

## Legal framework on freedom of religion or belief and actual application

Article 36 of China's 1982 constitution (revised in 2018) states that the "citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organisation or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion, or discriminate against citizens for their beliefs." The same article says that the state protects "normal religious activities". Without providing any definition of "normal", it clearly prohibits the use of religion for activities that "disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state." Likewise, religious organisations and activities must not be "subject to any foreign domination".<sup>1</sup>

In practice, Article 36 of the Constitution protects only the activities of the five officially recognised religious traditions – Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism – and only those governed by the seven state-sanctioned "patriotic" associations. Religious practice or expression outside the state-controlled apparatus is illegal and has been met, to varying degrees over the past seventy years with punishment, repression, and persecution.

Members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the armed forces are required to be atheists and are forbidden from engaging in religious practice. The government has effectively banned under-18s from receiving religious education, or participating in religious activities, via the national law that prevents organisations or individuals from interfering with the state educational system for under-18s.<sup>2</sup>

On 1 February 2018, revised Regulations on Religious Affairs came into effect, which amount to the most restrictive new laws on religious practice in thirteen years. They update the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs and confine many religious activities to registered sites. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), these revised regulations "further tighten control over religious activities". They state that "religious groups, religious schools, and religious activity sites and religious affairs are not to be controlled by foreign forces" and stipulate that religion must not endanger national security. The regulations also impose further restrictions on the communication of religious content, religious schools and charity work.<sup>3</sup>

Since March 2018, religious affairs have come under the direction of the United Front Work Department, an agency of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), replacing the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA). The United Front Work Department has absorbed SARA, giving the Communist Party direct management of religious affairs.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 1982 (revised 2004): [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/China\\_2004?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/China_2004?lang=en). (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>2</sup> US State Dept., "China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)", 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/> [accessed 23/05/22].

<sup>3</sup> "Repressed, Removed, Re-educated: The stranglehold on religious life in China," CSW, February 2020. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020-china-report>. (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>4</sup> "Communist Party takes control of religious affairs," CSW, 22nd March 2018. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/03/22/news/3886/article.htm>, (accessed on 12th December 2022).

In April 2018, the Chinese government issued a new White Paper titled “China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief”. According to the White Paper, “active guidance” will be provided to religious organisations to help them “adapt to the socialist society” and foreigners can only engage in religious activity that is “authorised”.<sup>5</sup> Religion, according to the White Paper, must serve the Communist Party.

Article 27 of China’s National Security Law also relates to freedom of religion or belief. This law has been criticised by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for its “extraordinarily broad scope” and vague terminology, which, he argues, leaves “the door wide open to further restrictions of the rights and freedoms of Chinese citizens, and to even tighter control of civil society.”<sup>6</sup>

Other regulations that may impact freedom of religion or belief include Document 9, a notice from the Central Committee of the Communist Party’s General Office, in April 2013, and a new law on foreign Non-Governmental Organisations, adopted in 2016. Document 9 presents Western values, Western constitutional democracy and Western-style free media as in conflict with the Chinese Communist Party’s values and claims that petitions and letters calling for protection of human rights are the work of ‘Western anti-China forces.’<sup>7</sup> The new NGO Law, which came into force in January 2017, gives the police unprecedented power to restrict the work of foreign groups in the country, and to limit the ability of local groups to receive foreign funding and work with foreign organisations. Foreign NGOs are required to have a Chinese government organisation as a sponsor, be registered with the police and be under the supervision of the Public Security Bureau. Police have new powers to arbitrarily summon representatives of foreign organisations in China, seize documents, examine bank accounts, and revoke registration. Foreigners or foreign organisations deemed to be involved in activities aimed at “splitting the state, damaging national unity or subverting state power” can be detained, barred from leaving the country, or deported.<sup>8</sup>

On 1 May 2021, the Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy came into effect, having been issued by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) on 9 February. The Measures are part of a series of new regulations that supplement the revised 2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs. These increase state control and surveillance of 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 – and impose penalties for clergy who violate state policies. The Measures also ban religious activity by independent religious clergy who are outside the five state-approved religious groups.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “Full Text: China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief,” State Council Information Office, People’s Republic of China, 4th April 2018: [http://english.scio.gov.cn/2018-04/04/content\\_50811898.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/2018-04/04/content_50811898.htm), (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>6</sup> “UN human rights chief says China’s new security law is too broad, too vague,” 7th July 2015. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16210&LangID=E>, (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>7</sup> ChinaFile Translation of the CCP’s “Document 9”, 10th November 2013. <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/11/chinafile-translation-ccps-document-9/>. (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>8</sup> “Fact Sheet on China’s NGO Law,” ChinaFile. 1st November 2017. <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/latest/fact-sheet-chinas-foreign-ngo-law>. (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>9</sup> US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Factsheet China, October 2021. [www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20China%20Factsheet.pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20China%20Factsheet.pdf) (accessed on 12th December 2022).

The Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services came into effect on 1 March 2022 and prohibit overseas organisations and individuals from operating online religious information services in the country.<sup>10</sup> These Measures forbid the sharing of religious content online without a permit, including through text messages, images, audio, and video. They also prohibit religious content that “induce[s] minors to believe in religion.”<sup>11</sup> They have resulted in the disbanding of WeChat groups by religious adherents, and strict self-censorship. They also mean a ban on live streaming of religious events and the removal of videos of religious events from the Internet.<sup>12</sup>

On 1 June 2022, new Financial Management Measures for Places of Religious Activities came into force. These regulations effectively give the United Front Work Department and the Ministry of Finance control of the finances of religious sites of state-controlled groups and regulate donations and offerings to ensure the promotion of “sinicisation” of religion.<sup>13</sup>

In April 2016, China’s President Xi Jinping addressed senior Communist Party officials at a meeting on religion and said that “religious groups ... must adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party”. Party members must be “unyielding Marxist atheists” who “resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means”.<sup>14</sup> This followed a speech by the director of China’s State Administration for Religious Affairs, who told a seminar on the sinicisation of Christianity that “Chinese Christian theology should be compatible with the country’s path of socialism”.<sup>15</sup> The government’s legislative framework introduced is clearly designed to fulfil that objective.

In September 2018 the Vatican reached a preliminary agreement with the Chinese government on the appointment of bishops, valid for two years. As a provisional agreement rather than a formal treaty, the text remains secret, but it is understood that it gives the Chinese government the right to recommend candidates to be appointed as bishops, who are then confirmed by the Vatican. The Vatican and the Chinese government renewed the agreement in September 2020, and again in October 2022.<sup>16</sup> On 24 November 2022, the Chinese government violated the agreement by appointing a bishop without previous consultation nor approval from the Vatican.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Office of International Religious Freedom, “International Religious Freedom annual report 2021: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)”, US Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>11</sup> “China: Freedom of religion or belief: the untold stories”, CSW, July 2022. <https://www.csw.org.uk/untoldstories> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>12</sup> “China: Freedom of religion or belief: the untold stories”, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> “Communist Party grabs religious funding”, Asia News, 15 April 2022: <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Communist-Party-grabs-religious-funding-55599.html> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>14</sup> “Religious groups ‘must adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party’ – Pres. Xi Jinping”, Hong Kong Free Press, 24 April 2016: <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/04/24/religious-groups-must-adhere-to-the-leadership-of-the-communist-party-pres-xi-jinping/> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>15</sup> “China plans establishment of Christian theology”, China Daily, 7th August 2014. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-08/07/content\\_18262848.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-08/07/content_18262848.htm) (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>16</sup> “Vatican and China renew agreement on bishop appointments”, La Croix International, 24th October 2022. <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/vatican-and-china-renew-agreement-on-bishop-appointments/16786#:~:text=The%20Holy%20See%20and%20China,was%20first%20renewed%20in%202020.> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Bernardelli, G. “Vatican says China has violated agreement with Msgr Peng appointment”, Asia News, 26th November 2022. <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Vatican-says-China-has-violated-agreement-with-Msgr-Peng-appointment--57194.html> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

## Incidents and developments

Over the period under review, the intense crackdown on all religious minorities by the Chinese authorities has continued. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom noted the deterioration of religious freedom conditions in 2021<sup>18</sup> with the US State Department's annual international religious freedom report stating, "authorities continued to arrest and otherwise detain leaders and members of religious groups, often those connected with groups not registered with the state sanctioned religious associations. Authorities reportedly used vague or insubstantial charges, sometimes in connection with religious activity, to convict and sentence leaders and members of religious groups to years in prison."<sup>19</sup> The tools used to track and arrest its citizens, including ethnic and religious minorities, feature leading edge surveillance technologies, of note the approximately 540 million CCTV cameras countrywide<sup>20</sup> – many replete with facial recognition capability – which are becoming increasingly refined.

As of 30 June 2022, the Political Prisoner Database of the human rights NGO Dui Hua Foundation counted 3,218 individuals imprisoned for "unorthodox" religious beliefs, including unregistered Christian groups and Falun Gong practitioners.<sup>21</sup>

In December 2020, the Chinese authorities restricted Christmas celebrations, designating only two acceptable forms of Christmas activity: either attending state-sanctioned churches, or celebrating Christmas at home.<sup>22</sup>

In February 2021, local authorities ordered the destruction of Sacred Heart Church in Yining, Xinjiang. Built in the year 2000, the Church holds all the required permits from the Administration for Religious Affairs – Yili district officials and Yining government authorities attended the inauguration, praising the construction. In 2018, as part of a "sinicisation" campaign, the Religious Affairs Office had chiselled off four bas reliefs on the façade, removed the statues of Sts Peter and Paul, pulled down the cross adorning the cusp of the tympanum, and destroyed the two domes and bell towers for being "too showy". One believer said: "This is further confirmation that the country does not respect freedom of worship."<sup>23</sup>

On 21 May 2021, Chinese police arrested 63-year-old Catholic Bishop Joseph Zhang Weizhu of Xinxiang Diocese in Henan Province, a day after they detained seven of his priests and an

<sup>18</sup> US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Annual Report 2022, China chapter: <https://www.uscirf.gov/annual-reports/country=36> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Office of International Religious Freedom, "International Religious Freedom annual report 2021: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)", US Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Surveillance camera statistics: which cities have the most CCTV cameras?, by Paul Bischoff, Comparitech, 11 July 2022; <https://www.comparitech.com/vpn-privacy/the-worlds-most-surveilled-cities/> (accessed on 28 December 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Dui Hua Political Prisoners Database. Updated regularly. <https://duihua.org/resources/political-prisoners-database/> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>22</sup> "Chinese Communist Party "secretly" bans all Christmas events but two...", ChinaAid, 25th December 2020 [https://www.chinaaid.org/2020/12/chinese-communist-party-secretly-bans.html?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+ChinaAid+%28China+Aid%29](https://www.chinaaid.org/2020/12/chinese-communist-party-secretly-bans.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+ChinaAid+%28China+Aid%29) [accessed 19/05/22].

<sup>23</sup> Wang Zhicheng, "Yining's Sacred Heart church to be torn down", Asianews, 19th February 2022 <https://www.Asianews.it/news-en/Yining%E2%80%99s-Sacred-Heart-church-to-be-torn-down-52395.html> [accessed 20/05/22].

unspecified number of seminarians for allegedly violating the country's new regulations on religious affairs.<sup>24</sup> He has been in detention ever since and his whereabouts are unknown.<sup>25</sup>

In November 2021, a Christian couple, Chang Yuchun and Li Chenhui, from Shaanxi province, were each sentenced to seven years in prison and a fine of RMB 250,000 (approximately USD \$35,129) for "illegal business operations," after their appeals were rejected. According to the Chinese human rights site Weiquangwang, their registered printing company had produced a large number of Christian books before being seized by the local authorities on 21 July 2020. More than 210,000 copies of various religious books were confiscated and at least 24 titles were later deemed to be "illegal publications".<sup>26</sup>

In 2021, the Chinese authorities arrested at least ten leaders and co-workers from four unregistered Protestant churches and charged them with 'fraud': Elder Zhang Chunlei (Love Reformed Church, Guiyang, Guizhou province); Pastor Wang Xiaoguang, his wife Yang Rongli and their five co-workers (Golden Lampstand Church, Linfen, Shanxi province); Hao Ming (Early Rain Covenant Church, Chengdu, Sichuan province) and Wu Jiannan (Green Pastures Church, Deyang, Sichuan province). Elder Zhang has since been indicted with an additional charge of "inciting subversion of state power".<sup>27</sup>

In February 2022, independent Protestant house church leader Pastor Hao Zhiwei was sentenced to eight years on 'fraud' charges by the authorities in Ezhou in China's central Hubei province. According to ChinaAid, Pastor Hao was criminally detained for preaching and collecting offerings without the approval of state-sanctioned associations. The 'fraud' charge is widely understood as targeting leaders of house churches, which are independent and not registered with the government or affiliated with the state-sanctioned church. Pastor Hao's church had been repeatedly raided by local authorities prior to her detention, and members of the congregation had been brutally attacked and detained.<sup>28</sup>

On 11 May 2022, the 90-year-old Bishop Emeritus of Hong Kong, Cardinal Joseph Zen, was arrested by Hong Kong authorities, and charged with "collusion with foreign forces" for his role as a trustee of the 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund, which provided legal aid support for pro-democracy protesters facing trial in Hong Kong.<sup>29</sup> Matteo Bruni, the Director of the Holy See Press Office, said: "The Holy See has learned with concern the news of Cardinal Zen's arrest and is following the evolution of the situation with extreme attention."<sup>30</sup> Cardinal Zen was subsequently released on bail, and his trial began in September 2022. In November 2022, he was sentenced to pay a fine

<sup>24</sup> "China arrests Vatican-approved bishop, priests, seminarians," UCA News, 24th May 2021. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/china-arrests-vatican-approved-bishop-priests-seminarians/92587> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>25</sup> "Chinese bishop remains in detention one year on," UCA News, 24th May 2022. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/chinese-bishop-remains-in-detention-one-year-on/97372> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>26</sup> "Christians face arrests, jail terms for church meetings and printing religious texts," CSW, 24th November 2021. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2021/11/24/press/5489/article.htm> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>27</sup> "House church leader sentenced to eight years in prison on fraud charges," CSW, 23rd February 2022. <https://www.csw.org.uk/2022/02/23/press/5587/article.htm> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>28</sup> CSW, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> "Cardinal Zen arrested in Hong Kong, Holy See expresses concern," Vatican News, 11th May 2022. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/cardinal-zen-arrested-in-hong-kong-holy-see-expresses-concern.html> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>30</sup> Salvatore Cernuzio, "Cardinal Zen arrested in Hong Kong, Holy See expresses concern," Vatican News, 11th May 2022 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/cardinal-zen-arrested-in-hong-kong-holy-see-expresses-concern.html> [accessed 18/05/22].

of USD \$500, having been convicted of “failing to register a now-defunct relief fund that offered assistance to Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement.”<sup>31</sup>

In July 2022, Archbishop Javier Herrera-Corona, the Vatican’s unofficial representative in Hong Kong, warned the city’s Catholic missions – numbering around 50 – that a crackdown was coming from the CCP. He is reported to have said: “Change is coming, and you better be prepared”, adding: “Hong Kong is not the great Catholic beachhead it was.”<sup>32</sup>

On 25 July 2022, the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong announced that there was a shortage of Bibles because printing houses on mainland China were unable, or unwilling, to print the Bibles. Friar Raymond Yeung, a member of the Diocese’s Stadium Biblicum Franciscanum, told Christian Times that the printing house that used to print their Bibles stopped, as they had to get government permission to print.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of August, at least five Protestant Christians from ethnic minority communities in Yunnan province were arrested for allegedly refusing to join a state-sponsored Church body. Pastor Wang Shunping and four Christians were detained on charges of “organizing and financing illegal gatherings” and were formally charged in September. Pastor Wang is an ethnic Nu and the other four are from Nu and Lisu communities in Fugong county of Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan.<sup>34</sup>

Violations of freedom of religion or belief against other religious communities also continue. The predominantly Muslim Uyghur population in China’s Xinjiang region face severe religious persecution, including the closure and destruction of mosques, arrest for religious practices such as praying, reading the Holy Qu’ran, fasting during Ramadan, abstaining from alcohol or pork, and wearing a hijab or a lengthy beard. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, “authorities separated as many as 880,000 Muslim children from their parents and destroyed or desecrated important religious and cultural sites throughout Xinjiang.”<sup>35</sup> It is estimated that at least one million Uyghurs are held in detention camps, where they are subjected to torture, rape and forced labour. A campaign of forced sterilization and forced abortions has also been reported.

In December 2021, the independent Uyghur Tribunal, chaired by British barrister Sir Geoffrey Nice, KC, who had led the prosecution of Slobodan Milosevic, published its judgment following a lengthy in-depth inquiry. It concluded that the persecution of the Uyghurs amounts to genocide, crimes against humanity and torture by the Chinese state.<sup>36</sup> In January 2021, outgoing

<sup>31</sup> Allen, E. “Cardinal Zen convicted by Hong Kong court, ordered to pay \$500 fine”, Crux, 25th November 2022. <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-asia/2022/11/cardinal-zen-convicted-by-hong-kong-court-ordered-to-pay-500-fine> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>32</sup> Greg Torode, “Vatican envoy in Hong Kong warns Catholic missions to prepare for China crackdown”, Reuters, 5th July 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vatican-envoy-hong-kong-warns-catholic-missions-prepare-china-crackdown-2022-07-05/> [accessed 25/07/22].

<sup>33</sup> “Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong faces shortage of Chinese Bible due to unwillingness of mainland Chinese printing houses”, ChinaAid, 1st August 2022 <https://www.chinaaid.org/2022/08/catholic-diocese-of-hong-kong-faces.html> [accessed 12/08/22].

<sup>34</sup> “Ethnic minority Christians arrested in China,” UCANews, 21st September 2022. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/ethnic-minority-christians-arrested-in-china/98843> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>35</sup> US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Annual Report 2022, China chapter: <https://www.uscirf.gov/annual-reports?country=36> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>36</sup> Uyghur Tribunal judgment, December 2021: <https://uyghurtribunal.com/> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo designated the persecution of the Uyghurs as a genocide,<sup>37</sup> and his successor Antony Blinken immediately agreed. In June 2022, the US State Department's annual international religious freedom report repeated these statements and referred to multiple other respected reports describing the situation as genocide.<sup>38</sup>

In August 2022, the outgoing United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, published her report on the situation in Xinjiang following her visit to China earlier in the year. The report noted "the restrictions imposed on the exercise of freedom of religion with respect to Islamic religious practice" in Xinjiang. It concluded that: "The extent of arbitrary and discriminatory detention of members of Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim groups, pursuant to law and policy, in context of restrictions and deprivation more generally of fundamental rights enjoyed individually and collectively, may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity."<sup>39</sup>

The persecution of Muslims is not limited to the Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim communities in Xinjiang. The Hui Muslim population has also been targeted. According to a Hui Muslim source cited in the 2021 US international religious freedom report on China, the government was attempting to remove characteristics of Hui religion and culture to make Hui citizens indistinguishable from Han citizens, with whom they share physical characteristics and language. Authorities took down minarets and domes and consolidated mosques, and Hui Muslim clergy were required to be trained in Party doctrine and instructed to pass those teachings on to their religious communities. The government targeted Hui cultural and business elites to remove Hui texts and art and cut off independent financial support to the community.<sup>40</sup>

Religious repression continues in Tibet as well. In May 2021, the Chinese government issued a white paper on Tibet which included a specific focus on sinicising religion. In July 2021, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping visited Tibet and stressed the importance of "fully implementing" the Party's policies on religion. Seminars were organised by local authorities to indoctrinate Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns in monasteries, and restricted their access to temples. Religious sites and symbols have been destroyed, and Tibetans who listen to the Dalai Lama's teachings or possess his picture are arrested and detained.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> US State Department, Determination of the Secretary of State on Atrocities in Xinjiang, 19th January 2021. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/determination-of-the-secretary-of-state-on-atrocities-in-xinjiang/index.html> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>38</sup> Office of International Religious Freedom, "International Religious Freedom annual report 2021: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)", US Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>39</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China," 31st August 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>40</sup> Office of International Religious Freedom, "International Religious Freedom annual report 2021: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau)", US Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

<sup>41</sup> US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Annual Report 2022, China chapter: <https://www.uscifr.gov/annual-reports?country=36> (accessed on 12th December 2022).

The persecution of other groups, including Buddhists, Taoists, and Falun Gong, continues. According to Falun Gong source Minghui, thousands of Falun Gong practitioners were harassed and arrested, and at least 892 were sentenced to prison terms. It is reported that 101 practitioners died as a consequence of state persecution.<sup>42</sup>

In Hong Kong, as almost all basic freedoms have been dismantled or undermined, the right to freedom of religion or belief is increasingly being eroded. While freedom of worship remains, there is increasing self-censorship by clergy in their homilies and preaching, growing surveillance of religious activities, threats to Church-run schools and increasing control of Churches. In January 2022, Ta Kung Pao, a newspaper controlled by the Liaison Office of the Central Government, published a series of articles attacking prominent Christians in Hong Kong and advocating restrictions on Christian Churches.<sup>43</sup>

### **Prospects for freedom of religion**

The present crackdown on religious freedom is the most serious since the Cultural Revolution. The government seems intent on carrying out its campaign of 'sinicisation' of religion, requiring all religions to adhere to the Chinese Communist Party's ideology, doctrine and teachings. The Chinese authorities' violation in November 2022 of the agreement with the Vatican is the latest sign of international promises falling victim to a long-predetermined domestic policy. The prospects for religious freedom continue to remain negative with repression and persecution set to continue, and, with ever-more sophisticated tools of surveillance technology, these will become increasingly intrusive and pervasive.

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<sup>42</sup> USCIRF, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> "China: Freedom of religion or belief: the untold stories," CSW, July 2022. <https://www.csw.org.uk/untoldstories> (accessed on 12th December 2022).