

'The Yunnan Model': How religious communities are managed with a grid system under strengthened Party leadership

Introduction

For religious communities in China, 2018 was a turning point. The revised Regulations on Religious Affairs ushered in an era of strict Party control over all aspects of religious affairs 'in accordance with the law'. Various government departments have been given power to ban, prohibit or punish collective religious activities including religious training, education and exchanges on the pretext of 'improving the rule of law in religious work' and 'managing religious affairs in accordance with the law'.

In late 2018 the Department in charge of Ethnic and Religious Affairs in the southwestern province of Yunnan circulated a confidential document on investigating and handling such issues with a handful of Christian leaders who co-signed a [joint statement](#) by church leaders, initiated by Pastor Wang Yi of [Early Rain Covenant Church](#) (ERCC).

A leaked document that was examined by CSW clearly outlines the government's crackdown operation on Christian groups and particularly unregistered churches throughout China following the publishing of the statement:

'Recently, as the crackdown on Christian irregularities and violations continues to intensify throughout the country, the forces of illegal Christian organisations, represented by the illegal Christian organisation Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan, and its main leader Wang Yi, have reacted strongly and conspired with each other to mobilize more than 400 illegal organisations and key individuals in more than 20 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities in China to co-sign the Pastors' Joint Statement for the Christian Faith, resisting the newly revised Regulations on Religious Affairs. This is their attempt to create momentum through online hype, form public opinion pressure, and obstruct and confront the government's governance in accordance with the law. This has seriously disrupted the normal order of religious administration, resulting in extremely bad influence. Based on the relevant clues, Yunnan police launched investigation and verification of the seven co-signatories who we are currently aware of...'

Comprehensive personal details of each of the co-signatories are included in the document, such as ID number, registered address and address of current residence, phone number, education background, religious activities etc. The co-signatories were from Kunming, Yuxi and Zhaotong, which is why the document was addressed to the Ethnic and Religious Bureau officials of those three cities in Yunnan.

It is reasonable to imagine that religious officials in other provinces received similar documents and more than 400 co-signatories have all been closely monitored and

harassed, if not already jailed like Pastor Wang Yi, or placed in pre-trial detention like [Elder Zhang Chunlei](#).

This study, which is based on the province of Yunnan will shed light on the Chinese government's harsh enforcement of repressive religious policies and its impact on religious communities in recent years.

About Yunnan

'The police in Yunnan are far more repressive of Christianity than in coastal areas in China. As long as you believe in Christianity, even if you don't attend church meetings, there will be state security officers coming to your home to check up on you. Those who believe in Christianity all get "invited for tea"¹ with very few exceptions.'

- A former house church member who has left China, February 2023

In January 2022 shocking videos emerged in China of a mother of eight locked in a village hut with a chain around her neck. While the case sparked outrage at the large-scale systematic trafficking and enslavement of women throughout China, the victim's identity also became a topic of heated discussion among Chinese citizens on various online platforms. Although the official claim that she was a native of a remote village in Fugong county, in the Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan province, is not convincing as it links the woman to someone who looks completely different from her and speaks a different dialect, the fact remains that Yunnan is known as one of the areas worst [affected by trafficking](#) and abduction of women and girls. As such, the shocking treatment of this woman reflects the reality of so many other women and girls who have been abducted or trafficked in Yunnan.

Yunnan is also one of the [poorest](#) provinces in China; its poor transportation and harsh environment are among the often-cited factors for its poverty. Nujiang is the poorest among its 16 prefecture-level administrative regions, while Kunming, its capital city, is said to be one of the best cities to live in China, dubbed 'Spring City'.

On the other hand, Yunnan is renowned for its large number of ethnic groups and breath-taking landscapes, from great canyons in the northwest to rice terraces in the south. About a third of Yunnan's total population, which is larger than Spain, are non-Han. Among its 51 minority ethnic groups, six have more than one million people each, but 26 have less than 5,000 each, and 15 are only seen in Yunnan. With a land covering 394,000 square kilometers, it is the eighth largest province in China and shares borders with Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam.

1 A euphemism for being questioned by the police.

Yunnan has a long history of religions and a large population of religious adherents. According to the Yunnan provincial United Front Work Department (UFWD) [website](#), all five major religions are practised in the province; the majority religion is Buddhism, followed by Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. The three major sects of Buddhism are all practised, namely Han Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Hinayana Buddhism, with the last not seen anywhere else in China. In addition, many practice ethnic minority folk beliefs.



A map of Yunnan with its 16 prefecture-level administrative regions. Source: d-maps.com.

With intertwining multiple sensitive issues, Yunnan has long been regarded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authorities as one of the key areas in China where ethnic and religious affairs are treated as a top priority. In October 2017, state media [reported](#) that ‘the Yunnan Model for ‘ethnic unity, religious harmony and stability on the border’ had won approval from the central leadership, and that the province was trying hard to ‘explore a new mechanism for religious affairs management’.

Now it seems that that goal has been achieved.

United Front at work

According to a recent [report](#), the Yunnan UFWD has established a ‘standardised and orderly’ mechanism, which boasts ‘top-bottom joint action, left-right coordination and comprehensive coverage’ in ethnic and religious affairs work. At its core is a grassroots grid management system, a list of identified problems and a list of assigned responsibilities.

Dubbed as ‘One Grid, Two Lists’, this system was [announced](#) by the Yunnan authorities during the CCP’s 19th national congress in October 2017. Within five years, the system has been implemented on four levels in Yunnan: from county, to town, to village, to ‘spot’ (see below).

In their report published in February 2023, the Yunnan UFWD outlined the system as follows:

1. A leadership team, headed by leaders of UFWD and an ethnic and religious affairs commission, consists of personnel from 29 departments/groups.
2. ‘All 16 prefecture-level administrative regions and 129 counties in Yunnan have ethnic and religious work departments as legal entities, and all 1,419 townships in the province have special ethnic and religious officers.’
3. ‘The province has been divided into 9,370 ethnic and religious management grids, with 1,227 coordinators in place, covering 86.4% of the province’s 1,419 townships, and 12,473 grid officers (informants), covering 84.73% of the province’s 14,721 villages/communities. All ‘spots’ that are considered to be risky, hidden, dangerous or weak with some ethnic and religious factors are comprehensively and regularly investigated. For the investigators, the effective transformation from “when something happens, go find the people responsible” to “people looking out for things that may go wrong” has been achieved.’

The numbers are impressive. The grid management system set-up by the UFWD in Yunnan illustrates the extent of the CCP’s invasive mass surveillance and preventative repression of religious communities.

In November 2022, a [think tank](#) on religious work in Yunnan was founded to provide the brain power, with 32 scholars and professors on board. There is also a new [Association for the Promotion of Ethnic Unity and Progress in Yunnan](#), which already has 185 members.

According to the Yunnan UFWD report, this is a system designed to ‘maximise the effective integration and enhancement of governance capacity in ethnic and religious affairs’.



In July 2022, a female university student handing out an anti-cult leaflet to a boy dressed in ‘Red Army’ costume in Huize county, Qujing, Yunnan. Source: weibo.com.

What does it all mean for religious communities on the ground?

Essentially, this ‘grid system’, is a ubiquitous, intrusive [social management](#) that has been rolled out under Xi Jinping’s rule in China. All religious groups, registered or unregistered, and their religious activities, in registered or unregistered venues, in public or private, have been closely monitored and recorded, and in some cases, reported to the authorities.

Listed below are some of the notable cases and policies that have been enforced in Yunnan since 2016, in chronological order:

1. On 15 April 2016 the public security authorities of Yunnan and Gansu joined forces to seize [Liangwei Printing Ltd](#), a professional Mulism scripture printing press in Kunming. They confiscated more than 320,000 copies of Islamic books and all printing equipment. They also arrested 32 people, including Ma Zhixiong and his wife Ma Jing. The investigation of this case, which involved 31 provinces, sparked panic among Muslim communities across the country. Mr and Mrs Ma were later sentenced to five years and two years and six months in jail respectively for printing illegal publications without authorisation.
2. On 1 July 2016 Regulations on Religious Affairs in Yunnan Province came into effect. New restrictions include the prohibition of ‘organising, inducing or forcing minors to participate in religious activities’, which effectively renders any religious youth work illegal.
3. On 21 October 2016 as many as [200 Christians](#) in various parts of Yunnan, such as Baoshan, Chuxiong, Dali, Kunming, Lincang, Xishuangbanna, Yuxi and Zhaotong, were interrogated, detained or arrested. About 40 of them, including Ju Dianhong and Liang Qin, house church leaders in Yunxian, Lincang, were deemed by the authorities to be members of the banned group ‘Three Grades of Servants’. On 28 December 2017 six were convicted under Article 300 of the Criminal Law, with Ms Ju and Ms Liang receiving sentences of 13 and 10 years respectively, and four others were handed sentences of 18 months to four years. See also CSW report ‘[Untold Stories](#)’.
4. On 5 March 2017 while returning to China from Myanmar, [Pastor John Cao](#) was detained by the police. He was a US resident who had made many trips to his native China to establish schools and work among the poor in Guizhou and Yunnan provinces before expanding his Christian humanitarian work into Myanmar. He was later convicted of ‘organising illegal border crossings’ and jailed for seven years. He is serving his sentence in a prison in Kunming.
5. In February 2018 the revised [Regulations](#) on Religious Affairs came into force across China.
6. On 19 April 2018 the CPC Central Committee General Office and the State Council issued a [circular](#) on ‘strengthening and improving the work of Islam in the new situation’. It states, among other things, that ‘the “Saudization” and “Arabization” of Islamic places of worship, clothing, religious rituals, interpretation of scripture and use of the Arabic language in recent years should be resolutely curbed and actively and correctly guided’; ‘new and expanded places of worship should be built in a Chinese style’; and ‘Arabic schools should not be used for the purpose of training religious leaders, or offering religious courses, or as places for religious activities; they should not organise students to participate in religious activities’. See also CSW report ‘[Untold Stories](#)’.
7. On 29 December 2018 Muslims were [violently evicted](#) by armed police officers from three mosques in Weishan Yi and Hui Autonomous Prefecture. Dozens were injured and detained in the clashes. The authorities announced that the ‘illegal religious site’ would be shut down.
8. In June 2019 two churches in Jinping Miao, Yao and Dai Autonomous County were [shut down](#), one on account of its unregistered status, the other on the grounds of security due to ‘being close to Vietnam’.
9. On 20 November 2019 the government of Chuxiong, Yunnan Province, [tried to forcibly demolish](#) a mosque in the urban area of Chuxiong City. A number of protesters were injured by officers.
10. On 29 November 2019 Religious Affairs officials in Jinping Miao, Yao and Dai Autonomous County [announced](#) that Miao Christians would be forbidden from using Miao Bible and preaching in Miao language.
11. In April 2020 local authorities [took over](#) a Catholic house of prayer in Changpojiao village, Jianshui county, and destroyed its Hall of the Virgin Mary.
12. On 11 August 2020 a Christian teacher was [fined](#) for conducting online theological training for church workers.
13. In October 2020 Miao pastor [Wang Hai](#) told Radio Free Asia (RFA) that his parents and brothers, who were also church leaders, had been secretly detained by Zhaotong police. Mr Wang himself had to go into hiding.

Pastor Wang’s father is an elder who established the



A screenshot taken from an official TV programme about Yunnan’s multi-departmental campaign to eradicate the ‘Three Grades of Servants’ cult shows Christian song books and audio Bible players among items seized by police as criminal evidence. Source: Weibo.com.

church in the Miao village in Lianfeng town, Yongshan county, Zhaotong, in the 1990s. The village still has no access to electricity, roads, nor running water today. In July 2020 Mr Wang's parents went to meet with the village committee to try to negotiate for better living conditions for the villagers. Instead, they were sprayed poison by the officials, which led to Mr Wang's mother being ill for three months. The family has become a target of government harassment ever since.



Mother of Pastor Wang Hai was sick after the poisoning incident in July 2020. Source: RFA.

14. On 15 November 2020 Li Chunzhe, a house church leader in Kunming, was [detained](#) by police for five days for holding a religious meeting at home.
15. On 28 December 2020 members of Tuguadi Church in Wuding county were [manhandled](#) by the authorities for refusing to place the national flag in front of the church.
16. On 27 February 2021 Zhongying Mosque in Daguan County, Zhaotong, was [forcibly demolished](#) by the authorities despite protests from local Muslims. They also forcibly removed the dome of another mosque in Daguan County, called Taoyuan Mosque.
17. In March 2021 the authorities in Yunnan announced plans to [forcibly renovate](#) more than 100 mosques in Zhaotong City. Zhaotong College banned Muslim girls from wearing the hijab, and those who violate this rule will be expelled. Meanwhile, leaders in Qujing city visited seven mosques in Luliang and coerced the directors of temple management committees to talk local Muslims into agreeing to mosque demolitions and renovation projects.
18. On 1 April 2021 Muslims gathered in front of [Talang Mosque](#) in Mojiang, Pu'er, to protect its dome and stop the government's 'renovation' project. Their slogan: 'We would die for our country without hesitation! We would die for our faith without regret!'



A screenshot shows nearly 100 Muslims in front of Talang Mosque, wearing burial shrouds. Source: Twitter @Yuliang_Ibrahim.

19. On 11 April 2021 Grace Church at Yunnan University was [shut down](#) by Kunming authorities on a Sunday. An unknown number of members was taken away by police.
20. On 30 April 2021 the government of Pihe Nu ethnic township in Fugong county [closed down](#) the Laomudeng Church on the grounds that members had not been vaccinated, and put a notice on the church door stating that 'the use of religious premises is suspended during the pandemic'. Laomudeng Church is the biggest Christian Church in Nujiang Grand Canyon in Northwest Yunnan.



Laomudeng Church, before its cross was removed. Source: CSW.



A series of political slogan boards have been erected outside Laomudeng Church, now without its cross. Source: CSW

21. On 7 May 2021 a core member of the Association of Disciples with the surname Zi was [criminally detained](#) by police in Luliang County, Qujing.
22. On 18 May 2021 Fugong county announced closure of a scenic area for four months. Sources familiar with the area say that Laomudeng Village is to be closed for renovation projects, which involves the demolition of homes for more than 200 villagers.
23. In July 2021 the authorities [raided](#) a youth summer camp in Dali and confiscated funds from the organisers. A pastor was fined 200,000 yuan (approx. 22,000 GBP).
24. In late July 2021 the dome of Majiacun mosque was [demolished overnight](#) by the authorities in Zhaotong. An imam who had opposed the demolition was [taken away](#) by police.
25. On 30 September 2021 former university lecturer Liu Yan was detained by Kunming police after being reported for practising Falun Gong. She was [sentenced](#) to three years and six months in prison in April 2022. She had already previously served three years in jail.
26. In early October 2021 the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church, a historic Catholic cathedral in Kunming, was demolished.



The Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Kunming before its demolition in October 2021. Source: 163.com.

27. On 19 October 2021 the authorities in Pingyuan township, Yanshan county, Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomic Prefecture started to forcibly remove the dome of Tianxin Mosque, leading to mass protests by local Muslims. The authorities responded with multiple arrests and detentions on suspicion of 'gathering a crowd to disrupt social order'.

According to CSW sources, at least four Muslim scholars have been indicted for 'promoting extremism'. The prosecutors have recommended lengthy jail terms for them: eight years for Lin yingzhai of Maolong Mosque; six years and five years and six months for Ma Jingwei and Ma Wu respectively, both of Songmaopo Mosque; and five years for Ma Changsheng, an imam who was visiting Pingyuan.

Local Muslims say that they were targeted for refusing to cooperate with the authorities' policies with regard to mosque demolitions and dismissing students from Arabic schools. They have been punished for insisting on the values and legitimacy of offering Islamic education in their mosques.



Imam Ma Changsheng. Source: CSW.



Tianxin Mosque, before its dome was removed. Source: Baidu.



Tianxin Mosque, after the renovation. Source: CSW.

28. On 1 January 2022 Yunnan's own [Regulations](#) on Religious Affairs, approved by the provincial people's congress, came into effect. Compared to the [2016 rules](#) which were enacted by the provincial government, new provisions include 'adhering to the leadership of the Communist Party of China, fully implementing the Party's basic policy on religious work, and adhering to the direction of the Sinicization of China's religion'.

29. In June 2022 CSW saw complaints by Muslims that the authorities in Yunnan use random excuses to regularly deny them access to mosques, and that mosques in Kunming were not allowed to open during that year's Eid al-Fitr. Nancheng Mosque in Kunming has been shut since December 2021.

30. On 11 June 2022 Baoshan mosque in Zhaotong had its domes and minarets forcibly demolished by officials, despite protests from the local Hui Muslim community. See [CSW report](#).

31. On 2 August 2022 five Christian teachers were detained by police in Fugong county, Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture. They were targeted because they rented a house in Fugong where they had held a few Christian gatherings and given free guitar and hymn lessons to some young people, which was reported to the police. The teachers include three ethnic Nu preachers, Wang Shunping, Nu Sangdeng and San Luobo, and two women, Hua Xiuxia and Dong Mengru. All five were formally charged with 'organising and sponsoring an illegal gathering'. In May 2023, they were released on bail.

The offence of 'organising and sponsoring an illegal gathering', which was added to China's Criminal Code in 2015, carries a custodial sentence of up to three years. See [CSW report](#).

32. From 8 - 16 August 2022 the government-run Christian associations in Baoshan, Yunnan, held a [training event](#) for 130 pastors and church workers from across the city, under the guidance of UFWD. Clergy learnt how to 'lead congregations in the direction of the Sinicization of Christianity and firmly support the CCP's leadership', following China's leader Xi Jinping's thought on religious work.

Incidentally, the host of the event, Xu Xianzong, is a pastor of Baoshan Qinghua Church, where the grave of the British missionary James O. Fraser is located.

33. In 2022, 27 Falun Gong practitioners were reportedly [imprisoned](#) in Yunnan Province, with jail terms of up to seven years. Two died in custody and six had their homes raided and property confiscated. Most of the cases occurred in Kunming.

34. On 12 January 2023 Fugong police in Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture [took into detention](#) four more Christians, who participated in a Bible study with Wang Shunping and the other four teachers in August 2022. They were released five days later.

35. On 14 April 2023 the police in Zhenxiong county in Zhaotong detained [Chang Hao](#), a preacher of a rural church, and seized the copies of Bible and Christian books as well as face masks with Christian messages found in his home. He has since been criminally detained for allegedly 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble'.

Conclusion

Yunnan, one of the most disadvantaged province in China, continues to see a wide range of violations that are targeted at religious minorities, including detentions and harassment of clergy and believers. Examples of draconian state practices include the restrictions on religious publications, meetings, the effect on the appearances of buildings, dress and symbols, teaching, training, sacred texts and use of minority languages. Legally permissible space for all religious activities apart from those performed and sanctioned by the state-run bodies have virtually been wiped out. The worst affected are the rural ethnic population in Yunnan, which is among the poorest and most marginalised in the country.

Instead of investing in improving people's living standards and combating real crime such as human trafficking, the authorities in Yunnan would spare no resource and leave no stone unturned in their efforts to control ethnic and religious groups and transform religion, in the name of 'Sinicization' and 'rule of law'. The Chinese government has failed in its obligations to protect human rights in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and has launched a systematic attack on freedom of conscience, religion or belief and the rights of ethnic minorities.

The international community must pay more attention to the situation for ethnic and religious minority groups in Southwestern China. Their voices deserve to be heard.

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).
- 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.
- 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.
- End the demolition of religious buildings as a means of limiting religious practice, and establish a complaints mechanism for religious groups affected.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- 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.
- Investigate and monitor cases of human rights abuses including violations of the right to FoRB.

