

China

Freedom of religion or belief: the untold stories

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free to believe



‘Every generation has its desperation, and every generation has its hope.’

The China Human Rights Lawyers Group¹



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All illustrations by Badiuca.

All the text, information, and extracts included in this report have been used by kind permission of the authors. For their safety, the authors’ names are not provided. Due to the variety in the lengths and styles of these research outputs, we have adopted different approaches, sometimes using the author’s original text, and sometimes producing a new summary of the original findings. As a result, the five sections employ different formats and presentation. Some reports have been edited for security reasons. The version of each summary included in this report has been approved by its author.

The views expressed in the summary sections of this report reflect the opinions of the authors, not necessarily those of CSW.

¹ China Change, ‘The Spring Breeze Is Bound to Cause Ripples: A New Year Statement by The China Human Rights Lawyers Group’, 1 January 2022 <https://chinachange.org/2021/12/31/the-spring-breeze-is-bound-to-cause-ripples-a-new-year-statement-by-the-china-human-rights-lawyers-group/>

Introduction

In 2020, CSW published a new report on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in China, entitled ‘Repressed, Removed, Re-Educated: The stranglehold on religious life in China’.² The report outlined the rapid and significant decline in the level of FoRB in China, and explained that ‘almost daily new details emerge about the use of technology in surveillance and profiling of Uyghurs in XUAR [Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region], alongside news of another church closure, another anti-xie-jiao³ campaign, and another flat denial by the government that any of this violates the right to FoRB.’

The violations described in CSW’s 2020 report have continued and, in many instances, have significantly increased. Therefore, rather than replacing the 2020 report, this new report focuses on violations against religion or belief communities that are under-reported or currently developing. It is based on in-depth research by five independent experts, which sheds light on less well-known cases and emerging FoRB developments.

Two years after the 2020 report, the authorities’ crackdown on FoRB has continued increasing in both breadth and severity. In a series of new regulations outlined below, further restrictions on space for registered religious groups have resulted in the complete shutting down of any space for independent religion or belief communities:

February 2018	Measures for the Approval and Management of Temporary Religious Activity Sites were published.
February 2018	Newly amended Regulations on Religious Affairs came into force.
March 2018	The implementation of the Five-Year Plan for Promoting the Sinicization of Christianity (2018-2022) was launched.
April 2018	The State Council published a white paper on ‘China’s Policies and Practices on Safeguarding Freedom of Religion and Belief’.
June 2018	The CCP Central Committee and the State Council issued ‘Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Work of Islam in the New Situation’.
January 2019	The ‘Five-Year Work Plan for Adhering to the Direction of Chinese Islam in China (2018-2022)’ was announced.
2019	The United Front Work Department and Ministry of Public Security issued the ‘Special Action Plan for Investigating and Handling Christian Infiltration from Abroad in accordance with the Law’.
September 2020	Measures for the Administration of Religious Communities came into force.
November 2020	The Implementation Rules for the Regulations on the Administration of Religious Activities of Foreigners were published.
December 2020	Regulations on the Administration of Islamic Hajj Affairs came into force.
May 2021	Measures for the Administration of Religious Clergy came into force.
September 2021	Measures for the Administration of Religious Institutions came into force.
March 2022	Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services came into force.
June 2022	Financial Management Measures for Places of Religious Activities came into force.

2 CSW, ‘Repressed, Removed, Re-Educated:The stranglehold on religious life in China’ www.csw.org.uk/2020-china-report

3 At least 20 religion or belief groups in China have been labelled as xie jiao, usually translated into English as ‘heterodox teachings’ or ‘evil cults’. These banned groups are actively pursued and persecuted by the authorities.

In reality, the restrictions on religion or belief communities have even surpassed the guiding measures from these regulations. Over the past two years we have witnessed more and longer sentences against Christian leaders; the demolition or ‘rectification’ of more religious buildings including churches and mosques; mass arrests of Tibetan Buddhists and the demolition of Tibetan Buddhist statues; and the arbitrary detention and disappearance of countless Falun Gong practitioners, members of the Church of Almighty God and other banned groups, as well as Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other ethnic groups in the Uyghur region, and lawyers and activists who defend the right to FoRB.

‘For Muslims, the dome of their mosque is in keeping with their aesthetics, and through this style of architecture they express their Muslim identity. Destroying the dome is in effect destroying an identity.’

An Ran, Hui poet (detained in January 2020)⁴

From 2020 up to the time of writing this report, the COVID-19 pandemic has radically impacted the lives of people around the world, and China is no exception. However, research from May and June 2020 highlighted by CSW found that even during the most severe period of the pandemic, the demolition of crosses and the banning of churches in various places never stopped.⁵ At the same time, members of religion or belief communities who have attempted to find and report information about the pandemic in China have been put in jail: Falun Gong businessman Fang Bin was taken away by police in February 2020 and his whereabouts remain unknown;⁶ Christian citizen journalist Zhang Zhan was arrested in May 2020 and later sentenced to four years’ imprisonment for ‘picking quarrels and provoking trouble’;⁷ while in January 2022 artist Xu Na was sentenced to eight years in prison for reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic and practising Falun Gong.⁸

‘In their [police officers’] eyes, Falun Gong practitioners are not human beings...They aren’t allowed any opportunity to defend themselves....They don’t have the rights that even murder suspects have. It’s totally unimaginable.’

Human rights lawyer Jiang Tianyong⁹

The scale and severity of these violations has not gone unnoticed outside China. United Nations experts,¹⁰ the European Union,¹¹ and democratic governments, parliamentarians and civil society organisations around the world have repeatedly called on the Chinese government to end violations against human rights defenders, citizen journalists, religion or belief communities and others. In particular, greater attention has been paid to the grave human rights abuses in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), with parliaments, the US government¹² and one people’s tribunal¹³ accusing the authorities of genocide or crimes against humanity. 2021 and 2022 also saw further attention to forced labour¹⁴ and in particular action to end forced labour in the Uyghur Region, including the US’s Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA), which was signed into law by President Biden in December 2021.¹⁵

Governments around the world have also introduced sanctions on officials believed to be responsible for human rights violations in XUAR.¹⁶ These actions have been met with fierce criticism from the Chinese government, and counter-actions such as sanctions against academics and parliamentarians including five members of the European Parliament.¹⁷

‘In 2018, you said our meeting venues were illegal and no one would care if people just met in their homes. Then you said our organisation was illegal. Then you said meeting in homes was also illegal. Now you blatantly insult us and say we are xie jiao [religious movements banned as ‘heterodox teachings’].’

An unregistered house church member, 2021

4 Deutsche Welle, ‘中国续推伊斯兰汉化 甘肃清真寺遭’ 灭顶’ www.dw.com/zh/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E7%BB%AD%E6%8E%A8%E4%BC%8A%E6%96%AF%E5%85%B0%E6%B1%89%E5%8C%96-%E7%94%98%E8%82%83%E6%B8%85%E7%9C%9F%E5%AF%BA%E9%81%AD%E6%BB%85%E9%A0%82/a-48297744 [in Chinese; translation by CSW]

5 CSW, ‘New research on China’s urban house churches amid the COVID-19 pandemic’, 21 September 2020 www.csw.org.uk/2020/09/21/report/4811/article.htm

6 CSW, ‘HRC49: Written submission on China’, 2 March 2022 www.csw.org.uk/2022/03/02/report/5594/article.htm

7 CSW, ‘CSW calls for urgent release of critically ill activist on hunger strike’, 19 August 2021 www.csw.org.uk/2021/08/19/press/5375/article.htm

8 CSW, ‘Artist and Falun Gong practitioner sentenced to eight years in prison for reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic’, 20 January 2022 www.csw.org.uk/2022/01/20/press/5553/article.htm

9 Epoch Times, ‘罗兰： 中共公安何以成公害’, 2 August 2019 www.epochtimes.com/gb/19/8/1/n11424700.htm [in Chinese; translation by CSW]

10 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘UN experts call for decisive measures to protect fundamental freedoms in China’, 26 June 2020 www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/06/un-experts-call-decisive-measures-protect-fundamental-freedoms-china?LangID=E&NewsID=26006

11 European External Action Service, ‘Statement of the EU Delegation to China on the International Human Rights Day’, 10 December 2021 www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/statement-eu-delegation-china-international-human-rights-day-1_en

12 United States Department of State, ‘Determination of the Secretary of State on Atrocities in Xinjiang’, 19 January 2021 <https://2017-2021.state.gov/determination-of-the-secretary-of-state-on-atrocities-in-xinjiang/index.html>

13 Uyghur Tribunal, ‘Uyghur Tribunal Judgment’, 9 December 2021 <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Uyghur-Tribunal-Judgment-9th-Dec-21.pdf>

14 Politico, ‘G7 doubles down on fighting Uyghur forced labor’, 22 October 2021 www.politico.eu/article/g7-doubles-down-on-fighting-uyghur-forced-labor/

15 United States Customs and Border Protection, ‘Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act’ www.cbp.gov/trade/forced-labor/UFLPA

16 BBC, ‘Uighurs: Western countries sanction China over rights abuses’, 22 March 2021 www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56487162

17 European Parliament, ‘Parliament to debate Chinese sanctions against MEPs’, 22 April 2021 www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/briefing/2021-04-26/4/parliament-to-debate-chinese-sanctions-against-meps

Despite the efforts made to hold the Chinese authorities to account, the overall FoRB situation in China has continued to decline, as will be demonstrated below.

The first research paper summarised in this report, *Article 300 of the Criminal Law and Religions and Beliefs in China: from a Perspective Based on Legal Texts*, is based on a study of the implementation of the ‘anti-*xie jiao*’ Article 300 of the Criminal Law. The author uses case information from official sources to track the application of this Article. The author finds that the Chinese Communist Party has cracked down on various faith groups labelled as *xie jiao*, in some cases because of their criticism of the Party. The report also examines the way police departments have established databases to control and discriminate against religious people, while the authorities crack down on unregistered house churches using ‘pocket crime’ offences such as ‘disrupting public order’ and ‘provoking trouble’.¹⁸

In the second research paper, *The Chinese Communist Party’s suppression of Islam in China in recent years*, the author focuses on the suppression of Islam outside XUAR: across the country, thousands of mosques have had their domes and minarets removed or been completely demolished, sometimes at night to prevent protests by local Muslims; those who have tried to prevent the demolitions have been detained and in at least one case sent to a psychiatric hospital. Schools have been forcibly closed, imams have been arrested, and, in common with other religions, Muslim social media groups, websites and blogs have been shut down.

The third summary is focused on a research paper *The Church in the Mountains: rural churches in Yunnan Province* which raises concerns about the situation of rural churches in Yunnan Province, where Christians, who make up 97% of the population in some villages, are facing increasing pressure from Religious Affairs Bureaux. Children are prohibited from attending church, with loudspeakers at the door reminding the congregation of this rule if the government-installed surveillance cameras detect minors during Sunday services. The authorities have also frozen churches’ bank accounts so that they are unable to pay their staff, leaving them to survive on potatoes and corn donated by neighbours. In some areas, only a few churches are still maintaining small groups that meet in people’s homes.

Research on *the impact of the new Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services* (the fourth research paper) finds that even before the measures came into effect on 1 March 2022, netizens began disbanding WeChat groups on religious topics or changing the names of the groups to avoid religious content. According to the author’s research, it is difficult to find live broadcasts or videos of a religious nature online now, while online religious community sites have been shut down. Alarmingly, several Christians report being warned by employers not to share Bible verses or prayers online.

Finally, in an analysis of the future of religious freedom for Protestants and Catholics in Hong Kong entitled *CCP’s Insidious Attack on Religious Freedom in Hong Kong*, the author predicts that the authorities will take discreet but serious steps to restrict Christian groups in the city by increasing controls over education and churches, including clergy. The author also suggests how Christian groups may respond to these restrictions, predicting splits between Protestant churches, some of which will turn to small house group meetings in order to survive. The author shares a bleak outlook for Catholic churches in the city, and for freedom of religion or belief overall.

Together, these experts provide a wider and concerning view of the FoRB situation in China. This report aims to provide a space for the opinions of these experts, to amplify their voices as part of our current analysis of common themes from their varied standpoints and experiences. The examples of FoRB violations from these independent perspectives show the wide range and reach of FoRB violations in China. The objective of this report is to inform and inspire policy makers, parliamentarians, researchers, NGOs, media and religious leaders to pay closer attention to FoRB violations in China, and to consider what action they can take to address these abuses.

Recommendations

To the government of the People’s Republic of China

- Protect the right of all people in China to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, in accordance with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).
- Ratify the ICCPR, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED) and the Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), and ensure national laws and relevant policies are in line with these international conventions.
- Revise all regulations and legislation pertaining to religion to ensure they align with international standards on the right to FoRB as set out in Article 18 of the ICCPR and the UDHR, in consultation with religious communities and legal experts.
- Repeal laws and regulations pertaining to *xie jiao* (usually translated as ‘heterodox teaching’ or ‘evil cults’).
- Ensure that any form of registration system is optional, not mandatory, and is not used as a tool to control religious activities.
- Immediately release all prisoners of conscience detained in connection with their religion or belief, and impartially investigate cases of wrongful imprisonment.
- Immediately and completely end all forms of forced organ harvesting.
- End the demolition of religious buildings as a means of limiting religious practice, and establish a complaints mechanism for religious groups affected.
- Immediately release human rights defenders detained or imprisoned in connection with their peaceful defence of the rights of others.
- Provide a safe and enabling environment for human rights lawyers, civil society actors and other human rights defenders.
- Consult with genuine civil society organisations in China and enable participation in preparations for human rights-related reporting, including the UN Universal Periodic Review process.
- Ensure that no citizen is detained incommunicado and that family members of detainees are informed of their whereabouts and the charges against them in good time, in accordance with international standards.
- Abolish and end the use of re-education camps, and all forms of extra-legal detention, enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention.
- Protect the rights of detainees and prisoners and immediately cease all forms of torture and ill-treatment, and impartially investigate allegations and reports of torture and deaths in detention.
- Remove security measures which place restrictions on cultural and religious rights in contradiction of Article 18 of the ICCPR, including in Tibet and in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR; also referred to by many Uyghurs as East Turkestan), and ensure the rights of all ethnic groups are fully protected.
- Protect the rights of children in XUAR by ceasing the practice of forcibly removing children from their homes and families, and ensuring minors are not detained in adult facilities.
- Grant access to all parts of China, including XUAR and Tibet, to United Nations Special Procedures and other international human rights bodies and experts.

¹⁸ ‘Pocket crimes’ refers to a crime that is so broadly worded that it can be applied to almost any activity, as if a prosecutor can keep it in their pocket to bring out when needed.



Xining Dongguan Grand Mosque, Qinghai. Photo: Unsplash/Zachary Keimig



Church in Bao An, Shenzhen. Photo: Unsplash/Joshua Fernandez

To the international community

- At every possible opportunity, in public and in private, urge the Chinese government to respect, protect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief for all people in China, and to implement the recommendations provided above.
- At every possible opportunity, in public and in private, condemn the use of re-education camps, and all forms of extra-legal detention, enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention.
- Investigate and monitor cases of human rights abuses including violations of the right to FoRB.
- Support all available means of investigation into human rights abuses in XUAR, including inquiries into whether abuses perpetrated by the Chinese government constitute crimes against humanity and genocide.
- Consider sanctions against policymakers responsible for human rights abuses including, but not limited to, those responsible for the abuses in XUAR.
- Given the high risk of arbitrary detention and ill treatment for those returning to China from overseas who fled due to religious persecution, national governments should also ensure that individuals belonging to ethnic and/or religion or belief minorities who may be at risk of persecution are not forcibly deported to China.
- Companies operating in China or involved in the sale of surveillance technology to the Chinese government and Chinese companies should conduct robust human rights due diligence to assess the impact of their transactions on religious and ethnic minorities, meeting with civil society stakeholders and technology and human rights activists engaged on these issues.
- Following revelations about the use of Uyghur forced labour and the connection with arbitrary detention and other human rights abuses, companies and brands should cut ties with suppliers of cotton and other goods implicated in forced labour and end sourcing from the Uyghur Region. National governments should also strengthen laws prohibiting trade in goods produced using forced labour, and adopt and implement binding laws requiring human rights due diligence in supply chains.¹⁹

¹⁹ See also: End Uyghur Forced Labour enduyghurforcedlabour.org

1. Article 300 of the Criminal Law and Religions and Beliefs in China: from a Perspective Based on Legal Texts

This summary has been written by CSW, based on research by a human rights lawyer and legal researcher, with the author's permission.

The report begins: 'China belongs to the group of countries which specially legislate against cults. In order to "legally" suppress beliefs, it has specifically created Article 300 of the criminal law in its legal system: the crime of forming or using superstitious sects or cult societies, or using superstition to undermine the implementation of the laws'.

This new 2021 report analyses the cases where detention is based on the crime of 'cult' under Article 300 of the Criminal Law. It goes on to explain which other criminal offences are used by the Chinese government to detain

people of faith, including disturbing public order, national security crimes and economic crimes. The final part of the report looks at the extra-legal means used by the Chinese government to detain people of faith, including in the Xinjiang 're-education camps'.

The report further notes, 'The Chinese government is usually dismissive of the many overseas reports on FoRB in China, because the content of these reports is mostly news reports from overseas websites and statements by people from abroad. The Chinese government claims that these statements and reports are false, and that there is no evidence to support them, and they are ill-intended, deliberate efforts of western society to discredit China. In contrast, this report quotes mostly legal texts and data that are made public in China as its



source of information and summarises more than two hundred public judgments to support the authenticity of the narration. The purpose of this report is to analyse the situation of religions and beliefs in China, ensuring the authenticity and reliability of the information sources. Since the sources are domestic and from official documents and news reports, the Chinese government cannot simply use false information as an excuse to brush aside criticism of its human rights situation.’

Key findings of the report by the author:

1. ‘The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has cracked down on various faith groups because of their criticism of the Party.’

The report finds that, ‘For those who have been convicted of the crime of “cult” by the courts, the behaviour concerned is usually general missionary activities (distributing and producing scriptures, etc). These preaching behaviours do not really harm people but are viewed as threatening the ruling regime. Thus, it is difficult to convict them directly under common crimes. Therefore, the Party created the “crime of forming or using cult societies to undermine the implementation of the laws” in order to detain the offenders.’ In the author’s assessment, the authorities cracked down on Falun Gong, the Church of Almighty God and other groups, because they consider these groups to be critical of the Party and involved in ‘advocating reactionary speech’.

2. ‘The Central Political and Legal Affairs Committee (CPLAC) interferes with religious judicial cases.’

‘The Central Political and Legal Affairs Committee (CPLAC) is an intra-party organization that the Party Committees at all levels set up to exercise leadership over the judicial organisations...The reason why the CPLAC can interfere with the judiciary is because the CPLAC represents the Party, whose status and power are greater than any institution. Therefore, in the political power hierarchy, the CPLAC is higher than the judiciary, judicial administrative organs, and [the] legislative [branch].

‘The CPLACs often use “suggestions”, “replies”, and “instructions” to influence the case outcome. Some give direct instructions to the judiciary regarding [future actions]. Very often in practice, the courts directly adopt the opinions of CPLACs, overriding the law.’

3. ‘Police departments established databases for daily control and discrimination against religious people.’

According to the author’s research, all local authorities in China are required to seek out and register all people in their locality who have participated in Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God groups, and previously underwent some form of detention. Their information is entered into a database of ‘cult members’. During important political meetings or international events such as the Beijing Olympic Games, people in the database will be the focus of investigation and control to prevent ‘unstable elements’ from going to Beijing and ‘causing trouble’. People in the database cannot hold public office, join the CCP or engage in various areas of political life.

4. ‘China cracks down on members of unregistered churches using “pocket crime” offenses.’

While Article 300 is used to control religion or belief groups not recognised by the government, the authorities use other charges to crack down on ‘underground’ churches and ‘house’ churches using ‘pocket crime’ offences. (‘Pocket crimes’ refers to a crime that is so broadly worded that it can be applied to almost any activity, as if a prosecutor can keep it in their pocket to bring out when needed.) This includes the crimes of ‘disrupting public order’ and ‘provoking trouble’, which are also commonly levelled at activists. However, the author says, ‘there is no clear legal interpretation of what constitutes “disrupting order”. The “public order” and “social order” in the law are very abstract concepts.’ A search on 11 September 2020 of online court judgements found that in 2019, prosecutors charged 113,850 people with the crime of ‘provoking trouble’, accounting for 6.3% of all crimes, ranking as the fourth largest crime. In addition, the author finds that religious believers are often convicted of ‘resisting the government’s religious policies’ and for the offence of ‘interference with public function’, for example for protecting crosses from being demolished.

2. The Chinese Communist Party’s suppression of Islam in China in recent years

This summary has been provided by the author and translated by CSW, with the author’s permission. The author is a writer and scholar of religion.

‘Since the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it has never stopped suppressing and persecuting religions. After Xi Jinping came to power, the persecution of religions has intensified. Islam, with its 20 million followers, has suffered endlessly.

‘The CCP has a long history of oppression against Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, and since the turn of the century, it has tightened its grip on local Muslims in the name of counter-terrorism. 2017 saw the start of the establishment of concentration camps in Xinjiang, where millions of innocent Uyghurs are subject to forced labour. There is now ample evidence to confirm this crime.

‘The genocide committed by the CCP in Xinjiang is well known to the international community, but its repression of Muslims outside Xinjiang is less well known. For this reason, we are publishing this investigation report with a focus on Muslims outside Xinjiang.

‘The CCP’s persecution of Islam is determined by the nature of the CCP’s political party, which is an atheist regime and therefore carries a natural hostility towards religion. Because of the ability of religion to influence the cohesion of people’s hearts, the CCP has guarded closely against all religions, fearing their spread. After the Communist Party came into power, the 1950s and 1960s saw its brutal persecution of religions. Its religious policies improved slightly after the 1980s, but this was only a small relaxation. The development of religions seems to have caused panic again, and this century has seen the tightening of restrictions on religions again.

‘In the case of Islam, the 2010s saw the arrest of several scholars, including a Muslim bookseller and his wife in Yunnan, a scholar from Zhejiang and an imam in Ningxia.

‘In 2017, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) proposed a “Five-Year Plan for the Sinicization of Islam”,²⁰ a plan to remove the influence of three “-zations” in China

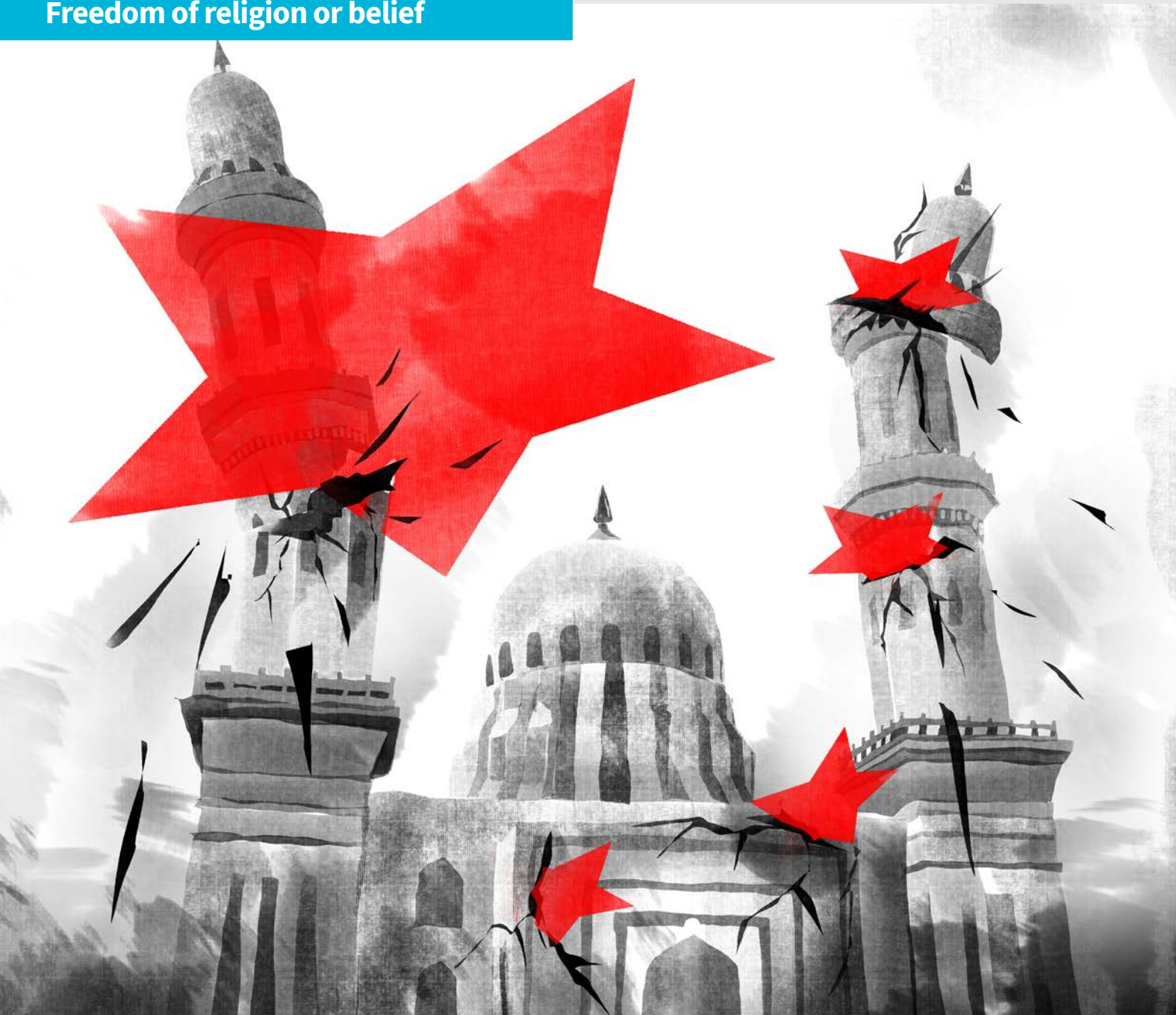
within five years: “Arabization”, “Saudization” and the “generalization of halal”.²¹ This was a trumped-up accusation intended to suppress Muslims in general. The scope of Sinicization of Islam includes the forced removal or alteration of all mosque domes and new minarets, and even arched windows, doors and ornaments; the forced defacement or destruction of Arabic scriptures hung or posted in all Muslim restaurants and Muslim households; the banning of the original Arabic Halal symbol on all halal food, and the closure of Arabic schools attached to mosques and the expulsion of students, as well as the closure of private Islamic websites, the banning of social media accounts dealing with such issues, and the admonition of those who publish information and spread the truth.

‘According to the Islamic Association of China, in 2016, there were about 40,000 mosques in China, of which 24,000 were in Xinjiang. In September 2020, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) said that some 16,000 mosques in Xinjiang had been demolished or damaged since 2017.²² Most of the original inland mosques were built in the Chinese style, and after the reform and opening up, many mosques were rebuilt, some of which were built in the Arab dome style; but under this campaign, domes and minarets have been removed from all the new mosques.

‘The mosques with domes were required to be replaced with flat roofs or pointed roofs, and excessively tall minarets had to be removed or their height cut down. This task was enforced by the local civil and religious authorities, with the assistance of the public security authorities. Mosque management teams are forced under duress to sign consent forms for rectification, and if they do not agree the mosques are forcibly demolished by the local authorities, and people who protest it are detained and admonished. There is no legal basis for the forced demolition, and the government authorities quote “confidential documents” as their source of authority.

‘Previously, the Grand Mosque of Weizhou was razed to the ground by the Chinese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution and was rebuilt by the people with

20 The Plan was announced in January 2019. See <https://bitterwinter.org/new-secret-sinicization-law-hits-chinese-muslims>
21 In July 2020, the authorities in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region decided to follow Xi Jinping’s call to “resolutely curb religious extremism and continuously rectify the problem of the three ‘zations’” – Arabization, Saudization, and the generalization of halal. See <https://bitterwinter.org/islam-sinicized-further-after-president-xis-visit-rfi>, ‘澳智库：中国近年拆除、破坏新疆清真寺1.6万座 北京：污蔑’, 25 September 2020 www.rfi.fr/cn/%E5%9B%BD%E9%99%85/20200925-%E6%BE%B3%E6%99%BA%E5%BA%93-%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E8%BF%91%E5%B9%B4%E6%8B%86%E9%99%A4-%E7%A0%B4%E5%9D%8F%E6%96%B0%E7%96%86%E6%B8%85%E7%9C%9F%E5%AF%BA1-6%E4%B8%87%E5%BA%A7-%E5%8C%97%E4%BA%AC-%E6%B1%A1%E8%94%91



their own funds after the reform and opening up. As part of the new demolition campaign, the government demanded that the Great Mosque of Weizhou must be forcibly demolished by 10 August 2018. On the night of the 10th, people who had heard the news gathered at the mosque to guard it, and on that day the CCP mobilised military police and armoured vehicles, and resorted to coercion by cutting off the internet and electricity. The stalemate lasted until the early hours of the following day, when government officials stepped in and said they would no longer demolish the mosque, and the crowd dispersed. A few days later, however, the government used a combination of soft and hard tactics to take control of the local mosque management committee and eventually demolished the mosque's main dome in a low-key manner. Without its dome, the mosque has become an awkward-looking building with a pointed tile roof.

'In August 2021, several women of faith gathered to protest against the demolition of the dome at the Dongguan Mosque in Xining, and were taken away by the public security authorities for intimidation and admonishment. In December 2021, a small mosque in Hohhot was forcibly demolished, and a female Muslim who stood alone under a crane in protest was forcibly dragged away and sent to a psychiatric hospital, where she was later forced to sign a statement saying that she would not oppose the demolition any more before being released.

'In March 2021, the Communist Party's forced demolition of mosques across Yunnan was resisted by Muslims in Zhaotong, Pu'er and Xishuangbanna. The Muslims of Dagan County in Zhaotong organised a march to protest against a demolition by the authorities, who stopped the demolition during the day. However, when the Muslims arrived the next day, it had been secretly demolished

overnight. As a result, the mosques in Zhaotong have since arranged for the Muslim masses to take turns guarding the mosques day and night. The Muslim masses in Zhaotong who guarded one mosque dug graves for themselves, stating that they had pledged to fight for the mosque until their final breath. Muslims at the Pu'er Mosque, and at the Dai Mosque in Xishuangbanna, wore white shrouds to show that they would die to defend the mosque. There is currently a standoff at the mosques in these areas.

'In addition to the mosques, Muslim gathering areas everywhere were affected: food streets, archways, restaurants and houses. Food streets and cultural streets with Arab styles have been demolished, archways and pavilions with domes and scriptures have been removed, Arabic signs in restaurants have been covered or painted over, and Arab tiles in front of Muslim households have been forced to be covered.

'Since 2017, a large number of Arabic schools have been forced to close and students dismissed, with only some mosques now retaining traditional scriptural education. In 2019, the Arabic school in Pingliang and the Arabic school at the Garden Street Mosque in Zhengzhou were shut down and the headmasters were forced to leave the country.

'In addition, on 8 October 2019, a number of primary and secondary schools in Sanya, Hainan, banned Muslim girls from wearing the hijab and students were banned from entering the school and had to sit and study in front of the school.

'Since 2016, various Islamic websites and forums have been shut down, with the Communist authorities shutting down the country's largest Muslim website, 2muslim.com. Another well-known Islamic website, lvsezhonghua.net, has also been shut down several times, and its owner has now had to move its server outside the country. On 1 March 2022, the Chinese Communist Party issued measures to manage religious information on the Internet and began banning all content about religion online. Several WeChat groups, WeChat accounts and Weibo accounts²³ were blocked, and most Muslims dared not speak out in anger about it.

'On 20 February 2022, some Muslims launched a signature campaign in solidarity with the Xuzhou woman in chains,²⁴ which was co-signed by more than 200 people from China and abroad. A few days later, the appeal letter was censored in China, several social media accounts of its author were suspended, and most of the signatories in China were summoned and admonished by the authorities, and forced to write pledges and confidentiality agreements.

'In addition to this, the Chinese Communist Party has employed a large number of propaganda accounts on social media to perpetuate the slander and defamation of Islam, concocting various rumours in an attempt to create the illusion that "Islam is an evil religion and Muslims are terrorists," and to completely demonise Islam in order to gain the support of the general public for the suppression of Islam.

'This summary is based on a series of investigations into the repression and persecution of Muslims outside Xinjiang, China, by the Chinese Communist authorities in recent years. It is hoped that the international community will understand what is really happening and support Chinese Muslims, and all those who are being oppressed.'

²³ Popular social media sites in China.

²⁴ In January 2022 video posted on social media of a Chinese woman locked in a village hut with a chain around her neck shocked the Chinese public, dominating online discussion until censors began to remove posts. See also: BBC, 'Xuzhou mother: Video of chained woman in hut outrages China internet', 31 January 2022 www.bbc.com/news/uk-60194080

3. The Church in the Mountains: rural churches in Yunnan Province

This summary has been written by CSW and is based on research carried out by an independent researcher focusing on religious communities.

On 7 September 2012 two earthquakes struck near the border between Yunnan and Guizhou provinces in south-west China. According to UNICEF, 81 people died and 256,900 families were affected, with many left in need of urgent relocation.²⁵ In the aftermath, relief teams entered the mountains to help rebuild the affected areas. After returning from the earthquake, one relief volunteer decided to establish a Christian fellowship to provide rice, oil and other necessities to over 1,000 impoverished families living in the mountains.

In fact, many towns and villages spread across Yunnan's high mountains and river valleys share a long, rich history of Christian belief, in particular among Yunnan's minority ethnic groups, including the Miao and Yi. Christian faith and practice are deeply embedded in local custom and culture, and play an integral role in the resilience of communities subsisting in what to a city-dweller may appear to be an exceptionally harsh environment. However, both old and new churches are now facing restrictions from the authorities, impacting their right to freedom of religion or belief.

In one of Yunnan's counties alone, there are currently an estimated 30,000 Christians: in some villages Christians make up 97% of the population. There are around 90 congregations belonging to the state-sanctioned Three-Self Church. However, in this area, there is little distinction between the Three-Self Church and the unregistered 'house churches', and according to one local source, the registered churches preach and lead their congregation in the same way as those in independent, unregistered churches, and until recently have not been closely controlled by the authorities.

Rural pastors in this region do not receive a salary from the church. Therefore, during the farming season, many church leaders leave to work in the big cities, which has left many congregations without permanent pastors.

Churches in the area play a vital role in caring for abandoned children. In some areas, many of the young people marry young, at the age of 14 or 15 years. Many of these marriages, which do not go through any legal process, end when the spouses reach 18 or 19 years old and leave their homes to work elsewhere. The children born during these temporary marriages are often

abandoned, and were previously left to scavenge for food in the rubbish. Church members have adopted such children or have arranged for them to be cared for by other relatives.

Despite the large Christian population, observers say that in the current religious environment, the authorities will not approve any new churches. As a result, many Christians have to walk two or three hours up into the mountains to the church on Sundays to attend services.

In 2021, the religious policy in the county, which had previously been more lenient than in neighbouring Guizhou province, for example, became increasingly strict. Several government-imposed restrictions in particular have dramatically changed the practice and appearance of regular Sunday worship. In the first place, the absolute prohibition on minors entering religious sites has prevented children from attending church with their families. In some cases, if the government-installed surveillance cameras detect minors in the congregation during Sunday services, a loudspeaker erected at the entrance of the church will remind the church leader to take the minors out of the congregation. In addition, Bible study sessions and Sunday meetings have been stopped periodically due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The local Religious Affairs Bureau has frozen some churches' bank accounts so that they are unable to pay their staff. As a result, some church staff, who were already receiving only very limited financial support, are now facing severe financial hardship, and are surviving on potatoes and corn donated by neighbours. Pastors in the area have also been pressured by the Religious Affairs Bureau to only allow 'as few people as possible' to enter the mountains to visit them.

The Religious Affairs Bureau also maintains very strict control over visits from outsiders. If the Bureau finds people from outside the area participating in church worship or visits to churches, they notify the police and investigate the matter. Furthermore, all religious communities in the area have informants who will report any irregularities in the church, and those who make reports receive rewards from the local authorities. In keeping with the situation in other parts of the country, schools also reportedly teach children to be on the lookout for 'spies' and teach them to report 'suspicious people'.



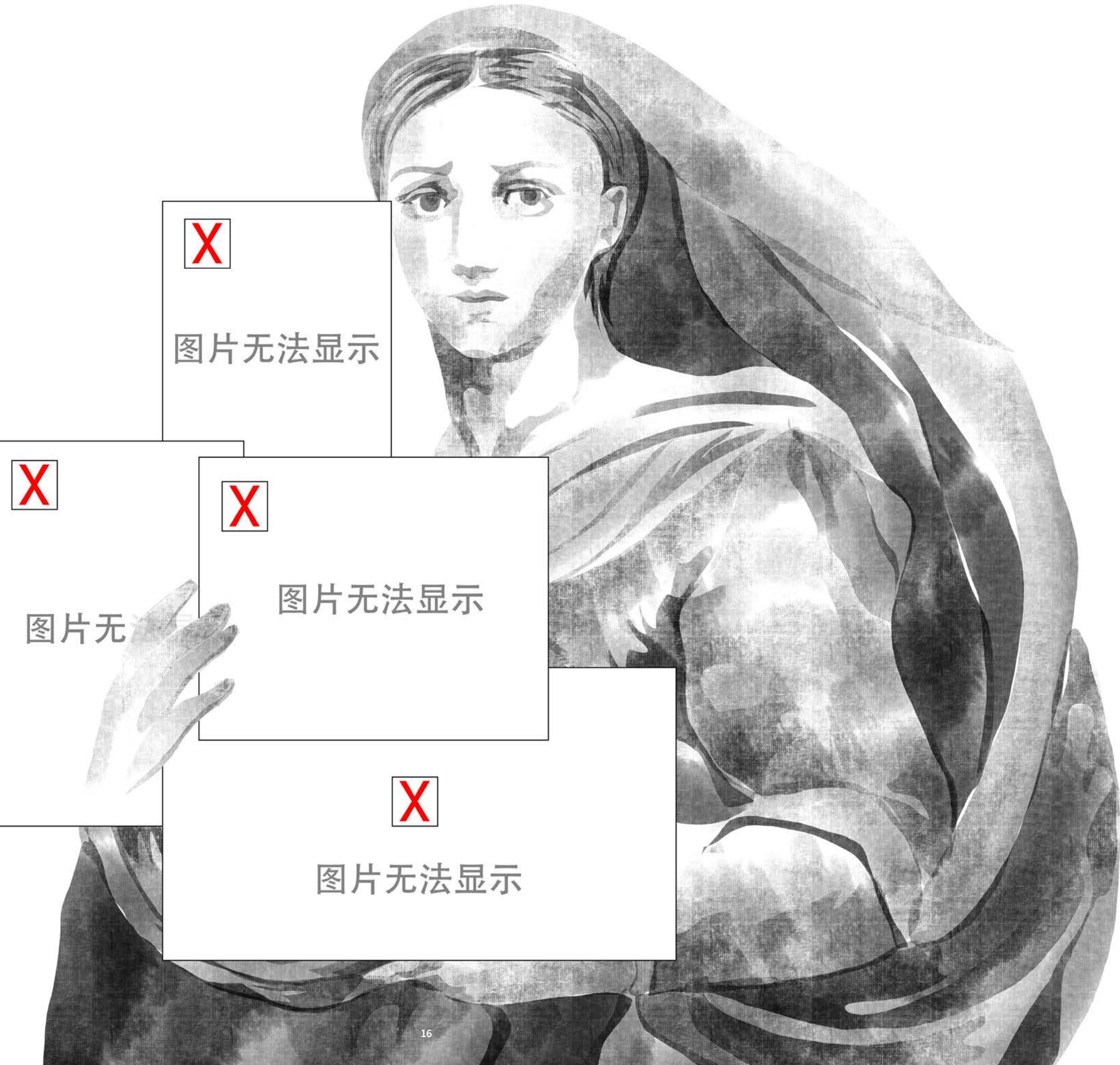
In some parts of Yunnan, churches only meet in person one Sunday a month to avoid the risk of being harassed by the police, and use the Internet for worship the other three Sundays. Church elders also report being forced to resign from civil service positions because they refused to renounce their faith.

One church questioned by the Religious Affairs Bureau was told in 2021 that since that year was the 100th anniversary of the founding of the party, 'all house church activities should be stopped'. They now also feel that the government is suppressing the church more and more. All they can do is to take one step at a time, in the face of an unknown future.

In a neighbouring region, also in Yunnan, the majority of crosses on the churches have been removed and many have been forced to hoist the national flag outside their buildings instead, as in other parts of the country. Meetings have also been stopped through the region, ostensibly to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, since the beginning of the pandemic there has not been a single case of infection reported from the entire region (as of 2021), and local Christians therefore believe the meetings are being stopped for the purpose of restricting religious activities. In some places, churches have not met for nearly two years. Only a few churches are still maintaining small groups that meet in people's homes, but it is not clear how long even these small-scale meetings will be permitted by the authorities.

²⁵ UNICEF, 'Over 200,000 quake-affected people are in urgent need of help in Yunnan' www.unicef.org/hk/en/emergency-news-types/on-7-september-2012-two-earthquakes-measuring-5-7-and-5-6-magnitude-hit-a-border-area-near-yiliang-in-yunnan-and-weining-county-in-guizhou-province-81-persons-died-and-more-than-200000-persons-are/

Censorship is making it harder to find religion-related videos online.



4. The impact of the Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services

This summary is based on first-hand research conducted in April 2022. It has been provided by the author and edited by CSW, with the author’s permission. The author is an independent researcher with a special interest in FoRB.

The Measures, which went into effect in March 2022, prohibit the sharing of religious content online without a permit, including through text messages, images, audio and video. They also prohibit religious content that ‘induce[s] minors to believe in religion’. All respondents indicated that they were already feeling the pressure of this new regulation to a greater or lesser extent.

Main findings of the research:

1. WeChat groups are forced to disband, or require strict self-censorship before sending messages.

Respondents said that since the end of January 2022, some large WeChat groups have announced their disbandment. At the same time, smaller groups also changed their names to avoid religious allusions. In addition, a Muslim imam said that a friend at the provincial Islamic association had told him that WeChat groups cannot exceed 10 people and that they cannot post religion-related content.

Another interviewee said that her house church abandoned WeChat as a communication tool, opting instead for the safer Telegram messaging app. However, it is inconvenient as using Telegram requires bypassing the Great Firewall (GFW).²⁶ She said that because of a national anti-fraud app launched by the police, many people find it too risky to use a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to bypass the GFW.

2. Any unofficial live streaming of a religious nature is banned, and videos have been taken down.

All respondents clearly stated that it is difficult to see live broadcasts or videos of a religious nature now, and most that are available are just popular science videos about religion or religious history. Major video sites such as Baidu Video and Bilibili have removed religion-related videos on a large scale, and it is now difficult for users to search for videos such as sermons. The Muslim imam interviewed also confirmed that he received a notice which bans all online live broadcasts.

²⁶ The ‘Great Firewall’: laws and technologies employed by the Chinese government to monitor, control and restrict internet use.



Baoshan Buddhist temple, Shanghai.
Photo: Unsplash/Tianhao Zhang

On 4 March, Japanese monk Yakushiji Kanho announced on Bilibili that his weekly live prayer could no longer continue.²⁷ In addition, one of his live broadcasts in February was stopped halfway through. This shows that the impact of the new management measures on live broadcasts and videos is immediate, and even foreigners with relatively more freedom will not be treated differently on this issue.

3. Daily sharing and communication are severely restricted.

For most respondents, this is the most worrying and disturbing. One interviewee said that he broke the habit of sharing scriptures on WeChat every Sunday because he had been reported to the authorities by a colleague for it. Another interviewee said that he once posted a prayer and was approached by a manager that afternoon asking him to delete it. One interviewee who works at a school said that she cannot share any religion-related content, let alone comment on it, without affecting bonuses and performance assessment for her and her colleagues.

Meanwhile, Chinese authorities have begun increasing efforts to shut down Christian online community sites. The 21-year-old ‘Jonah Home’²⁸ was permanently closed in April. The site announcement reads:

‘For obvious reasons, this website is unable to serve you from today. Thanks for your company and support! The disappearance of a website is only about a website disappearing; it doesn’t mean anything. Apart from a URL failing to load from that moment, nothing else stops at that moment. Therefore, there is no need to be concerned; just keep going. Jonah 2022.4.12’

In addition, apps such as the popular Bible app ‘WeDevote’ have been taken down and cannot be downloaded at present. Similarly, a large number of WeChat official accounts have been shut down one after another, and it is now difficult for Christians in China to find online resources about Christianity.

The experiences mentioned above prove that the new measures are being firmly implemented, which makes some respondents begin to worry that they may face further restrictions in the future. One interviewee believed that this is the Chinese authorities’ strategy for religious believers; that these restrictions are the means, while taming and eradication of certain religious practices is the goal. Another interviewee agreed, arguing that the ultimate goal of the Chinese authorities’ policy for Christianity is to establish ‘red churches’ in China with the so-called ‘party spirit’, that is, churches that obey the regime rather than God.

5. The CCP’s Insidious Attack on Religious Freedom in Hong Kong

This summary has been written by CSW, based on research by an independent religious scholar, with the author’s permission.

In this report, the author explores some early signs of the Chinese authorities’ intent to restrict religious freedom in Hong Kong, with a special focus on Christian churches – Catholic and Protestant – and their respective responses to this ‘looming threat’ to their freedom. The author begins:

‘The most violent form of attack on religious freedom is not necessarily the burning of churches and the killing of believers, for the persecutors kill the bodies but not the souls. Rather, the more dangerous and insidious attack on a religion could be its corruption from within, so that its believers can only practise the faith in name rather than in essence. In this regard, the CCP is about to use the latter strategy to attack religious freedom in Hong Kong. Why? Hong Kong is an international city, and it is the world’s number three international financial center, ranked only behind New York and London.²⁹ Closing Christian schools and churches may be too shocking to foreign expatriates and affect the city’s international reputation. Rather, the CCP can totally restrict religious freedom by using an insidious means: corrupting Christian education and exerting total control on churches without closing them.’

As the author notes, unlike mainland China, Hong Kong has historically enjoyed a high degree of religious freedom, and has a long history of Christian mission. ‘To this day, around 60% of primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong are run by Christians...nurturing freedom fighters like Martin Lee and Joshua Wong.’ The author also highlights Christians’ involvement in the 2019 protests against a controversial extradition bill as one of the reasons behind the CCP’s plan to restrict religious freedom. In July 2019, nearly two million Hong Kongers took to the street to protest the bill.³⁰ The author observes: ‘As Christians believe in the importance of fighting for justice, many churches were open to shelter protesters so that they could hide from police brutality. In one night, Christians chanted “Sing Alleluia to the Lord” literally for hours in front of the policemen as a way to show their

solidarity to the protesters and demonstrate their love for peace and justice.³¹ Pastor Roy Chan even organized a group of Christians to stand between the policemen and young protesters in order to protect them from the police; he has now fled to the UK because of his involvement in the protest.³² Apart from this, we should not fail to mention the contribution of generations of democracy fighters like Pastor Yiu-Ming Chu and Benny Tai who organized the Occupy Central movement in 2014,³³ as well as Jimmy Lai and Cardinal Joseph Zen who have stood up against the CCP for decades past. Why is this important? The CCP will most certainly take all these into account and retaliate in the future by tightening its control over religious freedom: the first step would be by reining in Christian education.’³⁴

First step: Corruption of Christian education

‘The CCP knows very well that in order to control a state, the first step is to control the mind[s] of young children.’ However, the author believes that ‘rather than closing Christian schools all at once and turning them into public schools, the CCP’s plan is to corrupt Christian education from within by compromising those who work in the field’ through the CCP Liaison office in Hong Kong and ‘training sessions’ for principals who are later reportedly approached to join the CCP.

Second step: Total control of Christian churches

The report continues: ‘In a similar vein, the CCP will most likely allow churches in Hong Kong to remain open, yet the government will impose severe restrictions on church administration by the following means: (1) imposing a draconian law on religions, (2) establishing the Religious Affairs Bureau, and (3) the re-education of Christian clergy.’

The author notes that in January 2022, Ta Kung Pao, a newspaper controlled by the Liaison Office of the Central Government in Hong Kong, published a series of articles on the need to place restrictions on Christian churches in Hong Kong; it suggested that the draconian ‘Chinese Temple Ordinance’ from the colonial era should be applied to Christian churches.³⁵

27 Bilibili, 4 March 2022 <https://t.bilibili.com/633688606043537409?tab=2>
28 www.jonahome.net [in Chinese; translation by CSW]

29 The Global Financial Centres Index www.longfinance.net/programmes/financial-centre-futures/global-financial-centres-index/
30 BBC, ‘Hong Kong protest: ‘Nearly two million’ join demonstration’, 17 June 2019 www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-48656471
31 BBC, ‘Hong Kong protests: How Hallelujah to the Lord became an unofficial anthem’, 22 June 2019 www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-48715224
32 Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, ‘Hearing on The State of Civil and Political Rights in Hong Kong’, 14 October 2021 https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/sites/humanrightscommission.house.gov/files/documents/20211013%20Witness%20Testimony%20Pastor%20Roy_0.pdf
33 Reuters, ‘Explainer: What was Hong Kong’s ‘Occupy’ movement all about?’, 24 April 2019 www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-politics-occupy-explainer/explainer-what-was-hong-kongs-occupy-movement-all-about-idUSKCN1S005M
34 UCA News, ‘Hong Kong’s Catholic millionaire pledges to fight for democracy’, 10 October 2020 www.ucanews.com/news/hong-kongs-catholic-millionaire-pledges-to-fight-for-democracy/89835
35 UCA News, ‘Hong Kong’s religious freedom now firmly in Beijing’s sights’, 2 February 2022 www.ucanews.com/news/hong-kongs-religious-freedom-now-firmly-in-beijings-sights/95958#
CSW, ‘Pro-Beijing Hong Kong media criticises religious leaders and Falun Gong’, 4 February 2022 www.csw.org.uk/2022/02/04/press/5573/article.htm



‘In the 1920s, the British colonial government imposed a restrictive law on indigenous Chinese religions...The most frightening clause of this Ordinance is this: the government can—without any search warrant—enter and search any temples, even seizing any documents or books as long as it has suspicion of any violation of this Ordinance.’ The author states, ‘it is true that this law is biased against the Chinese religions. However, this colonial law only exists on paper and it has rarely been used to prosecute anyone. The CCP newspaper rightly claimed that this unfair treatment should be eliminated. However, this is the insidious part: [they say that] such differential treatment should be addressed not by the elimination of this Ordinance altogether but by making

sure that Christian churches must be included in this Ordinance as well.’

Furthermore, the newspaper cites a ‘pro-Beijing’ lawyer, Lawrence Ma, who hoped that the HKSAR government would establish a new bureau in order to fully implement the vetting, licensing and monitoring of religious groups. The author believes that this is essentially the Hong Kong version of the Religious Affairs Bureau that monitors all religions in mainland China. In fact, when Carrie Lam ran for Chief Executive in 2017, she proposed setting up a ‘Religious Affairs Unit’ for coordinating religious policies in Hong Kong.³⁶ However, upon opposition from Catholic Bishop John Tong and other Christian leaders, she retracted this from her election campaign a few days

later.³⁷ However, the author notes that politics in Hong Kong have changed dramatically in the past five years, including through the appointment of Xia Baolong to the position of Hong Kong Affairs Director of the CCP. Xia was responsible for tearing down thousands of crosses in Zhejiang Province while he was assigned there.³⁸

The author believes the Hong Kong government may establish a Religious Affairs Bureau soon, and also exert further control over the clergy through civil registration combined with the mandatory oath of fidelity to the government: indeed, since 2020, the HKSAR government has required all its civil servants to take the oath of fidelity to the government, or face losing their jobs. The author contends that, in appearance, this oath is not much different from the Oath of the Allegiance of the US. However, ‘the HKSAR government made it clear that even opinions made against the government—for example on Facebook—could be considered as a violation of this oath of fidelity. In order to tighten its control on religions, the government could easily extend this requirement of oath-taking to all clergy in Hong Kong.’

The author pays special attention to a meeting in October 2021 organised by the CCP Liaison Office in Hong Kong, in which three patriotic bishops and 15 religious figures from the mainland briefed 15 Hong Kong clergy on Xi Jinping’s vision of religion with ‘Chinese characteristics’.³⁹ According to two unnamed clerics who participated in the meeting, the mainland speakers emphasised that Xi’s policy of Sinicisation is aligned with the Christian concept of inculturation. However, the author firmly believes that inculturation and Sinicisation are two totally different concepts: the first is the adaptation of Christian teaching and practices to cultures. On the other hand, ‘Sinicization is the attempt to subsume or subject the Christian faith into the Communist ideology which is intrinsically atheistic’.

be civilly registered with the government and continue their ministry, while others may refuse to do so, leave the congregation, and establish new house churches instead’, following, to some degree, the division between registered and unregistered churches in mainland China. Some Protestant pastors are already training Bible study leaders so that, in the worst case scenario, Christians can meet in their homes and pass on the faith without going to a place of worship.

However, the author believes that things are much more complicated for Catholics because of the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. The author notes: ‘Given the current stance of the Vatican toward the CCP and the Orwellian surveillance system in Hong Kong, it is very difficult for Catholic priests to defy the CCP and go underground without being tracked down by the government...[The] hierarchal structure also means that the Catholic Church does not allow “freelance” priests who perform public ministry without the supervision of a bishop or superior of a religious institute.’

The analysis concludes: ‘The recent arrest of Cardinal Joseph Zen suggests that the CCP has already begun to crack down on religious freedom in Hong Kong. In response, the Diocese of Hong Kong merely states that it ‘is extremely concerned about the condition and safety of Cardinal Joseph Zen,’ without condemning the government’s action. If the mindset of the Diocese is to preserve the churches and schools, even at the cost of failing to speak out for an unjustly arrested nonagenarian Cardinal, it strongly proves the thesis of this research report. The CCP can totally restrict religious freedom by using an insidious means: corrupting Christian education and exerting total control on churches without closing a single Christian church or school.’

Possible responses from Christian churches

‘With the looming threat of civil registration and oath-taking, Christian churches may choose to respond in two ways: (1) by obeying the government’s mandates and becoming part of the official church or (2) by refusing the mandates, creating a resistance movement, and going underground.’ The author suggests that Protestants may have more flexibility in their response compared to Catholics, because the former’s structure is more flexible: ‘While the Sunday worship of Catholics must be conducted by a priest, Protestants can choose to meet in the homes of Christians with any trained laymen as the leader of Bible studies.’ The author predicts splits among Protestant denominations: ‘some pastors may choose to

36 UCA News, ‘Carrie Lam’s religious policies for Hong Kong like mainland’, 1 March 2017 www.ucanews.com/news/carrie-lams-religious-policies-for-hong-kong-like-mainland/78536#

37 South China Morning Post, ‘Carrie Lam apologises for ‘misunderstanding’ on proposed religious affairs unit’, 5 March 2017 www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2076180/carrie-lam-apologises-misunderstanding-proposed-religious
38 Time, ‘China’s New Hong Kong Affairs Director Used to Rip Crosses From Churches’, 13 February 2020 <https://time.com/5783509/hong-kong-affairs-office-churches-crosses/>
39 Reuters, ‘Historic conclave: Chinese bishops, priests brief Hong Kong clerics on Xi’s religious views’, 30 December 2021 www.reuters.com/world/china/exclusive-historic-conclave-chinese-bishops-priests-brief-hong-kong-clerics-xis-2021-12-30/



Conclusion

The information and analysis by the experts cited above provides a window into some of the lesser-known and emerging developments in the crackdown on FoRB in China. These violations are taking place at the same time as further abuses against religious or belief communities across the country, including Falun Gong practitioners, Uyghur and Hui Muslims, Tibetan and other Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and numerous others. As our 2020 report observed, no one from the most powerful Party member at the top of a Shanghai corporation, to the poorest rural herder in the remote edges of the country, can follow their conscience and belief and live without fear.

‘Essentially, Sinicization of Christianity is about remoulding religions through ideological re-education.’

A human rights lawyer, 2022

In addition, dozens of lawyers who have persistently and peacefully challenged violations of FoRB and other human rights have been disbarred, fired, harassed, evicted and even imprisoned and tortured. This includes Gao Zhisheng, who was forcibly disappeared in August 2017,⁴⁰ and Chang Weiping, who was held in incommunicado detention for almost a year and remains in pre-trial detention at the time of writing, accused of ‘subversion’.⁴¹ Both men were previously tortured in detention.

‘When human rights lawyers find it difficult to defend even their own rights, how can they defend the rights of their clients? If they are persecuted for seriously upholding the dignity of the existing law, what should they do? Overthrow the existing legal system?’

A human rights lawyer, 2022

The studies and other cases cited above should therefore not be seen in isolation. Nor are the mass arbitrary detention of Uyghurs and the dismantling of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong one-off incidents. They are part of a sustained attack on human rights by a Chinese Communist Party leadership fixated on control at all costs, and on all aspects of life. This is revealed not only in the sustained attacks on human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, and NGO workers, but also in the violent suppression of the voices of ordinary citizens petitioning their leaders for justice, such as victims of corruption, land grabs and health scandals.

At the time of writing, this is also apparent in Shanghai, a city in the grip of a brutal COVID lockdown without concern for human dignity, and that has reportedly resulted in desperately ill patients dying from lack of access to medical care, or taking their own lives in despair. In this city where Christian lawyer and citizen

journalist Zhang Zhan remains jailed amid health concerns, other activists who courageously speak out against rights abuses are still subject to detention and police harassment.

This report provides a limited list of recommendations to the international community, but in fact it is incumbent on everyone who seeks to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief to find new ways to stand with victims and survivors of FoRB violations in China, counter the Party narrative on religious freedom, and pressure the authorities to end the crackdown on religion or belief communities. Further to this, the international community must make consistent efforts to work with, listen to and support FoRB defenders and victims of religious persecution in the diaspora, from all religion or belief communities. Only by working with these individuals can we find hope for a future in which everyone in China has the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.

⁴⁰ CSW, ‘Gao Zhisheng, China’ www.csw.org.uk/gao.htm

⁴¹ CSW, ‘Wife of detained human rights lawyer says his serious health problems were caused by torture’, 20 October 2021 www.csw.org.uk/2021/10/20/press/5456/article.htm

**‘Every generation has its desperation,
and every generation has its hope.’**

The China Human Rights Lawyers Group

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