a large Hui Muslim population. In Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, minors are prohibited from entering mosques and engaging in 'unofficial' Qur'anic studies.

Schools used to pressure children and parents to stop practising religion or belief

In various parts of the country authorities have used educational institutions to monitor citizens' religious beliefs and to limit some forms of religious activity. Authorities have also threatened to block access to education on the basis of parents' religious belief or practice.

In Zhejiang⁴ and Henan⁵ Provinces, schools have told students or their parents to report their religious beliefs to the school. According to an anonymous Christian speaking to China Aid, the authorities used this information to find the addresses of religious believers, and then told them to renounce their beliefs.⁶ For several years, authorities in Xinjiang have also instructed elementary and middle school teachers to tell their students not to fast during Ramadan.

As part of a wider crackdown on religious observance and practice in Henan Province,⁷ authorities told residents that 'believing in religions' is prohibited and that if they opposed the policy, their children would not be allowed to attend school.⁸ CSW sources report that in some parts of the country, teachers have also been questioned about their religious beliefs.

3 Reuters, 'Muslim county in China bans children from religious events over break', 17 January 2018 www.reuters.com/article/us-china-religion/muslim-county-in-china-bans-children-from-religious-events-over-break-idUSKBN1F60PI

4 ChinaAid, 'Many districts in Zhejiang initiated a purge against Christians', 17 May 2018 www.chinaaid.org/2018/05/many-districts-in-zhejiang-initiated.html

5 UCAN, 'Church crackdown intensifies in China's Henan province', 20 April 2018 www.ucanews.com/news/church-crackdown-intensifies-in-chinas-henan-province/82111

6 ChinaAid, 'Many districts in Zhejiang initiated a purge against Christians', 17 May 2018 www.chinaaid.org/2018/05/many-districts-in-zhejiang-initiated.html

7 CSW, 'China: Churches under pressure in Henan', 23 April 2018 www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/23/press/3926/article.htm

8 UCAN, 'Church crackdown intensifies in China's Henan province', 20 April 2018 www.ucanews.com/news/church-crackdown-intensifies-in-chinas-henan-province/82111

1 For example, Article 44 prohibits proselytising in state schools; Article 11 stipulates that only national groups or those at the level of the province, autonomous region or directly-governed municipality, may establish religious schools.

2 CSW, 'China: Churches under pressure in Henan', 23 April 2018 www.csw.org.uk/2018/04/23/press/3926/article.htm

Childcare and educational facilities closed

Kindergartens operated by faith-based groups have been closed down. In Xiamen, Fujian Province, authorities shut down a kindergarten funded by a local church for allegedly 'not obtaining the necessary approvals'.⁹ In March 2018 in Anyang, Henan Province, police sealed off a kindergarten run by a Catholic church.¹⁰ Also in March 2018, security guards and officials surrounded a Protestant Christian kindergarten in Beijing to prevent parents and teachers from entering. Officials also reportedly confiscated materials.¹¹ Local Christians believe the closures are deliberately targeting Christian-run facilities, and those connected to churches that have themselves been pressured to close.

Ethnic minority schools in Xinjiang have also reportedly been closed, and in some cases transformed into re-education camps (see below). According to China Aid, from March 2018, the authorities have only permitted schools with 'a Han Chinese background' to operate, closing down schools specifically catering to Uyghur, Kazakh, and Mongolian children. Authorities closed down the Fourth Uyghur Secondary School of Xinyuan on 2 March and confirmed that it had been reopened as a 'political training center'.¹²

Detention of minors based on religion or belief

In 2017 and 2018 there were reports of the widespread detention of Uyghurs, Kazakhs and members of other ethnic groups in political re-education camps¹³ in Xinjiang. Up to one million individuals in Xinjiang are believed to have been detained for varying periods of time without charge, sometimes in connection with their peaceful religious activities, including

praying or wearing 'Islamic' clothing.¹⁴ In some cases whole families, including children, have reportedly been held in re-education camps as a result of their religious activities.¹⁵

In March 2018 a 17-year-old Uyghur boy, Naman, died of unknown causes, in detention at a political re-education camp in Kashgar. His family was forced to bury him under police supervision, according to sources interviewed by Radio Free Asia. Naman had been arrested after travelling to Turkey as a tourist with friends.¹⁶

Recommendations

To the government of the People's Republic of China:

- Ratify and implement the ICCPR, and ensure full implementation of the CRC and other international treaties containing provisions relevant to the issues described above.
- Ensure that children are not barred from accessing education, including further education, because of their religion or belief or that of their parents.
- Allow under 18s to engage in activities relating to the exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief, in accordance with Article 18 of the ICCPR and Article 14 of the CRC.
- Ensure that minors are not detained in connection with their peaceful exercise of their right to FoRB or that of their parents, and release all under 18s currently detained in such circumstances.

To the international community:

- UN Member States should ensure that FoRB and the right to education in China are consistently raised in every appropriate international platform, including during high-level visits and other bilateral exchanges, as well as in multilateral fora such as the UN General Assembly and UN HRC sessions and during the UPR process.

9 Radio Free Asia, 'China Escalates Nationwide Crackdown on Protestant Churches', 17 May 2018 www.rfa.org/english/news/china/churches-05172018111646.html

10 UCAN, 'Chinese Catholic-run kindergarten seized', 28 March 2018 www.ucanews.com/news/chinese-catholic-run-kindergarten-seized/81926

11 ChinaAid, 'Beijing authorities raid Christian kindergarten for three days', 6 April 2018 www.chinaaid.org/2018/04/beijing-authorities-raid-christian.html

12 ChinaAid, 'Xinjiang converts ethnic minority schools into ethnic minority detention centers', 9 April 2018, www.chinaaid.org/2018/04/xinjiang-converts-ethnic-minority.html

13 Various known as 'counter-extremism training centres', 'education and transformation training centres' etc.

14 Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 'Chairs Raise Alarm About Deteriorating Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang', 8 January 2018 www.cecc.gov/media-center/press-releases/chairs-raise-alarm-about-deteriorating-human-rights-situation-in

15 Human Rights Watch, 'China: Free Xinjiang "Political Education" Detainees', 10 September 2017 www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/10/china-free-xinjiang-political-education-detainees

16 Radio Free Asia, 'Uyghur Teenager Dies in Custody at Political Re-Education Camp', 14 March 2018 www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/teenager-03142018154926.html/