

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in China deteriorated. The government continued to vigorously implement its “[sinicization of religion](#)” policy and demand that religious groups and adherents support the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) rule and ideology. In December, top CCP and government officials [held](#) the National Conference on Religious Work in Beijing, after which authorities and state-controlled religious organizations at all levels organized meetings to study and implement the CCP’s religious policies. Throughout 2021, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA)—a government agency under direct control of the CCP’s United Front Work Department (UFWD)—and other agencies [issued](#) new legal measures, imposing further restrictions on clergy, religious schools, and [religious content on the internet](#). Although China recognizes Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Taoism, adherents of groups with perceived foreign influence—such as underground Catholics, house church Protestants, Uyghurs and other Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists—and those from other religious movements, such as Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God, are especially vulnerable to persecution.

During the year, Xinjiang authorities continued to [detain](#) Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims arbitrarily in concentration camps, prisons, and forced labor camps for a variety of religiously related reasons. Former detainees and witnesses [reported](#) physical and psychological torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, forced labor, and forced sterilization and abortion while in custody. Moreover, authorities separated as many as [880,000](#) Muslim children from their parents and [destroyed](#) or desecrated important religious and cultural sites throughout Xinjiang. In 2021, the [U.S. government](#) and the [parliaments](#) of Canada and several European countries, [research organizations](#), and the United Kingdom (UK)-based [Uyghur Tribunal](#) determined the atrocities in Xinjiang to be genocide and/or crimes against humanity. Furthermore, evidence [suggests](#) that Chinese authorities began to [implement](#) similar repressive policies against Hui Muslims—a group the government previously tolerated—throughout China.

The Chinese government continued its pervasive control and suppression of Tibetan Buddhism. In May, it issued a [white paper](#) on Tibet that included an emphasis on sinicizing religion there. In July, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping visited Tibet and [stressed](#) the importance of “fully implementing” the Party’s religious policies. Local authorities organized seminars to [indoctrinate](#) monks and nuns at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, [restricted](#) Tibetans’ access to temples with heavy security presence, [destroyed](#) sites and symbols of religious significance, and [detained and punished](#) Tibetans for listening to the Dalai Lama’s teachings or possessing his portrait.

Despite the Vatican-China agreement on bishop appointments, authorities continued to harass and detain underground Catholic priests who refuse to join the state-controlled Catholic association, such as Bishop [Joseph Zhang Weizhu](#) of Xixiang, Hebei Province. They also intensified persecution of Protestants by harassing, detaining, arresting, and physically abusing leaders of Protestant house churches who refuse to join the state-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement, such as Elder [Zhang Chunlei](#) of Ren’ai Reformed Church and Pastor [Yang Hua](#) of Living Stone Church in Guiyang City, Guizhou Province. Pastor [Wang Yi](#) of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu City, Sichuan Province, remained imprisoned, serving a nine-year sentence amid reports of his deteriorating health. Moreover, authorities throughout China routinely [raided](#) churches, detained Christians, and [confiscated](#) religious materials. The government also continued to demolish church buildings and crosses—including the [Sacred Heart Catholic Church](#) in Xinjiang—under its “sinicization of religion” campaign.

The government continued its persecution of other religious movements, often using the “anti-cult” provisions under [Article 300](#) of China’s Criminal Law. Falun Gong source Minghui reported that in 2021, authorities [harassed and arrested](#) thousands of Falun Gong practitioners and [sentenced](#) 892 to prison terms. At least 101 practitioners [died](#) as a result of government persecution. The government escalated its persecution of the Church of Almighty God, reportedly [arresting](#) thousands of its members throughout China and [torturing](#) many for practicing their faith. Some reportedly [died](#) in custody.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate China as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Expand financial and visa sanctions to target Chinese officials and entities responsible for carrying out severe religious freedom violations, especially within the CCP’s UFWD, SARA, the public security and state security apparatus, and localities where particularly egregious violations occur;
 - Work with like-minded countries in international fora, including the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, to collectively hold the Chinese government accountable for severe religious freedom violations, including by creating a UN Commission of Inquiry to investigate and identify perpetrators of genocide and other atrocity crimes in Xinjiang and document other severe human rights abuses throughout China; and
 - Enforce China-related human rights legislation to ensure that U.S. companies do not contribute to religious freedom violations in China.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Work with the administration to ensure that China-related human rights legislation, such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act and Tibet Policy and Support Act, are fully enforced.

Background

China is officially an [atheist state](#). Of China's [estimated](#) 1.4 billion people, approximately 18 percent are Buddhist, including Tibetan Buddhists; five percent are Christian; and two percent are Muslim. Other significant religious traditions include Taoism, Falun Gong, and folk religion practices.

The CCP, whose members are banned from believing in or practicing any faith, has long repressed religious freedom, and in recent years it has become increasingly hostile toward religion, implementing campaigns to "sinicize" Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity to rid them of alleged "foreign" influences. These policies require religious groups to support CCP rule and its political objectives, including by altering their religious teachings to conform to CCP ideology and policy. Both registered and unregistered religious groups and individuals who run afoul of the CCP face harassment, detention, arrest, imprisonment, and other abuses.

National Religious Work Conference

At the National Conference on Religious Work, top CCP officials [reiterated](#) many of the same policy priorities from the [2016 conference](#), which was followed by severe religious freedom violations in subsequent years. General Secretary Xi [emphasized](#) "fully implementing" the Party's theory and policies on religious affairs, including the "sinicization of religion" policy. He called for strengthening control and management of religion, requiring officials to adhere to Marxist views of religion, and demanding state-controlled religious groups to support the CCP's rule and its religious policies.

In addition to the top leadership, other central, provincial, and military officials—including officials from Xinjiang and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps—attended the conference virtually. Afterward, government authorities and state-controlled religious organizations at all levels organized separate meetings to study General Secretary Xi's speech and to implement the policies. Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi [convened](#) one such meeting and emphasized that his agency must "effectively prevent and resolve major risks within the religious sphere [and] safeguard national security and unity, ethnic unity, and social stability." Specifically, Minister Zhao called for a crackdown on "religious extremist thoughts and forces," "illegal missionary activities," "cults," religious activities associated with the Dalai Lama, and "illegal religious activities on the internet."

Accountability for International Crimes against Uyghurs

In December 2021, the UK-based and civil society-led [Uyghur Tribunal](#) judged that China has committed—beyond a reasonable doubt—genocide and crimes against humanity under international law. The tribunal considered and reviewed extensive evidence presented by

victims, witnesses, and experts, and it linked the repressive policies and abuses in Xinjiang to the highest echelon of Party and government leadership, including General Secretary Xi and former Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Chen Quanguo. The tribunal invited the Chinese government to take part in its proceedings but did not receive a response. The Uyghur Tribunal was formed in large part due to the lack of meaningful UN actions and inaccessibility to international courts. The International Criminal Court (ICC) [stated](#) in December 2020 that it would not investigate abuses against Uyghurs in Xinjiang as China is not a party to the ICC.

Key U.S. Policy

In January 2021, the administration of then President Donald J. Trump [designated](#) China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as genocide and crimes against humanity. In March, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden [affirmed](#) this determination. That same month, the United States, Canada, the UK, and the European Union [imposed](#) coordinated, targeted sanctions on two Chinese officials—Wang Junzheng and Chen Mingguo—for their involvement in serious human rights abuse in Xinjiang. In May, the U.S. Department of State [announced](#) visa sanctions against Chinese official Yu Hui for his involvement in the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners. In December, the U.S. government [sanctioned](#) Shohrat Zakir and Erken Tuniyaz, former and current chairman of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, respectively, for their involvement in serious human rights abuses in Xinjiang, as well as Chinese company SenseTime for developing facial recognition programs that targeted Uyghurs. That same month, the Biden administration [implemented](#) a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics given the Chinese government's ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses. Also in December, the Biden administration [appointed](#) Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya to serve concurrently as the special coordinator for Tibetan issues. On November 15, the State Department [redesignated](#) China as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action existing restrictions on exports to China of crime control or detection instruments or equipment.

In July, the U.S. government [issued](#) an updated Xinjiang Supply Chain Business Advisory, which [warned](#) businesses with supply chain and investment ties to Xinjiang of heightened legal risks due to serious human rights abuses in the region. In December, Congress [passed](#) the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act—legislation USCIRF had recommended Congress support—and President Biden [signed](#) it into law. The law creates a "rebuttable presumption" that all goods and products from Xinjiang are made with forced labor and bans their import, unless U.S. Customs and Border Protection certifies by "clear and convincing evidence" that forced labor was not involved.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [China's 2021 Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [I Grew Up Witnessing Forced Labor. U.S. Companies Must Step Up.](#) (New York Times)
- **Podcast:** [China Sanctions U.S. Religious Freedom Officials](#)
- **Hearing:** [Ending Genocide—Accountability for Perpetrators](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Gulmira Imin](#), [Jimmy Lai](#), [The Panchen Lama](#), [Hu Shigen](#), [Adil Tuniyaz](#)