

Introduction

1. CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide) is a human rights organisation specialising in the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all.
2. CSW is concerned by a critical deterioration in the overall protection of human rights in China since 2013, including the arbitrary detention, torture, and forced labour of millions of Uyghurs and other ethnic groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China; a crackdown on democracy and rule of law in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), China; the use of intrusive high-tech surveillance to track and unjustly prosecute peaceful conduct; violations of the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly; and the arbitrary detention, torture and forcible disappearance of human rights defenders, including lawyers Chang Weiping and Gao Zhisheng.
3. While the situation for FoRB remains a complex picture, with conditions varying according to religion, location, ethnicity, attitudes of local officials, and other factors, overall the situation is rapidly and significantly deteriorating against the backdrop of broader human rights violations.

New regulations on sharing religious information online

4. CSW is deeply concerned by new restrictions on sharing religious information online; the 'Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services', published by the Chinese government in December 2021 amid ongoing violations against religious communities, are due to take effect on 1 March 2022.¹
5. Under the regulations, any Chinese organisation or individual that operates online religious information services must submit an application to the provincial religious affairs department. The scope of the regulations is deliberately broad, including text messages, images, audio and video shared through any application or online forum (Article 6). A prohibition of online religious activities and ceremonies (Article 17) is especially concerning while the pandemic continues. The measures also prohibit religious content that "induce[s] minors to believe in religion," effectively making online youthwork by religious communities illegal.

Recent restrictions on religious observance

6. CSW is concerned by reports of further detention and surveillance of members of Early Rain Church in

Chengdu, Sichuan province - an unregistered church where the pastor and over 100 church members were arrested in December 2018. Elder Li Yingqiang was detained for "disturbing social order" on 24 December 2021 as police attempted to stop him preaching at the church's online Christmas Eve service. He was released at 12.40am on 25 December. Other church members were followed over the Christmas period by unknown persons believed to be working for the authorities.

7. During the same period, Sichuan police issued an official arrest notice, dated 24 December, for retired church leader Hao Ming of Qingcaodi "Green Pastures" Church in Deyang, Sichuan. China Aid reported that the notice accused Hao of fraud. Shortly afterwards, the family of the church's elder Wu Jiannan also received an arrest notice.²

Violations against Tibetan Buddhists

8. Freedom of religion or belief violations against Tibetan Buddhists continue, including intrusive military surveillance of monasteries and religious occasions such as important prayer days. In addition, any activity in association or connection with the Dalai Lama is severely repressed by the Chinese authorities.
9. In December 2021 a 99-foot-tall Buddha statue, another smaller statue and 45 Buddhist prayer wheels were demolished in Drango (Luhuo) county, Sichuan Province, the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Authorities have claimed that construction documents were not approved and that the statues violated local building codes. It is reported that Wang Dongsheng, the county's China Communist Party (CCP) secretary, who is known to heavily crackdown on Tibetan Buddhists, ordered the demolition of a monastic school and the demolition of the statues after his appointment in October 2021. Reports of the subsequent detention of six Tibetan monks in Sichuan province are also concerning. It is thought that the authorities arbitrarily detained the monks 'over suspicion that they informed the outside world about the demolition.'³
10. CSW is further concerned by reports that an estimated 117 Tibetans were detained after a spate of arrests since August 2021 by Chinese authorities in the region, a figure reported by the non-profit organisation Tibet Watch.⁴ The crackdown focused on language rights, the possession of banned images of Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama and keeping in contact with Tibetans in exile. At least one person was denied medical treatment and detainees were forced to undergo political re-education; there were also reports of torture, with Tibet

1 The Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services, published 20 December 2021 <http://www.sara.gov.cn/qtdlyw/364754.jhtml>

2 ChinaAid, 'Families informed of loved ones official detention in China', 29 December 2021, https://www.chinaaid.org/2021/12/families-informed-of-loved-ones.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email

3 International Campaign for Tibet, 'CCP demolishes important Buddha statues, detains Tibetans', 10 January 2022, <https://savetibet.org/ccp-demolishes-important-buddha-statues-detains-tibetans/>

4 Tibet Watch, 'Around 50 Tibetans arrested on suspicion of keeping photos of the Dalai Lama' <https://freetibet.org/news-media/na/around-50-tibetans-arrested-suspicion-keeping-photos-dalai-lama>

Watch describing the village where this took place as being under military lockdown.⁵

11. The crackdown follows a short visit to Tibet Autonomous Region, China by Chinese leader Xi Jinping from 21 July, his first such visit to the area in his current role. In a speech at the conference on ethnic affairs in August, Xi stressed the need to eliminate “ethnic separatism and religious extremism” and prevent “dangers” in the ethnic affairs. Some observers fear that the arrests reported so far may indicate the beginning of wider crackdown.

The Imprisonment of Falun Gong practitioners

12. In 1999 the Public Security Bureau established a special organisation, informally known as the ‘610 office’, with the purpose of eradicating the spiritual movement Falun Gong and later other groups classified as ‘heterodox teachings’ or ‘evil cults’. Individuals affiliated with such groups have been charged under Article 300 of the Criminal Law, which prohibits ‘organizing/using a cult to undermine implementation of the law’. Penalties include detention, surveillance, and deprivation of political rights, fines, or combined penalties with fines, up to a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.
13. Falun Gong has been banned since 1999. Practitioners and supporters outside China continue to report the arrest, imprisonment, torture and death in custody of Falun Gong practitioners across the country.
14. On 16 January 2022, an award-winning artist was sentenced to eight years in prison for reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic and practising Falun Gong. Chinese human rights site Weiquangwang (Rights Defense Network)⁶ reports that Xu Na was also fined 20,000 yuan (approximately £2,300 GBP).
15. Xu Na was arrested by Beijing police in July 2020 along with 10 other Falun Gong practitioners, on suspicion of “using a cult organisation to undermine law enforcement”. However, a copy of the indictment document specifically accuses them of sending photos and reporting to The Epoch Times, a United States of America-based outlet affiliated with the Falun Gong new religious movement, about COVID-19 restrictions in Beijing between February and June 2020.⁷ The indictment identifies Xu Na as the leader of the group. It also says that Xu Na “met with others to practise Falun Gong several times” at a privately rented property, where police officers found items containing Falun Gong materials.

16. The group of 11 were tried behind closed doors at the Dongcheng District People’s Court, Beijing, on 15 October 2021. Their lawyers were blocked from attending the trial, and Xu Na’s lawyer Liang Xiaojun has since had his legal license revoked. The 10 individuals arrested alongside Xu Na are said to have also been handed custodial sentences, though the details are currently unknown.
17. This is the third time that Xu Na has been imprisoned in connection with her activities as a Falun Gong practitioner.
18. Separately, Falun Gong businessman Fang Bin has also been targeted for reporting on the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan by sharing videos on social media. His whereabouts and status have remained unknown since he was taken by police in February 2020.

Recommendations to the Human Rights Council:

19. Call on China to respect and protect the fundamental human rights of all, including Tibetan people, Falun Gong practitioners, Uyghurs, Christians and other ethnic and religion or belief communities.
20. Call on China to respect its international obligations and to release without delay all those detained in connection with the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief.
21. Call on China to immediately and unconditionally release all those detained for the sharing of information relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.
22. Call on China to urgently withdraw the planned regulations on online religious information, which could have a devastating impact on religion or belief communities in China.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Weiquangwang, ‘Ms. Xu Na, a Falun Gong practitioner, was sentenced to 8 years in prison’, 16 January 2022 <https://wqw2010.blogspot.com/2022/01/8.html>

⁷ ChinaAid, ‘Beijing Dongcheng District Court opens trial for Xu Na’, 16 January 2022 <https://www.chinaaid.net/2021/10/11.html>

**CSW everyone
free to believe**

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