

About China Voices

Welcome to China Voices, a CSW quarterly update on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in China. All cases cited have been reported either publicly, including from various websites in China (* indicates Chinese language links), or privately through CSW sources. For feedback or further information, please email contact@thechinacorner.org.

Introduction

The last quarter of 2022 may be remembered as one of the most eventful periods in China since 1989. The Chinese Human Rights Lawyers Group [commented](#)* that during the last two months of 2022, they ‘vaguely feel’ a turning point might have quietly arrived for China to go through ‘the Three Gorges’ – meaning the most precarious moments – in history.

At the Party Congress in October 2022, Xi Jinping announced himself re-elected as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary for an unprecedented third term. Having abolished term limits in 2018, he is poised to become China’s supreme leader for life. He also made it clear that there would be no wavering on rigid pandemic policies, which have inflicted immeasurable social and economic pain on Chinese citizens while increasing the Party’s ability to maintain political stability.

Xi’s consolidation of dictatorship has caused a backlash. Despite tightened security, dissent had started to spread prior to the Congress. A [protester](#) managed to hurl banners from a bridge in central Beijing, demanding food, freedom, dignity, reform, voting rights and the removal of Xi from power, before police took him away. In late November, Xinjiang residents took to the streets in [protest](#), after a fire killed at least 10 people trapped in an apartment block in Urumqi due to restrictions under the zero-COVID policy. Within days, [demonstrations](#) were held nationwide and worldwide to mourn the

victims and protest the policy, some holding blank sheets of paper.

In early December, the Chinese government abruptly reversed its zero-COVID policy. Meanwhile, police started rounding up protesters across the country. The Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) [estimates](#) that more than 100 people have been detained, including five young Tibetan women.

In a [resolution](#) on the government’s crackdown on the recent peaceful protests adopted on 15 December, the European Parliament noted ‘that all the victims of the Urumqi fire are of Uyghur ethnicity, thus deepening the suffering of this ethnic group which has fallen victim to systematic human rights atrocities taking place in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region’. CSW and other NGOs have [called](#) on the Chinese government to end its violent crackdown and arrests of peaceful protesters.

From October to December 2022, CSW recorded 68 incidents of violations affecting religious or belief groups throughout China. Members of religious communities continued to be targeted by the authorities for ordinary religious activities such as praying at home, remembering victims of disasters, gathering to worship or making religious offerings. Some have also been subject to harassment, interrogation or detention for criticising government policies, in violation to their rights to freedom of expression as citizens.

Part 1 – Sinicization of religion

■ Religion in the 20th Party Congress report

In his [report](#) to the Party Congress, General Secretary Xi reiterated the principle of Sinicization of religion (or making religion ‘Chinese in orientation’ as it appears in the official translation of transcript), pledging the CCP’s ‘active guidance to religions so that they can adapt to socialist society’.

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The report states that one of the CCP's greatest achievements is in the area of national security: 'We have effectively contained ethnic separatists, religious extremists, and violent terrorists and secured important progress in the campaigns to combat and root out organized crime.' On the topic of people's livelihood and social welfare, Xi says:

'The Communist Party of China has led the people in fighting to establish and guard the People's Republic. It's essentially about guarding the people's hearts.' Those aware of the extent of the CCP's intrusion into society through political indoctrination will perceive that this was not a genuine gesture of concern for the people's wellbeing.

In short, there is no sign of a reversal in the CCP's hostility towards freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief in this important report.

Throughout the country, people from all walks of life, all religious backgrounds and all ages were organised to watch and study Xi's 20th National Congress report.



Tibetan monks and police officers stand to honour Xi Jinping in front of a TV screen. Source: Timothy Grose via Twitter.

■ Head of Three Self explains Sinicization of Christianity

Xu Xiaohong, chairman of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), was the mastermind behind the Five-Year Plan for Promoting the Sinicization of Christianity (2018-2022).

In an [article](#)* promoted by SARA (State Administration for Religious Affairs), he advocates

for the 'stigma of foreign religion' to be constantly eliminated in China's Christianity and the latter should realize its true 'self' theologically.

He sees clergy, seminary teachers and students as the key to 'deepen and realize the Sinicization of Christianity', with more patriotic education needed in seminaries and churches so that pastors and teachers can 'improve their political standing', to effectively promote Sinicization of Christianity and guide believers through sermons.

Xu admits that in some areas, Sinicization is not that popular among grassroots clergy and believers.

He revealed that the next five-year plan for promoting the Sinicization of Christianity (2023-2027) was being finalised. Theological breakthrough has been identified as a 'bottleneck', because 'only when theological thoughts are Sinicized, can Christianity be truly Sinicized'.



Teachers and students at Jinling Xiehe Theological Seminary watch the 20th Party Congress. Source: CCCTSPN.org

Part 2 – Policy watch

On 22 October 2022, the Vatican [announced](#) that it had extended an agreement on the nomination of Bishops with China for another two years. Details of the agreement, which began in 2018, have not been made public.

The deal has not shielded underground Chinese Catholics from oppression. Instead, the underground Catholic church is under greater

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pressure. Bishops and priests who do not join the state-controlled ‘patriotic church’ are banned by the government from carrying out church duties, and their church buildings risk being forcibly demolished. This is ‘the result of the Vatican-China deal’, [commented](#)* a priest in Shijiazhuang, Hebei province.

Cardinal Zen, who called the deal a ‘sell-out’ of China’s underground Catholics, has been [convicted](#) for failing to register a fund that helped Hong Kong pro-democracy protesters.



A banner in a Catholic church: ‘Love your country is a commandment of the Lord’. Source: Twitter @Frfrancisliu

Part 3 – Widespread violations

■ Xinjiang

China detained hundreds of Uyghurs in the north-western Xinjiang region during a new round of its ‘Strike Hard’ campaign from July to October 2022. To ‘safeguard stability’, authorities rounded up Uyghurs who had recently turned 18, those released from internment camps in recent years and those who managed to elude monitoring in recent years, according to a [report](#) by RFA.

The [World Uyghur Congress](#)* said more than 7,000 Uyghurs were fined by the Chinese authorities for engaging in religious activities, such as praying and reciting the Quran at home, within a three-month period while subject to strict coronavirus containment measures. Officials searched homes under the pretext of pandemic control and confiscated religious books and prayer mats.

■ Tibet

During this quarter, news emerged of 13 Tibetans being sentenced to prison or detained by police.

[Six Tibetan writers and rights activists](#) in Eastern Tibet were handed jail terms ranging from four to fourteen years on charges including “inciting separatism” and “endangering state security”. [A Tibetan monk](#) was jailed for three years for his participation in a campaign that discouraged local residents from killing and selling animals. [Two monks](#) from Kirti Monastery were imprisoned for three years and four years respectively for making religious offerings online, and [another monk](#) from the same monastery was sentenced to two years and six months.

In December, [three Tibetans](#)* were detained on their way back from a pilgrimage to Sekhar-Guthog Temple, Lhozhag County, on the grounds that they had plans to travel to India.

■ Falun Gong

According to a [report](#) by Minghui.org, a total of 633 cases of Falun Gong practitioners being sentenced for their faith were recorded in 2022, with prison terms ranging from six months to 15 years. Most were convicted of ‘undermining law enforcement with a cult organization’. Eleven practitioners, including artist [Xu Na](#), were arrested and later jailed for this crime after sending photos of Beijing under COVID restrictions to overseas media.

Read more: [Article 300 of the Criminal Law and Religions and Beliefs in China](#)

■ Christian

Four house church leaders were handed prison sentences of one year, two years and eight years, for ‘crossing the national border illegally’, ‘[unlawfully possessing items](#) that advocate terrorism or extremism’ and ‘fraud’ respectively.

In December 2022, a court in Ezhou, Hubei province, [rejected](#) Pastor Hao Zhiwei’s appeal against her conviction and eight-year sentence for fraud. The final verdict states: ‘Hao is aware that she doesn’t

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have a pastoral certificate. She fabricated her pastoral identity in order to gain victims' trust and collect "offering". She had the intention to purposefully defraud victims.'

Linfen Covenant House Church leaders Li Jie and Han Xiaodong and co-worker Wang Qiang have all been formally arrested on fraud charges. Two female members were released on bail after being detained for fraud.

[Read more](#) about house church leaders detained on [fraud](#) charges.

Part 4 – FoRB defenders

Lawyer and pastor speak up for house church leaders charged with fraud over offerings

[In an article*](#) posted on WeChat, China's most popular social media site, on 10 November 2022, Christian lawyer [Zhang Kai](#) analyses the case of [Zhuhai Royal Wedding Church](#) ('Wangjia Hunli'), where three church leaders were convicted of fraud in 2017.

He concludes that the Chinese government's prosecution of house church leaders for receiving tithes and offerings indicates 'a total denial of the legitimacy of house churches'. It is based on this logic: 'If a church is not registered with the government, it is illegal, which means the pastor is fake, which means tithes and offerings they receive are fraudulent.'

He points out that this is effectively 'breaking the law by legal means, in violation of the CCP's policies'.

Mr Zhang also cites the case of [Zhang Chunlei](#), who was also charged with fraud. Elder Zhang's Love Reformed Church has rigorous financial procedures in place, according to his wife.

As a response, Pastor Jin Mingri of Beijing Zion Church [wrote*](#):

'House churches have been exploring ways to gain legal status as social organisations in China

and have tried to adapt to the various regulations and policies in place through their own efforts. However, as you have analysed in your article, to date we have not found a realistic way to achieve the incorporation and subsistence of house churches.'

Pastor Jin urges the Chinese authorities to immediately end all prosecution against house church leaders and enact a law to guarantee the constitutional right of citizens to freedom of belief.

Notable reports

- [China's Religious Freedom Violations](#): Domestic Repression and Malign Influence Abroad - US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)
- USCIRF: "[State-Controlled Religion and Religious Freedom Violations in China](#)"
- [Tibet, the Dalai Lama, and the Geopolitics of Reincarnation](#) - International Tibet Network
- [Forced Marriage of Uyghur Women](#): State Policies for Interethnic Marriages in East Turkistan - UHRP
- UK FCDO Office: [Human Rights and Democracy Report 2021](#)
- China: [Freedom on the Net 2022 report](#) - Freedom House
- US Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) [2022 Annual Report](#)
- [Mass Iris Scan Collection in Qinghai 2019–2022](#) - The Citizen Lab
- [China Dissent Monitor June-September 2022](#) - Freedom House
- [Patrol and Persuade](#): A follow up on 110 Overseas investigation - Safeguard Defenders
- [Repression and Resilience](#): Mental Health of Chinese Human Rights Defenders – The Rights Practice