

ARTICLE

The Wolf in Sheep's Skin: The Discrepancy between the Promises of Religious Freedom in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and the Actual Practices in Mainland China

El lobo con piel de oveja: La discrepancia entre las promesas de libertad religiosa en la Constitución de la República Popular China y las prácticas reales en la China Continental

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How to cite:

Gaffet, G. (2025). The Wolf in Sheep's Skin: The Discrepancy between the Promises of Religious Freedom in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and the Actual Practices in Mainland China. *Derecho en Sociedad*, 19(1), PP. 1-19. Doi: 10.63058/des.v19i1.307

Submission received: 15 August 2024. **Accepted:** 2 December 2024.

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² This manuscript builds upon a publication that originally appeared in Canopy Forum, a digital platform from the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University: <https://canopyforum.org/canopy-forum-in-collaboration-with-derecho-en-sociedad/>

Abstract

This article analyzes how the Chinese authorities guarantee the freedom of religion and belief in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, yet simultaneously violate it under Xi Jinping's leadership. The religious demography and historical background of politics and religion offer reasons for the Chinese Communist Party to hold a negative perception of religion, including the five official religions and other beliefs. It also explains the Party's motivations for overseeing and restricting the religious freedom of all individuals and groups. The Constitution of China states its respect for the freedom of religion and belief for all individuals and groups. However, some terms in the Constitution are ambiguous and may indicate certain implications. In practice, the Chinese authorities do not respect their Constitution and have established the State Administration for Religious Affairs to monitor all religious groups. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, various regulations, measures, and policies reveal that the Party-state actively implements its anti-religion agenda. The illustrated incidents demonstrate that the religious freedom of minorities, such as Catholics, Protestants, Hui and Uyghur Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists, is especially violated. Spiritual groups are regarded as "evil cults" and are arrested under the Criminal Law. The atheist and authoritarian state considers that all these religious groups may use their religion to threaten the stability of China.

Keywords: constitutions, regulations, China, religious freedom, religious minorities

Resumen

Este artículo analiza cómo las autoridades chinas garantizan la libertad de religión y creencias en la Constitución de la República Popular China y, al mismo tiempo, la violan bajo el liderazgo de Xi Jinping. La demografía religiosa y el trasfondo histórico de la política y la religión ofrecen razones para que el Partido Comunista Chino tenga una percepción negativa de la religión, incluidas las cinco religiones oficiales y otras religiones y creencias. También se explica la motivación del Partido para supervisar y restringir la libertad religiosa de todos los individuos y grupos religiosos. La Constitución de China establece su respeto por la libertad de religión y creencias de todos los individuos y grupos religiosos. Sin embargo, algunos términos en la Constitución pueden ser ambiguos e indicar ciertas implicaciones. En la práctica, las autoridades chinas no respetan su Constitución y establecen la Administración Estatal para Asuntos Religiosos para monitorear a todos los grupos religiosos. Bajo el liderazgo de Xi Jinping, diferentes regulaciones, medidas y políticas indican que el Partido-estado implementa activamente su trabajo antirreligioso. Los incidentes ilustrados muestran que la libertad religiosa de las minorías religiosas, como los católicos, protestantes, musulmanes Hui y uigures, y los budistas tibetanos, es especialmente violada. Los grupos espirituales son considerados como "cultos malignos" y son arrestados bajo la Ley Penal. El estado ateo y autoritario considera que todos estos grupos religiosos pueden utilizar su religión para amenazar la estabilidad de China.

Palabras clave: constituciones, reglamentos, China, libertad religiosa, minorías religiosas

Introduction

China has a long history. In its relationship with the West, China dominated trade initially due to its superior civilization. However, the Industrial Revolution in Europe reversed this situation. In the Opium War in 1842, the British defeated China and signed a treaty. This became the basis for a sequence of wars and diplomatic dealings that altered China's international status. In the nineteenth century, foreign powers grew, and China was repressed by signing treaties.

Nowadays, the Chinese central government adopts a top-down leadership structure and infringes on human rights in various aspects, most notably through its tightened control over the media and education in recent years. President Xi Jinping has stated that all media are entirely under the leadership of the Party (Rhodes & Yu, 2023). Information sharing to and from China requires the Party-state's authorization and is used as a propaganda tool to promote the Party's political agenda, ensuring the regime's leadership and the nation's stability are upheld and propagated. Additionally, education and research at all levels are co-opted to control people's knowledge through propaganda. The Patriotic Education Law, passed during a session of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, took effect on 1 January 2024. Its goal is to indoctrinate students to love and devote themselves to the Chinese Communist Party and its leadership, strengthening their national identity and the core values of socialism.

Religion can hardly escape from the same fate. Religious freedom is deprived because religion is perceived as a threat or rival according to the ideology of the Communist Party. Therefore, this paper will investigate how the People's Republic of China shows inconsistency in its constitution and its actual practices toward religious freedom in mainland China under Xi Jinping's leadership. First, the religious demography and the history related to politics and religion in mainland China will be provided to give a better understanding of the state's restrictions on freedom of religion and belief. Next, the constitution of China and other legal provisions that promise freedom of religion and belief will be explained. Then, the main challenges to freedom of religion and belief in reality will be elucidated and illustrated with incidents of violations. The empirical analysis will be supported by legal texts, scholarly resources, international reports, and reporting from religious freedom advocacy groups. This paper will end with a conclusion.

Background Information

Religious Demography

The population of China in 2023 is 1.4 billion. Despite being an atheist state, different religious groups exist in China. According to the 2020 World Religion Database, the non-religious (Atheists and Agnostics) comprise forty percent of China's population, Chinese folk-religionists (followers of indigenous religions of China) thirty percent, Buddhists sixteen percent, Christians seven percent,

Ethnic religionists four percent (followers of local religions connected particularly to ethnic groups), Muslims one point seven percent, and Daoists and Confucianists less than one percent (ARDA, n.d.). According to the International Religious Freedom Report 2023, seven to twenty million Falun Gong practitioners were estimated by the Freedom House in 2017, whereas two thousand five hundred Jews by the World Jewish Congress in 2015 (US State Department, 2024, pp. 7–8).

Wenzhou city in Zhejiang province represents one of the largest Christian communities in China. According to the official data, approximately ten percent of the city's population is Protestant, following the efforts of foreign missionaries George and Grace Stott since the 1860s (Chan, 2014). Concerning the Muslim population in China in 2020, the majority were Uyghurs (Turkic-speaking), followed by Hui (Mandarin-speaking) (Textor, 2022). Uyghur Muslims concentrate in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Yunnan Province is one of the places where Hui Muslims primarily live.

History of Politics and Religion

Before the Communist Party was founded, Chinese sovereignty was introduced in East Turkestan in 1911, but Uyghurs fought for their independence. They won twice but were defeated in 1949 (Islam, 2023). In the same year, Mao Zedong founded the People's Republic of China (PRC) and led as the chairperson of both the PRC until 1959 and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) until 1976 (Scharm, n.d.). Under the influence of Marxism-Leninism, for Mao, all religions should be ultimately eliminated and he tried to achieve this goal by first placing them under CCP rule ('Chairman Mao', n.d.).

The CCP regards atheism as part of its basic doctrines and reinforces its ideology. After the establishment of the PRC, Mao expelled foreign Christian missionaries and created five state-sanctioned religious bodies in the appointment of their religious leaders. Nevertheless, not all religious individuals and groups surrendered. The Vatican denied state-appointed bishops as Catholic and caused the Catholic loyalists to Rome to go underground (Introvigne, 2018).

Protestant church leader Wang Mingdao, who was a fundamentalist, believed that a pure church ought to be led by truly born-again and indigenous Chinese Christians (Cook, 2021, p. 139). He disagreed with the ideology of the CCP and refused to join the state-sanctioned Protestant church organization, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Wang regarded its leaders as theologically liberal and considered that the true church must remain separated from the state. He openly criticized the TSPM and called Christians in China to be independent of the CCP's oversight (Nation & Tseng, 2022, pp. 6–7). He was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment in 1955 (Cook, 2021, pp. 163–164). His refusal to join the TSPM is perceived as the beginning of the house church movement.

According to Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, refusal of being a Communist brought persecution, non-compliant Christians were re-educated through labor in the re-education camps (Boyd-MacMillan, 2006, p. 52). Massimo Introvigne elucidated that the Cultural Revolution in 1966 led to the persecution of both authorized and unauthorized religions. Many pastors, priests, monks and imams were killed, whereas religious books and places of worship were destroyed (Introvigne, 2018).

After Mao died, Deng Xiaoping rose to power. According to G. Wright Doyle and Eleanor Albert, Deng's 1979 "Open Door" policy of opening up the outside world and the release of imprisoned religious leaders brought gigantic growth of Christianity in the 1980s, with Christianity first spreading in house churches created in rural areas (Doyle, 2012, p. 53; Albert, 2018). On 31 March 1982, the Central Committee of the CCP promulgated "Document 19: The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period." It rebuked the error of the Party's leaders made during the Cultural Revolution to some extent. However, this Party's policy repudiated the "leftist" errors by restricting and suppressing religious activities and managing religious affairs (Madsen, 2020, pp. 18–19).

After the Tiananmen Square massacre (1989), Boyd-MacMillan and Marie-Eve Reny explain that pro-democracy intellectuals in urban communities pivoted to religious practices: Daoism, Buddhism, and Christianity (Boyd-MacMillan, 2006, p. 54; Albert, 2018). Reny adds that leaders of unregistered churches considered the separation of religion and state, that religious activities should be without state interference. Although the Public Security Bureau (police at the prefecture level) was responsible for prosecuting and preventing illegal activities, these activities were tolerated under conditions of containment bargain such as no engagement in political activism (Reny, 2018, pp. 2–7; 'Public Security Bureau', n.d.). Furthermore, according to Introvigne, when Deng promoted Qi Gong as a traditional Chinese culture rather than religion, Falun Gong rose and was perceived as a threat by the CCP. Hence, the largest segment of religion in China consisted of unregistered religious organizations, considered illegal by the government (Introvigne, 2018).

In 2013, Xi Jinping was elected as president of China. He also holds the positions of general secretary of the CCP and chairman of the Central Military Commission (Graceffo, 2023). In 2018, Xi abolished the term limit for serving as president. He intensified antireligious campaigns, more fiercely than the previous decades. In 2022, he extended his presidency to a third term as CCP general secretary, becoming one of the three most powerful leaders in PRC's history (along with Mao and Deng). The state dominates church affairs with tighter restrictions such as the inclusion of Communist ideology in religious doctrines and restriction of the church's operation. These restrictions advanced rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Open Doors International, 2022, pp. 9–10).

Legal Provisions of China

The Chinese government officially recognizes five religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Only Daoism is genuinely Chinese, the others were imported from overseas. China signed five international treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), to respect and protect fundamental human rights (Open Doors International, 2022, p. 6). Nevertheless, it has not ratified the ICCPR.

Besides, the revised Constitution of the PRC declares its protection of the freedom of religion to its citizens. Article 36 states that

citizens of the People's Republic of China shall enjoy freedom of religious belief.

No state organ, social organization or individual shall coerce citizens to believe in or not to believe in any religion, nor shall they discriminate against citizens who believe in or do not believe in any religion.

The state shall protect normal religious activities. No one shall use religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the state's education system.

Religious groups and religious affairs shall not be subject to control by foreign forces (Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 2019).

Despite the promise of protection, other possible interpretations and certain implications are found. In the third paragraph, Richard Madsen interprets "normal religious activities" as activities within the church building, implying no mission activities (Madsen, 2020, p. 23). Reny defines "normal" as those registered with and approved by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (Reny, 2018, p. 1). However, it will be argued that "normal religious activities" include only adult religious activities approved by the state. The emphasis of the term "normal" lies not on the status as "registered," but on their obedience and loyalty to the Party-state. Such protection thus comes with conditions and is not always guaranteed. The last paragraph shows possible signs of "Sinicization". Besides, foreign religious personnel require an invitation and approval from the state before they may preach at the registered sites (Ping, 2012, pp. 3–4). Moreover, no foreign printed materials can be distributed to any local religious organizations (Harvey, 2023).

Apart from the Constitution, the protection of freedom of religion can be found in other laws. For example, the Law of the PRC on Regional National Autonomy, the General Rules of Civil Law, the Law of Education, and the Labor Law. These laws protect the property of religious organizations,

equal education, and employment opportunities to every citizen with diverse religious backgrounds, and respect for religious beliefs and customs of each ethnic group (Ping, 2012, p. 2).

Actual Practices and Religious Persecutions in the Mainland

According to Open Doors, China's ranking moved up from the top thirty in the World Watch List 2019 to the top twenty in 2023 (China: 2023 Full Country Dossier, 2022, pp. 5–6). The placement slightly drops in 2024, its score is still slowly increasing. The Communist and the post-Communist oppression, and the dictatorial paranoia are the main persecution engines, driven mainly by the Government officials and the Political parties (Open Doors International, 2023, p. 6). The Party-state delegates departments such as the Religious Affairs Bureau, Ministry of State Security, and Public Security Bureau for regular anti-religion work. It perceives Protestant house church Christians, Roman Catholics, Muslim Uyghurs, and Tibetan Buddhists as having foreign connections, whereas spiritual groups, notably Falun Gong, as “evil cults” or xiejiao (Crabtree, 2023). The unregistered groups are severely persecuted. However, registered organizations are also repressed. Therefore, the Party-state practices in infringement of religious freedom will be explained with illustrations as follows.

State Departments for Anti-Religion Work

The State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), carries out the direction of the United Front Work Department (UFWD) to implement religious policy. The SARA oversees the operations of China's five officially sanctioned religious organizations: Buddhist Association of China, Chinese Daoist Association, Islamic Association of China, Patriotic Catholic Association and Three-Self Patriotic Movement (Protestant). It aims at supervising the appointments of clergy and the interpretation of religious doctrine, and ensuring all registered religious bodies support and implement the CCP policy. Among all directors of SARA, Ye Xiaowen persecuted aggressively unregistered Christian groups, Tibetans, and Falun Gong from 1995 onward. He launched the first regulations of religious activity, distinguishing all worship and other religious activities of the registered communities as legal and those of underground communities as illegal. It led to the arrests of bishops and priests, the vandalism and destruction of places of worship, and physical violence against the believers. Besides, the eleventh Panchen Lama was elected in 1995 under his direction, unrecognized by the Dalai Lama. He obliged the approval of the Party on all Buddhist reincarnation. Additionally, he led a campaign against Falun Gong resulting in arrests of members, being accused of following an “evil cult” (Cervellera, 2009; Kunchok, 2023a). In 2018, the SARA was incorporated into the UFWD. The UFWD reports directly to the Central Committee of the CCP. It manages opposition within the nation, making sure that prominent Chinese individuals and groups align with the Party and its agenda (Nation & Tseng, 2022, p. 252).

The Ministry of State Security manages the Early-Warning Intelligence Team, which is primarily

responsible for gathering intelligence on foreign-related religions, analyzing the patterns of their religious activities, developing trends of foreign-related religions and providing early-warning information for crackdown campaigns.

The Public Security Bureau is responsible for the surveillance and control of “evil cults.” It administers the Investigation and Crackdown Team. It is responsible for conducting surveillance work, establishing a database of members in foreign-related religious groups, and following and suppressing their activities (Wu, 2019).

Government Issues Regulations and Measures

On the surface, the Party-state issues regulations and measures to maintain public security. However, in reality, it requires the political loyalty of state-controlled religious organizations to the CCP and to serve its political purposes and interests (M. Chen, 2022, p. 2). Indeed, Document 19 promulgated in 1982 already states that

the basic task of these patriotic religious organizations is to assist the Party and the government to implement the policy of freedom of religious belief, to help the broad mass of religious believers and persons in religious circles to continually raise their patriotic and Socialist consciousness, to represent the lawful rights and interest of religious circles, to organize normal religious activities, and to manage religious affairs well (Religion and Law Consortium, n.d.).

Since then, the state regulations on religion have been based on the principles pronounced in this document and Article 36 of the revised Constitution of the PRC, forming the “1982 framework” (Madsen, 2020, p. 17). The most significant policies on religion under Xi’s leadership are the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs, which took effect in February 2018. The objective of this policy is to constrain activities in registered religious organizations, eliminate the unregistered ones and cause further crackdown on the cult (‘New Regulation on Religious Affairs’, n.d.). Article 8 mandates that state-regulated religious groups cooperate with the government by implementing state laws, regulations and policies (Religious Affairs Regulations 2017, 2017). Moreover, four Articles state that unregistered staff performing any religious activity in unregistered sites will receive heavy fines and face closure of sites. Additionally, neither religious activities (considered as proselytism) for minors nor at school campuses is allowed, including those offered by Three-Self Churches after school (Cervellera, 2017; Zhou, 2019).

Furthermore, in 2020, Article 5 of the Measures on the Administration of Religious Groups further obliges religious organizations to follow the Party’s leadership and notably persist in the “Sinicization” of religion. Article 17 mandates them to publicize and educate religious communities on state laws and policies to support socialist values. Articles 19-36 require them to be subject to the CCP’s ongoing monitoring of diverse religious matters such as the management of religious

schools, place of worship and clerical selection. Articles 37 and 38 warn about punishment for noncompliant groups and individuals (Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups, 2020).

The Measures for Administration of Internet Religious Information Services were enforced in March 2022. Religious groups must obtain government-issued licenses to disseminate religious content online. However, registration requirements and process records are complicated. In article 15, sermons and lectures performed by licensed groups and schools will be verified for their “Sinicized” content to ensure they promote socialist values and have no intention of proselytization. Article 17 states that religious activities such as worship of Buddha, ordination, mass, and baptisms cannot be broadcast live or recorded in images, audio and video or texts (Hu, 2021). After the law became effective, the reputed website “Jonah Home” providing rich Christian resources was suddenly closed. The accounts of individual Christian users of WeChat, a messaging application, were deleted (Gao, 2022).

Last but not least, Beijing launched the “Buddhist and Daoist Clerical Personnel Information Query System” in 2023. Later in May, the same system was launched for Islamic, Catholic and Protestant clergy. The database was to identify the illegitimate clergies and persecute them (He, 2023). Additionally, in the same year, Measures for the Financial Management of Venues for Religious Activities came into effect on 1 September. Monasteries, temples, mosques, churches and other religious activity venues including sermons are required to support the leadership of the CCP and Xi’s plans for the “Sinicization” of religious activity, or they will face liquidation. Article 50 states that these venues should integrate Chinese culture and embody Chinese style in their architecture, sculpture, painting and decoration. In Articles 52 and 53, religious groups are not allowed to build large religious statues outside their religious buildings, this prohibition also applies to private citizens or donors (Hu, 2023).

Finally, spiritual groups such as Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God are regarded as illegal or “superstitious cults.” They are attacked by the “anti-cult” provisions, specifically Article 300 of the PRC Criminal Law, which forbids the use of a cult to undermine the implementation of laws and regulations (Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China, 1979). The Falun Gong source reported over 7,000 practitioners were arrested or harassed, more than 600 were imprisoned and about 170 were martyred in 2022 (Minghui, n.d.).

“Sinicization” of Religion

In 2015, Xi Jinping announced the theory of “Sinicization” and applied it to all carriers of culture, including academia and religion. The SARA and state-sanctioned religious organizations implement the “Sinicization” of Religion, a major strategic measure to remove foreign forces and influences. It guides all religions to conform to the CCP’s doctrines and cultivate the core values of socialism, and assimilates ethnic minorities into Chinese culture so that their cultural and religious identities

can be erased. This is because the state avoids foreign and extremist forces using religion as a threat to infiltrate China and disseminate separatism (Xia, 2022).

Indeed, the concept of “Sinicization” was used in the past, it signifies the effort to replace foreigners who managed businesses, religions and civil society organizations with Chinese leaders. These leaders are notably selected by the Party and “operate within a framework of strategies and objectives indicated by the CCP” (Sinicization, n.d.). In 2016, Xi gave a keynote speech at the Communist Party National Conference on Religious Work. He emphasizes the continual work of “Sinicization” of all religions and the management of religions based on the rule of law for management effectiveness. In 2018, each of the state-controlled religious bodies released their five-year plan for 2018-22 on how to “Sinicize” their own religions (Gan, 2019). Consequently, unregistered and non-compliant religious groups face harassment, arrest, detention, imprisonment and other abuses. In 2022, all five state-sanctioned religious groups, together with the Chinese Catholic Bishops’ Conference and the China Christian Council, issued a joint statement called “National Religious Organizations Common Initiative on Cultivating Frugality and Abstaining from Extravagance.” It is to pledge that they would adhere to CCP guidelines for the management of religions, including supervision of religious institutes, finances, and properties. It aims to implement the spirit of the CCP’s second National Conference of Religious Affairs held in December 2021 (Union of Catholic Asian News, 2022). Under the effect of this policy, the religious freedom of the following four religious groups is particularly violated.

Protestants

The Chinese Christian Council (CCC) is responsible for theological education and the publication of Bibles, hymnals and religious literature with socialist values. It is illegal to possess any Bible not purchased in the bookstores operated by the TSPM (A Bible for Every Believer, n.d.). Since the “Administrative Measures for Religious Schools” was implemented in 2021, CCC’s president led a team from China Christian Theological Education Committee to inspect Zhejiang Theological Seminary. It is to verify the progress of the “Sinicization” of seminaries and full compliance with the Measures, so that seminaries promote Xi’s socialist ideology (Zhang, 2023).

At church, sermons are scrutinized to ensure the incorporation of the Communist ideology. Besides, over two hundred house churches including Wenzhou Sanjiang Church have been demolished and two thousand crosses removed in Zhejiang, particularly in Wenzhou, since 2014. Pastors were arrested and detained (Yu, 2016). According to the authorities, the Sanjiang Church was illegally built, breaching the land-use regulations (Li, 2014).

Additionally, in August 2017, numerous local churches in Wenzhou received notices from the state that minors were rigorously forbidden to enter churches.” After the state’s Regulations on Religious Affairs were enforced and the five-year plan on “Sinicization” for the official religions

was implemented in 2018, further actions were taken place in March 2023, parents of kindergarten children in Longwan district of Wenzhou city were mandated for the first time to sign a “pledge form of commitment for family not to hold religious beliefs.” The pledge states that parents affirm not to hold any religious belief including cult, not to participate in any religious activities, and not to propagate religion in any location. The pledge also demands affirmation of being exemplary observance of the CCP discipline and the country's laws and regulations (ChinaAid, 2023).

Finally, the “Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for Further Advancing the Sinicization of Christianity (2023-2027)” was launched in December 2023 and interpreted by the CCC and TSPM. When compared to the last outline (2018-22), it shifts its focus from emphasis on the significance of the “Sinicization” of Christianity to the more concrete actions. It plans to reflect and discuss major theological themes such as the “theology of God” in the context of Chinese culture. It aims at building a theological framework with Chinese characteristics to manage the Chinese church (Zhang, 2024).

Catholics

The SARA issued Administrative Measures for Religious Clergy in 2021. Article 16 states that bishops are elected through the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), approved and consecrated by the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference (Introigne, 2021). It violated the Provisional Agreement made secretly by the Holy See and the PRC on the appointment of bishops in China in 2018. It was renewed in 2020 and 2022 with the extension of two years. In November 2022, the Vatican released a statement saying that Peng Weizhao's installation as the Auxiliary Bishop of Jiangxi was surprising, the diocese of Jiangxi was not recognized by the Holy See (Vatican, 2022). Despite becoming official, Bishop Peng from the underground church still had little autonomy. The CCP pressured both official and underground bishops, and shaped diocesan boundaries to fit their political objectives (‘Underground Bishop Peng Weizhao Becomes Official in Jiangxi’, 2022). Nevertheless, the Holy See hopes for appropriate communications on the matter from the Chinese authorities and is willing to conduct respectful dialogue for the common interest (Allen, 2022).

Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of Wenzhou, recognized by the Pope but not the CCP, was arrested multiple times and subjected to regular “brainwashing” sessions to join the CPCA. The kidnappings occurred on the eve of important Catholic events. In 2021, he was kidnapped and detained. In 2022 and 2023, he was arrested (AsiaNews, 2021; ChinaAid, 2023).

In addition, clergy are mandated to attend political indoctrination sessions. Also, the liturgy is altered to underscore loyalty to the CCP and the state. At the twentieth of the National Congress of the CCP in 2022, Xi stated that religion must be compatible with socialist values (US State Department, 2023, pp. 29–30).

Muslims

Uyghurs, as the majority of the Muslims fought for their independence in the past, threatening the state. In 2014, the Chinese government based on the riots in Xinjiang to characterize Muslims in Xinjiang as extremists. The re-education efforts started in 2014 and expanded in 2017 for anti-extremism. Xi's "Sinicization" aims at assimilating Uyghurs to CCP's rule and ideology, and erasing their ethnic/religious identity (Abdureshid, 2022). Since 2017, over one million people have been imprisoned and arbitrarily detained in re-education camps, most of them are Uyghurs. According to the white paper, the Chinese government calls it as "vocational education and training centers" to prevent any terrorist ideas (The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang, n.d.). Detainees were tortured and involuntarily sterilized. They were forced to pledge loyalty to the CCP, and to renounce Islam and other cultural practices (Uyghur Human Rights Project: Questions and Answers, n.d.). Those outside the camp were subjected to intense surveillance and forced inter-marriages (Maizland, 2022). Since 2019, these camps have been transformed into detention centers or prisons. One in twenty-five people were sentenced to prison on terrorism-related charges, despite age and gender. They are all Uyghurs (Wu & Kang, 2022).

Besides, the Hui Muslims in Yunnan face ongoing persecution ('China Plans to "Sinicize" Islam as Muslims Warn of Eradication Campaign', 2019). The Najiaying mosque resumed construction in June 2023, with scaffolding around the minaret and dome. Many people in Najiaying received calls from the local police that they are neither allowed to use VPNs to browse social media platforms outside of China, nor take pictures/videos related to the mosques' "Sinicization" nor post them (Chen, 2023).

Tibetan Buddhists

Apart from SARA director Ye's persecution, the CCP tries to unceasingly destroy Tibetan religion and culture. Tibetan youth are "Sinicized" through education. In 2019, government officials ordered the rectification of the Huiquan temple. A Tibetan Buddhist shrine was converted into a Chinese pavilion and the traditional Tibetan bronze pillars were annihilated (F. Zhang, 2020). This year, monks were forced to sign documents renouncing their ties to Dalai Lama (Kunchok, 2023b). Many were forced into mass labor camps and training centers for political indoctrination ('China "coercing" Thousands of Tibetans into Mass Labour Camps - Report', 2020).

Conclusion

According to Dennis Petri and Jonathan Fox, several elements contribute to the discrepancy between the constitutions for religious freedom and their actual practices. First, constitutional clauses that guarantee religious freedom are “symbolic in nature and lack any practical implication.” Second, restrictions on religious freedom are found in lower-level legislation and bureaucratic practices. Third, the national sovereignty overrules the effectiveness of the international human rights system. The state can choose not to commit to the system in practice (Petri & Fox, 2023, pp. 13–14). Open Doors criticizes that China does not fulfill international obligations by breaching international treaties and failing to protect the rights of Christians (China: 2024 Full Country Dossier, 2023, p. 6). Concerning the violation of ICCPR Article 18, the unregistered Guangzhou Bible Reformed Church was raided by police officers twice. They accused the church of meeting illegally (‘Officials Established Task Force for Guangzhou Bible Reformed Church,’ 2023). Concerning the infringement of CRC Art. 14, the government officials raided a church school in Fujian Province and reported the school as a “cult.” Students were interrogated overnight and deported to their hometowns (ChinaAid, 2021).

The PRC Constitution declares the protection of religious freedom of every citizen, yet certain wordings are ambiguous and seem to imply specific prerequisites. The atheist and autocratic state regards religious freedom as granted by the government under conditions that its dominion is not threatened. Religious organizations and individuals must obey fully and remain loyal to the Party-state in exchange for their religious freedom, despite without guarantee at times. Under the leadership of Xi, the Party further suppresses their religious freedom. The Party-state continually delegates the Religious Affairs Bureau to monitor religious organizations and individuals through the five state-sanctioned associations. Together with the Ministry of State Security and the Public Security Bureau, they implement anti-religion work by enforcing legal regulations and superficially justifying them to preserve public security. The ultimate goal of its political agenda advancement was revealed in the “1982 framework” and the Regulations on Religious Affairs in 2018. However, the 2018 policy and other measures attempt to go beyond Document 19: every non-compliant, regardless of registered and unregistered organizations of all official religions, is coerced by the state to cultivate the Party’s socialist ideology. Restrictions extended to religious personnel, religious venues, and private online usage. Spiritual groups, regarded as “evil cults,” face criminal punishment and inhuman treatments such as organ harvesting. These laws and policies violate people’s right to manifest their religion or belief in worship and practice, and prohibit children from adopting a religion or belief of their choice.

When taking historical factors into account, the CCP is suspicious of Catholicism and Protestantism due to their foreign ties and of religions practiced by ethnic groups in sensitive border regions, Buddhism in Tibet and Islam in Xinjiang (Vala, 2017). These religious and ethnic groups were involved in ruling and subverting the nation in the past. To put them under the Party’s control, the “Sinicization” of religion policy obliges the Party’s ideology to incorporate into religious doctrines and erase foreign cultures or thinking. As illustrated, religious symbols are removed from religious

architecture; religious leaders are appointed directly under the Party's authority; and children are forbidden to study religions and worship with their parents. Three ethnic groups – the Tibetan Buddhists, Hui Muslims and Uyghur Muslims – even face the crisis of losing both their cultural and religious identities. Therefore, the laws, regulations, and policies in China conceal the Party-state's ambitious conspiracy: these religions are undergoing a “face-lift.” In other words, their unique doctrinal beliefs will gradually be eliminated and ultimately replaced by socialist patriotic doctrines. The more resistant the religious groups are to the government, the fiercer the state represses their religious freedom.

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