

Key Findings

- Controls over religion in China have increased since 2012, seeping into new areas of daily life and triggering growing resistance from believers.
- At least 100 million people—nearly one-third of estimated believers in China—belong to religious groups facing “high” or “very high” levels of persecution (Protestant Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and Falun Gong).
- Despite tightening controls, millions of religious believers defy official restrictions in daily life or engage in some form of direct protest, at times scoring significant victories.
- The impact of these dynamics reaches beyond the realm of religious policy, deeply affecting China’s overall legal, social, political, and economic environment.

Executive Summary

A Taoist disciple joins the order without knowing when he will be admitted to priesthood. Dozens of Christians are barred from celebrating Christmas together. Tibetan monks are forced to learn reinterpretations of Buddhist doctrine during a “patriotic reeducation” session. A Uighur Muslim farmer is sentenced to nine years in prison for praying in a field. And a 45-year-old father in northeastern China dies in

custody days after being detained for practicing Falun Gong.

These are a small sample of the obstacles that Chinese believers encounter when they seek to peacefully practice their faith—products of the ruling Communist Party’s multifaceted apparatus of control. Combining both violent and nonviolent methods, the party’s policies are designed to curb the rapid growth of religious communities and eliminate certain beliefs and practices, while also harnessing aspects of religion that could serve the regime’s political and economic interests.

Since Xi Jinping took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, the authorities have intensified many of their restrictions, resulting in an overall increase in religious persecution. But believers have responded with a surprising degree of resistance, including in faith communities that have generally enjoyed cooperative relationships with state and party officials.

This escalating cycle of repression and pushback illustrates a fundamental failure of the Chinese authorities’ religious policies. Rather than checking religion’s natural expansion and keeping it under political control, the CCP’s rigid constraints have essentially created an enormous black market, forcing many believers to operate outside the law and to view the regime as unreasonable, unjust, or illegitimate.

The present study is a detailed examination of the dynamics of religious revival, repression, and resistance in China today, as well as their recent evolution and broader implications. The report focuses on seven communities that together account for over 350 million believers: the country’s officially recognized religions—Buddhism (Chinese and Tibetan), Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam—as well as Falun Gong, the largest of several banned *qigong* practices, new religious movements, and quasi-Christian sects.

Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, religious persecution in China has

increased overall.

As China experiences a spiritual revival across a wide range of faiths, the Chinese government's religious controls have taken different forms for different localities, ethnicities, and denominations. In many parts of China, ordinary believers do not necessarily feel constrained in their ability to practice their faith, and state authorities even offer active support for certain activities.

At the other extreme, Chinese officials have banned holiday celebrations, desecrated places of worship, and employed lethal violence. Security forces across the country detain, torture, or kill believers from various faiths on a daily basis. How a group or individual is treated depends in large part on the level of perceived threat or benefit to party interests, as well as the discretion of local officials.

Nonviolent forms of control are more prevalent, but they are also deeply offensive to many believers, directly intruding on the internal functions of religious organizations. They include vetting religious leaders for political reliability, placing limits on the number of new monastics or priests, and manipulating religious doctrine according to party priorities. Extensive surveillance, "reeducation" campaigns, and restrictions on private worship affect the spiritual lives of millions of people. And increasingly, economic reprisals and exploitation have become a source of tension and a catalyst for protests.

Under Xi, many of these practices have expanded. New legal mechanisms have codified previously informal restrictions. Crackdowns on unregistered and even state-sanctioned places of worship and religious leaders have increased, with several clerics receiving long prison terms. Constraints on children's ability to participate in religious life have multiplied. Four communities examined in this study have experienced an increase in persecution: Protestant Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, and both Uighur and Hui Muslims.

Spectrum of Religious Persecution

 Tweet

Very Low	Taoists
Low	Chinese Buddhists Hui Muslims
Moderate	Catholics
High	Protestants
Very High	Tibetan Buddhists Uighur Muslims Falun Gong

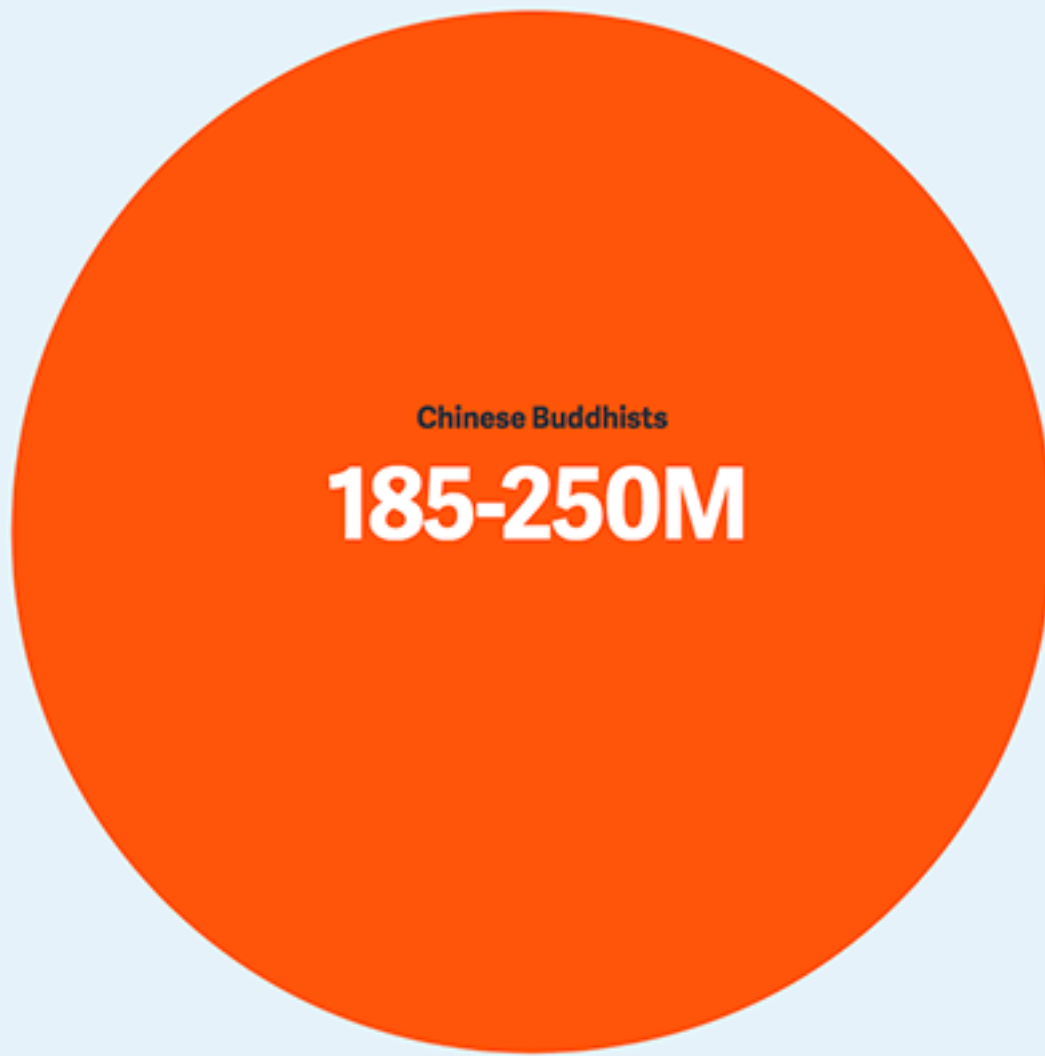
Note: Freedom House researchers and academic advisers assigned these designations based on the situations described in the chapters devoted to each group, as well as the breakdown provided in the Key Religious Controls chart.

China's Religious Communities

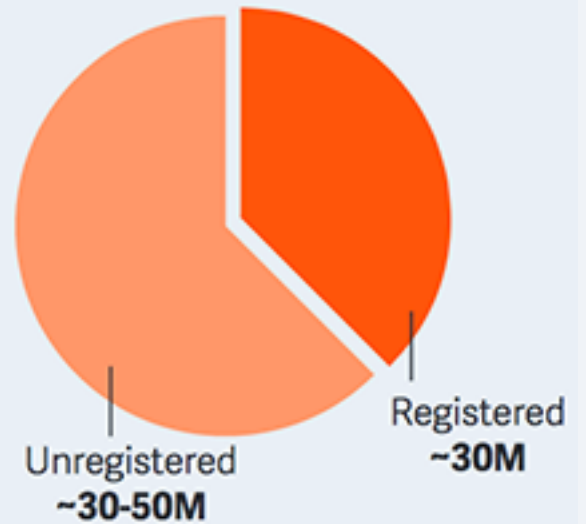
China is home to over 350 million religious believers and hundreds of millions more who follow various folk traditions. Determining the precise size of religious communities in China is notoriously difficult, even for officially recognized groups. Government statistics exclude those who worship at unregistered temples or churches and believers under the age of 18, and many Chinese engage in a mixture of religious and folk practices. Official figures for Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists are based on ethnicity, embedding the assumption that all members of an ethnic group adhere to a particular religion. And for banned groups like Falun Gong, no contemporary official figures exist.

Nevertheless, having some sense of the overall and relative size of these

communities is important for understanding the nature of religious revival, repression, and resistance. The following are informed estimates for the communities examined in this study (with the exception of Taoism, for which no figures were available), drawing on official figures, public opinion surveys, academic studies, media reports, and religious groups' own reporting.



Protestants 60-80M



Muslims 21-23M



Falun Gong practitioners 7-20M



Catholics 12M



Tibetan Buddhists 6-8M



Note: For more detailed examinations of each group's size, as well as sources informing the above estimates, see their respective chapters.

Trajectory of Religious Persecution in China across Faith Communities

(Nov 2012–Nov 2016)

Protestant and Christians



(Increase)

Since early 2014, local authorities have intensified efforts to stem the spread of Christianity amid official rhetoric about the threat of “Western” values and the need to “Sinicize” religions. As the larger of the two main Christian denominations in China, Protestants have been particularly affected by cross-removal and church-demolition campaigns, punishment of state-sanctioned leaders, and the arrest of human rights lawyers who take up Christians’ cases.

Uighur Muslims



(Increase)

Controls on religion have deepened and expanded in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, where a majority of Uighur Muslims reside. Previously informal or local restrictions in Xinjiang—on issues such as religious dress—have been codified at the regional and national levels. Authorities have launched new campaigns to more closely monitor smartphone usage and force businesses to sell alcohol, while incidents of security forces opening fire on Uighur civilians have become more common.

Hui Muslims



(Minor Increase)

Amid growing official and public anxiety about the spread of Islam and the threat of Islamist-inspired violence, Hui Muslims have experienced some intensified restrictions and Islamophobia since November 2012. In several provinces, bans on children’s religious study have been more strictly

enforced, displays of halal signs restricted, and a crackdown on Salafi Hui Muslims launched.

Tibetan Buddhists

(Minor Increase)



President Xi Jinping has largely continued the repressive policies and campaigns of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, while deepening and expanding certain controls. New measures include punishing assistance to self-immolators, canceling previously permitted festivals, increasing intrusive restrictions on private religious practice, and more proactively manipulating Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and the selection of religious leaders.

Chinese Buddhists

(Consistent)



President Xi has continued Hu-era policies, creating an environment of relatively low persecution for Chinese Buddhist practice. His actions and rhetoric portray Chinese Buddhism as an increasingly important channel for realizing the party's political and economic goals at home and abroad. In a rare occurrence, a Chinese Buddhist monk was sentenced to prison in 2016 on politically motivated charges.

Taoists

(Consistent)



CCP leaders continue to view Taoism, an indigenous Chinese religion, as an attractive tool for building regime legitimacy on the basis of traditional Chinese culture and for improving relations with Taoist believers in Taiwan.

Catholics

(Minor Decrease)



Although some Catholic churches have been subjected to forced cross removals, relations between Beijing and the Vatican have warmed since

March 2013. The two sides appear to be on the verge of a breakthrough agreement governing the appointment of bishops in China at a time when more than 40 vacancies have opened. Nevertheless, some prominent figures in the church remain skeptical about how much any deal would reduce repression of underground Catholics.

Falun Gong practitioners

(Minor Decrease)



Falun Gong practitioners across China continue to be subject to widespread and severe human rights violations. Nevertheless, repression appears to have declined in some locales. President Xi has offered no explicit indication of a plan to reverse the CCP's policy toward Falun Gong. But the imprisonment of former security czar Zhou Yongkang and other officials associated with the campaign as part of Xi's anticorruption drive, together with Falun Gong adherents' efforts to educate and discourage police from persecuting them, have had an impact.

Yet there have also been a number of positive developments in unexpected quarters. Sino-Vatican relations have warmed, raising the possibility of an agreement on the appointment of Catholic bishops. Such a pact would remove a major source of division in the Chinese church. Falun Gong practitioners, though still subject to severe abuses, are experiencing reduced persecution in many locales, as top officials driving the campaign have been purged in intraparty struggles, and years of grassroots outreach by adherents and their supporters have won over some lower-level authorities.

Indeed, members of all faith communities have responded to official controls with creativity and with courage, at times scoring significant victories. Whatever the outcome of each contestation, it is clear that the CCP's efforts to impose its will on a wide spectrum of religious practice and thought are falling short or backfiring in

important ways.

Religious groups, beliefs, and practices that the CCP has devoted tremendous resources to extinguishing have survived or spread, representing a remarkable failure of the party's repressive capacity. Meanwhile, official actions are generating resentment, assertiveness, and activism among populations that might previously have been apolitical and largely content with CCP rule.

The impact of these dynamics reaches far beyond the realm of religious policy alone, deeply affecting China's overall legal, social, political, and economic environment. Looking toward the future, Xi and his colleagues face a critical choice: Do they recognize their errors and loosen religious controls, or do they press ahead with a spiraling pattern of repression and resistance that might threaten the regime's long-term legitimacy and stability? Their decision will be critical in determining the ultimate cost of the ongoing battle for China's spirit.

Religious Persecution by Province

Many religious controls in China are imposed nationwide, and instances of persecution have been recorded in every one of China's 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and province-level municipalities since November 2012. Still, the degree of persecution and the primary groups targeted vary from region to region.



Overview: Marxist Materialism Confronts Religious Reality

By Sarah Cook, Senior Research Analyst for East Asia

[Communist Party cadres must be] unyielding Marxist atheists. We should

“*guide and educate the religious circle and their followers.*”
– Xi Jinping, April 2016¹

“*The world is won by those who let it go. But when you try and try, the world is beyond winning.*”
– Lao Tzu, founder of Taoism²

Religion and spirituality have been deeply embedded in Chinese culture and identity for millennia. This fact posed a challenge for the avowedly atheist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) when it came to power in 1949, and its strategies for dealing with religiosity in Chinese society have fluctuated in the decades since.

Under Mao Zedong—and particularly during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76)—the party took extreme measures to stamp out religion. Thousands of monasteries, churches, and mosques were destroyed, monks were disrobed, and untold numbers of religious leaders and believers were imprisoned, tortured, and killed.

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The pillars of the CCP’s religious policy

As CCP leaders have come to terms with the enduring existence and apparent expansion of religion in Chinese society, they have pursued a complex policy designed to maximize the benefits to party rule while minimizing the risks. Four key pillars of the strategy are evident in its implementation:

- **Opportunistic exploitation:** Harnessing the benefits of religion to advance broader CCP economic, political, cultural, and foreign policy goals
- **Rule by law** Developing legal and bureaucratic instruments to control religious practice and institutions

- **Selective eradication:** Fiercely suppressing religious groups, beliefs, and individuals deemed to threaten party rule or policy priorities, often via extralegal means
- **Long-term asphyxiation:** Adopting measures to curb religion's expansion and accelerate its extinction among future generations

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Trajectory under Xi: Intensified restrictions, unexpected improvements

Since November 2012, Xi Jinping and his colleagues have largely maintained the CCP's stance on religion and continued specific policies initiated by their predecessors. Nevertheless, certain distinctions and points of emphasis have emerged.

Rhetorically, Xi has been even more vocal than Hu in his effort to harness China's religious and cultural traditions to shore up CCP legitimacy, linking them to his own signature concepts of the "China Dream" and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. At the same time, in the context of a broader ideological campaign to limit the influence of so-called Western values, Xi has warned against foreign infiltration of the religious sphere. Together, these two messages have reinforced the perception that the CCP favors Asian religions like Buddhism and Taoism, particularly if their expansion might help contain the spread of faiths like Christianity and Islam, of which the party has traditionally been more wary.

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Factors driving change

A constellation of factors appear to be driving these changes, for better or worse, at

both the national and local levels. Religious groups have been swept up in a **broader tightening of CCP control** over civil society and an increasingly anti-Western ideological bent under Xi Jinping. The party is essentially bracing itself for the potential political impact of an economic downturn while seeking new sources of legitimacy. The new religious restrictions bear markers of Xi's particular mode of governance, including the "rule by law" emphasis on legislation, an expansion of party-state representation in various social entities, and dedicated efforts to rein in social media activity.

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The impact and limits of CCP policies

The party's apparatus of religious controls and its repressive actions since late 2012 have been effective in many ways. Tibetan self-immolations have been stifled. Crosses on churches in Zhejiang Province are much less visible. Harassed house churches have been forced to disperse. And many fewer Uighurs are appearing in public with headscarves or long beards.

More broadly, a corps of politically loyal religious leaders has been established, and a new generation is being trained at official seminaries and Buddhist academies. A sizable contingent of religious believers feel that they can practice their faith largely unhindered. In a coup for the government's "soft power" initiatives, China hosted the general conference of a long-standing international Buddhist organization for the first time in 2014.

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Political, economic, and social implications

The human cost of the CCP's controls and abuses is overwhelming. Religious

prisoners form the largest contingent of prisoners of conscience in China. With each passing day, more Chinese citizens are swept into the party-state's repressive apparatus for engaging in peaceful spiritual practice. Families are torn apart, injuries and psychological damage are inflicted, and lives are lost. In some parts of the country—like Xinjiang, Zhejiang, and Heilongjiang, for example—high levels of persecution cut across multiple groups, with police officers and judges potentially being asked to target members of several faiths.

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Future outlook

Xi Jinping and other party leaders have numerous options if they wish to extricate themselves from their policy failures. They could loosen registration rules to bring more believers into a realistic legal framework, though that may mean allowing registered groups to operate outside the confines of the “patriotic” associations. They could reverse past arbitrary decisions that have generated significant backlash from believers and damaged party legitimacy, such as prohibiting veneration of the Dalai Lama, banning Falun Gong, and removing crosses from state-sanctioned churches. And they could begin to distinguish between peaceful religious practice and acts of violence when prosecuting Uighur Muslims. Such steps would generate significant goodwill among multiple faith communities and would not infringe significantly on the party's ability to protect other core interests.

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Evolving mechanisms of religious control and persecution

Despite the diversity of the Chinese government's approaches to management of

different faiths, certain methods of control are evident across multiple groups examined in this study. Four dimensions of the party-state's apparatus—and their recent evolution—are particularly notable for their profound impact on the lives of ordinary people in China and the insight they provide into how the Chinese authorities interact with believers:

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Acknowledgements

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