



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

October 2021

CHINA

Nadine Maenza
Chair

Nury Turkel
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Anurima Bhargava

James W. Carr

Frederick A. Davie

Khizr Khan

Sharon Kleinbaum

Tony Perkins

Erin D. Singhsinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

By [Mingzhi Chen](#), *Policy Analyst*

China's 2021 Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy

On February 9, 2021, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA)—a government entity under the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department—*issued* the [Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy](#) (the Measures). The Measures, which became effective on May 1, 2021, are a part of a series of newly issued regulations that supplement the revised 2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA). The Measures subject clergy of the five state-sanctioned religious groups in China—the Buddhist Association of China, the Chinese Taoist Association, the Islamic Association of China, the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement, and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association—to even tighter state control and surveillance. They also impose penalties for clergy who violate a complex web of state rules and policies aimed at curtailing religious freedom. Moreover, the Measures effectively ban religious activity by independent religious clergy who are not part of the five state-sanctioned religious groups. This factsheet provides an overview of the new Measures and their adverse impact on religious freedom in China.

The New Measures on Clergy

The new Measures expand an invasive and comprehensive system of control and surveillance on clergy. Article 3 of the Measures requires clergy—among other demands—to support the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule, the Chinese socialist political system, and the CCP's "sinicization of religion" policy, effectively imposing a political test to ensure clergies' loyalty to the CCP. Articles 6 and 12 specifically prohibit clergy from engaging in "illegal religious activities," "religious extremism," and "foreign infiltration using religion." These vague provisions could be used as a broad pretext to crack down on independent religious groups, ethno-religious minority groups, and religious groups with perceived foreign connections.

Through the new Measures, Chinese authorities can exert extensive control over the clergy through the five state-sanctioned religious groups and the government's religious affairs bureaus (RABs). These religious groups vet, recognize, and ordain candidates for clergy positions, and then submit their information to the RABs at corresponding levels of government—county, city, provincial, and national. The Measures further mandate SARA to establish a digitized national "religious clergy database." Local RABs enter and update clergy information—including information

related to the punishment and disqualification of clergy—in the database, thereby allowing increased government surveillance and control of clergy.

The Measures expressly target high-level Tibetan Buddhist and Catholic clergy, specifying unique ordination or recognition requirements for clergy of these two groups. The special attention paid to the clergy recognition processes for Tibetan Buddhism and Catholicism demonstrates the Chinese government’s heightened political sensitivity toward these two religions with perceived foreign connections. Furthermore, state-sanctioned religious groups, working with and under the supervision of the RABs, may punish clergy for violating government rules and regulations. More serious offenses—particularly those related to “illegal religious activities, religious extremism, separatism, terrorism, and engaging in religious activities under foreign influence”—are subject to criminal prosecution under Article 73 of the [2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs](#).

Key Provisions of the 2021 Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy

(Translations provided by [Bitter Winter](#), with modifications)

Article 3

Religious clergy should love the motherland; support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party; support the socialist system; abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations, and rules; practice the core values of socialism; adhere to the principle of independent and self-administered religion in China; adhere to the direction of the sinicization of religion in China; and operate to maintain national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony, and social stability.

Article 6

Religious clergy shall fulfill the following obligations: (1) safeguard the national interest and the public interest, and carry out activities within the scope of laws, regulations, and rules; (2) follow the instruction of the religious affairs departments and other relevant departments in accordance with the law; (3) comply with the rules and regulations formulated by religious organizations, and accept the management of religious organizations, religious schools, and venues for religious activities where they belong; (4) serve the citizens of faith and guide them to be patriotic and law-abiding; (5) maintain the normal order of religious activities, resist illegal religious activities and religious extremist ideology, and resist infiltration by foreign forces using religion;

(6) maintain and promote harmony between different religions, within the same religion, and between believing and non-believing citizens; and (7) follow all other obligations under the laws, regulations, and rules.

Article 12

Religious clergy shall not perform the following acts: (1) endanger national security, public safety, promote, support, finance religious extremism, undermine ethnic unity, split the country, engage in terrorist activities, or participate in related activities; (2) interfere with the implementation of administrative, judicial, educational, and other state functions; (3) under domination of the foreign forces, accept unauthorized clergy appointment by foreign religious groups or institutions, and other acts that violate the principle of independence and self-administration of religion; (4) accept domestic and overseas donations in violation of relevant state regulations; (5) affect the normal productive activities and life of the citizens; (6) organize, preside over, or participate in unauthorized religious activities held outside the authorized venues for religious activities; (7) use public charity activities to proselytize, proselytize in schools and other educational institutions outside of religious institutions, and engage in other proselytizing activities that violate state regulations; (8) engage in commercial propaganda in the name of religion; and (9) other violations of laws, regulations, and rules.

Article 13

Qualification for religious clergy should be determined by authorized religious groups and reported to the religious affairs departments for recording purposes. National religious groups shall formulate measures for the recognition of religious clergy of their religion, stipulating the titles, recognition requirements, and procedures, etc. Recognition requirements should include provisions stipulated in Article 3. National religious groups’ recognition measures shall be reported to the State Administration for Religious Affairs for recordation. Religious groups shall recognize religious clergy in accordance with the recognition measures formulated by national religious groups.

Article 15

The succession of Tibetan Buddhism’s Living Buddhas shall be handled in accordance with the “Regulations on Religious Affairs,” the “Administrative Measures for the Reincarnation of Tibetan Buddhism Living Buddhas,” and other relevant regulations.

Article 16

Catholic bishops are approved and ordained by the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China. The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China shall, within 20 days after the ordination of a bishop, fill out a Catholic bishop reporting form and submit it to the State Administration of Religious Affairs for recordation. The following materials shall be submitted: (1) a copy of the bishop's household registration document and a copy of his resident ID card; (2) a statement issued by the Catholic organization of the province, autonomous region, or directly-administered municipality providing details on the democratic election of the bishop; (3) a letter of approval from the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China; and (4) a statement on the ordination signed by the bishop who presided over the ordination. The format of the recordation form for Catholic bishops is formulated by the State Administration of Religious Affairs.

Article 33

Religious affairs departments shall strengthen the information management of religious clergy in accordance with the principle of incorporating management into service. The State Administration of Religious Affairs shall establish a database of religious clergy, and the religious affairs department of the local people's government shall provide and update in a timely manner the following information such as clergy's basic information, awards, punishments, and cancellation of record, etc.

Article 37

In accordance with the Constitution, laws, regulations, rules, policies, and the practical work needs, religious groups shall establish and improve regulations for the management of religious clergy within the scope of their mandate, formulate codes of conduct for religious clergy, improve the mechanisms for reward and punishment as well as for appointment and exit, and impose punishment on religious clergy who violate laws, regulations, rules, and rules of the religious groups to which the clergy belong.

Article 38

Religious groups shall develop an assessment system for religious clergy to conduct evaluations and use it as an important basis for appointments, rewards, and punishments.

Article 39

Religious groups shall establish files of religious clergy, improve the information sharing mechanism for clergy of religious groups, religious schools, and religious activity venues, and regularly report changes in religious clergy information to the religious affairs departments. Religious schools shall promptly report relevant information of religious clergy of their schools to the religious group that established the school. Religious activities venues shall promptly report relevant information about their religious clergy to the local religious groups and religious affairs departments.

Article 48

A religious clergy who violates the relevant provisions of the Measures shall be punished in accordance with Article 73 of the "Regulations on Religious Affairs" and other provisions.

Implications of the 2021 Measures on Clergy for Religious Freedom in China

The 2021 Measures are an integral part of a series of new regulatory measures—covering *religious groups* (effective February 1, 2020), clergy (effective May 1, 2021), and religious schools (effective September 1, 2021)—issued by SARA to supplement the RRA. Experts note that the 2021 Measures on clergy *allow* a wider scope of control compared to the previous two regulatory measures on clergy combined. Moreover, the Measures represent an escalation in the government's surveillance and control of religious clergy, affecting both state-sanctioned and unregistered independent religious groups.

In recent years, the CCP has tasked leaders of state-sanctioned religious groups to *promote* its religious policies, particularly the "sinicization of religion" policy, which has led to protests from religious communities. Authorities have persecuted state-sanctioned clergy who opposed such policies. For example, authorities in Zhejiang province—a location with a large Christian population and previously known for its relative tolerance of Christianity—have intensified a crackdown on Christianity in recent years, including by persecuting state-sanctioned Christian leaders who opposed government policies. Notably in 2016 and 2017, Zhejiang authorities removed from office, and ultimately detained and arrested Protestant pastor *Gu Yuese*—a high-profile leader of the official Protestant group in Zhejiang—for his open opposition to the local authorities' forced cross removal and church demolition campaign.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Against this backdrop, the new Measures on clergy—along with the 2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs—could generate an even greater chilling effect, forcing more clergy of state-sanctioned religious groups to openly endorse government policies at the expense of their religious convictions. According to [reports](#), on May 2, a day after the new Measures became effective, a state-sanctioned Protestant pastor in Wenzhou city, Zhejiang, was seen in a recorded video using the Bible to publicly promote the CCP’s political propaganda and policies during a sermon. Clergy members who run afoul of government regulations and policies could now face severe penalties, especially for security-related charges such as “religious extremism,” “separatism,” and “terrorism,” which are particularly concerning for clergy of [Muslim groups](#).

The new Measures also effectively ban clergy of unregistered independent religious groups. Since the issuance of the Measures in February 2021, Chinese authorities have detained and arrested scores of underground Catholic priests—including Bishop [Joseph Zhang Weizhu](#) of Xixiang, Hebei province—and

unregistered Protestant house church leaders—such as Elder [Zhang Chunlei](#) of Ren’ai Reformed Church and Pastor [Yang Hua](#) of Living Stone Church in Guiyang city, Guizhou province. Authorities reportedly tortured some of these religious leaders, including Bishop Zhang Weizhu, forcing him to join the state-sanctioned Catholic group. In addition, on May 23, the CCP government reiterated through a [White Paper](#) its intention to control the reincarnation or selection of the next Dalai Lama, in violation of the Tibetan Buddhist community’s right to select and venerate its own religious leaders. Authorities have routinely [detained and punished](#) Tibetan Buddhists—including monks—found to possess photos, videos, and teachings of the 14th Dalai Lama. Moreover, as of September 2021, the whereabouts of the 11th Panchen Lama [Gedhun Choekyi Nyima](#)—who was abducted by the Chinese government in May 1995—remained unknown.

For more information about religious freedom conditions in China, see USCIRF’s [2021 Annual Report chapter](#) and [USCIRF’s legislation factsheet on the 2019 Regulation for Religious Groups in China](#).

Professional Staff

Danielle Ashbahian
Supervisory Public Affairs Officer

Dwight Bashir
Director of Outreach and Policy

Susan Bishai
Policy Analyst

Elizabeth K. Cassidy
Director of Research and Policy

Mingzhi Chen
Policy Analyst

Patrick Greenwalt
Policy Analyst

Gabrielle Hasenstab
Communications Specialist

Roy Haskins
Director of Finance and Operations

Thomas Kraemer
Director of Human Resources

Kirsten Lavery
Supervisory Policy Analyst

John Lechner
Policy Analyst

Niala Mohammad
Senior Policy Analyst

Jason Morton
Senior Policy Analyst

Mohyeldin Omer
Policy Analyst

Dylan Schexnaydre
Victims List and Outreach Specialist

Jamie Staley
Supervisory Policy Adviser

Zack Udin
Researcher

Nina Ullom
Congressional Relations and Outreach Specialist

Madeline Vellturo
Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.