

China

Written Evidence for the Conservative Party Human rights Commission Inquiry 2016-2020

Introduction

The human rights situation in China has continued to deteriorate during the period from 2016 to the present. This downward trend has consisted of increasing human rights abuses under Xi Jinping, accompanied by and manifested through a shrinking space for civil society, a heightened sensitivity to perceived challenges to Party rule, and the introduction of legislation that curtails civil and political rights in the name of national security.

This submission looks specifically at the situation of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for communities and individuals in China within the context of broader human rights violations in the country. The submission considers specific cases of violations against Muslims, Christians, Falun Gong practitioners and Tibetan Buddhists. The submission also looks at the restrictions on and challenges faced by human rights lawyers who defend the right to FoRB, and includes further details on the situation for Uyghurs and other Muslim-majority ethnic groups in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, including the prevalence of forced labour.

Context: human rights in China and the situation of FoRB defenders

Human rights defenders inside and outside China agree that there has been a rapid and significant decline in the human rights situation in China since President Xi Jinping took office which has continued from 2016 to the present with a further intensification of repressive measures, limiting freedom of expression online and offline, and stamping out all forms of dissent.

The impact of the crackdown on human rights lawyers which began in July 2015 casts a dark shadow over the legal rights defence community which has yet to dissipate. Dubbed the ‘709 crackdown’, it saw over 300 human rights lawyers and activists, and their colleagues and family members, interrogated, detained and in some cases imprisoned or forcibly disappeared. Many of these lawyers have represented individuals arrested in connection with their religion or belief.

On 5 April 2020 lawyer Wang Quanzhang, one of the many lawyers detained in the crackdown, was released from prison and immediately placed into quarantine for 14 days, hundreds of kilometres from his family. During his detention, his wife repeatedly called for his release, and the family have also been targeted. In September 2019 Wang's six year-old son was [forced](#) to leave his primary school after police made multiple visits to the school.¹ Shortly after Wang's release, Amnesty International [reported](#) that police had threatened Wang Quanzhang's sister, telling her not to pick him up from prison.² Wang has since been able to reunite with his wife and son in Beijing; at the time of writing, he appears to be under heavy surveillance.

A [statement](#) by the European Union Spokesperson on Wang's release said that the EU “considers that his rights under China's legislation and international commitments were not respected during

¹ CSW, ‘Human rights lawyers and their families experience harassment’ 11 Sep 2019 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2019/09/11/press/4439/article.htm>

² Amnesty International, ‘China: Wang Quanzhang's freedom an ‘illusion’ until government lifts ruthless restrictions’ 5 April 2020 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/china-wang-quanzhang-freedom-an-illusion-until-government-lifts-ruthless-restrictions/>

trial and detention” and called on the authorities to thoroughly investigate reports about Wang being subject of serious mistreatment and torture.³

Before his detention Wang defended victims of FoRB violations, including Falun Gong practitioners. FoRB cases are politically sensitive in China. Lawyers who take on such cases can face harassment and intimidation from the authorities; those who continuously take on FoRB cases become targets, and can be jailed or forcibly disappeared, as mentioned above.

For the lawyers themselves, overall pressure is increasing, forcing some to scale back their work on ‘sensitive’ cases or leave the profession entirely. Five years on from the spate of detentions of human rights defenders in 2015, the situation looks bleak. Nevertheless, a statement by the China Human Rights Lawyers Group on the fourth anniversary of the 709 crackdown, offers some cause for hope:

“In the past four years, although the relevant authorities have exhausted all means to discredit human rights lawyers or force detained human rights lawyers to confess guilt, unexpectedly, those human rights lawyers are receiving more and more respect and attention from the people. The deeds of lawyers such as Gao Zhisheng, Tang Jingling, Tang Jitian, Jiang Tianyong, Liu Wei, and others are inspiring one group of human rights lawyers after the next to continue to bravely advance in pursuit of our ideals...we are willing to work together with freedom loving people all over the world to hold fast to the values of democracy and the rule of law, and respect and defend human rights together.”⁴

Freedom of religion or belief in China

The level of FoRB in China is rapidly and significantly decreasing. The reality of the right to FoRB for religion and belief communities in China remains a mixed picture, and conditions vary according to religion, location, ethnicity, and attitude of local officials, as well as other factors. Nevertheless, the overall picture for religious life from the period from 2016 to the present has overwhelmingly been one of an increase in government pressure, restrictions and intimidation, and a decrease in freedom.

Under Xi Jinping, there has been a new focus on religion at the highest levels of government, a revision of the Regulations on Religious Affairs, and fresh emphasis placed on the requirement that all religious communities in China ‘sinicise’ by becoming ‘Chinese in orientation’ and adapting to ‘socialist society’. CSW’s sources believe the intent behind ‘sinicisation’ is to eradicate independent religion and bring all religious activities under state control.

This intent is being implemented in different ways for different groups, and in different places. There are tangible signs, such as the demolition of temples, mosques and churches by authorities, and the removal of religious symbols and pictures from homes and places of worship. There are also less visible changes, however: clergy removed from their positions and replaced with those with government approval; pressure on schools to check up on the religious beliefs of their students and staff; and surveillance cameras installed in and around places of worship. In the most extreme

³ EEAS, ‘China: Statement by the Spokesperson on the release of human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang’ 5 April 2020 https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-Homepage/77088/china-statement-spokesperson-release-human-rights-lawyer-wang-quanzhang_en

⁴ China Change, ‘Statement by the China Human Rights Lawyers Group on the Fourth Anniversary of the ‘709 Incident’ <https://chinachange.org/2019/07/08/statement-by-the-china-human-rights-lawyers-group-on-the-fourth-anniversary-of-the-709-incident/>

cases, religious adherents are arrested, imprisoned, tortured and even killed in connection with their religion or belief.

On 1 February 2018 China's State Council revisions to the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs came into effect. These measures strengthen state control over religious activities in China. Although the 2005 regulations already placed religion under the supervision of the state, in practice, some religious communities, including a large number of unregistered churches, have existed in a grey area where they have been tolerated by the local authorities. Under Xi Jinping and the new regulations this grey area is being shut down, and unregistered 'house' churches and other independent religious groups are under increasing pressure to either register or disband.

"The government has more and more power over education, the media, and now religion. The government wants control over everything, over religion and education and culture. If anyone takes part in activities [outside of the government approved activities] they will be held responsible."

- Christian and legal expert

The remainder of this submission will focus on examples of violations on the right to freedom of religion or belief for various groups.

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

During 2017 and 2018 there were numerous reports of the widespread detention of Uyghurs, Kazakhs and members of other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups in political re-education camps⁵ in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).⁶ Information on the camps has been well-documented by human rights organisations,⁷ including CSW, drawing on information from interviews with witnesses and family members of victims as well as public recruitment notices, government procurement and construction bids, Chinese state media, testimony from legal proceedings (Kazakhstan), academic research⁸, international media reports⁹ and Google Maps images.

In November 2019, the *New York Times* revealed that they had received over 400 pages of leaked internal Party documents which provided further evidence of a vast and brutal crackdown, carefully and deliberately planned at the highest levels of Party leadership.¹⁰ More [leaked](#) documents were [revealed by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists](#)¹¹ on 24 November 2019.

⁵ Various known as 'counter-extremism training centres', 'education and transformation training centres' etc. and described by witnesses and family members as 'concentration camps', 'prison camps' and so on.

⁶ Also referred to by many Uyghurs as East Turkestan.

⁷ Including: Human Rights Watch, "Eradicating Ideological Viruses": China's Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang's Muslims', 9 September 2018 www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs

⁸ Including: Zenz, Adrian, "Thoroughly Reforming them Toward a Healthy Heart Attitude" – China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang', 15 May 2018 www.academia.edu/36638456/Thoroughly_Reforming_them_Toward_a_Healthy_Heart_Attitude_-_Chinas_Political_Re-Education_Campaign_in_Xinjiang

⁹ Including: Radio Free Asia, Uyghur News www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur

¹⁰ New York Times, "Absolutely No Mercy": Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims', 16 November 2019 www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html

¹¹ ICIJ, 'Exposed: China's Operating Manuals for Mass Internment and Arrest by Algorithm' Nov 24 2019 <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/exposed-chinas-operating-manuals-for-mass-internment-and-arrest-by-algorithm/>

The documents similarly detailed the mechanisms, guidelines and procedures behind the detentions in XUAR; they also shed light on the severity of conditions inside the camps.

The strength of the evidence leaves no doubt that mass detentions are taking place in XUAR which violate domestic and international law.

Over one million individuals are believed to have been detained without charge in the camps since 2017. Recent estimates are as high as three million.

Reasons for detention in the camps include:

- Having relatives living abroad
- Accessing religious materials online
- Having visited certain 'sensitive' countries
- Communal religious activities
- Behaviour indicating 'wrong thinking' or 'religious extremism'
- Sometimes no reason is given at all.

Individuals sent to the so-called re-education camps do not have access to legal counsel and there is no mechanism for appeal. Their families are typically not told where they are being held, or when they will be released. Inside the camps conditions are dangerously unsanitary and overcrowded; detainees are subject to beatings, sleep deprivation, forced medication and solitary confinement. At a hearing of the Congressional Executive Commission on China on 28 November 2018, Mihrigul Tursun described her detention in a camp in XUAR:¹²

"I clearly remember the torture I experienced in the tiger chair the second time I was incarcerated. I was taken to a special room with an electric chair. It was the interrogation room that had one light and one chair. There were belts and whips hanging on the wall. I was placed in a high chair that clicked to lock my arms and legs in place and tightened when they press [sic] a button. My head was shaved beforehand for the maximum impact. The authorities put a helmet-like thing on my head. Each time I was electrocuted, my whole body would shake violently and I could feel the pain in my veins. I thought I would rather die than go through this torture and begged them to kill me."

Although not all detainees are Muslim, and ethnicity appears to be the most significant factor linking the detentions, nevertheless there is a significant religious element as well. Not only have some individuals been detained in connection with their peaceful religious activities, but witnesses also report that inside the camps detainees are required to renounce Islam and promise not to follow religion. Detainees have been forced to eat pork or drink alcohol, against their religious beliefs.

"My mother in law...cannot stop crying about all her children who have been locked up in the camps...There is no one to take care of her and she has been left alone... suffering from hunger and pain."

- An Australian Uyghur, whose family are in XUAR

¹² Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 'Hearing: The Communist Party's Crackdown on Religion in China, Testimony of Mihrigul Tursun', 28 November 2018 www.cecc.gov/sites/chinacommission.house.gov/files/documents/REVISED_Mihrigul%20Tursun%20Testimony%20for%20CECC%20Hearing%202011-28-18_0.pdf YouTube, 'Hearing on The Communist Party's Crackdown on Religion in China', 29 November 2018 www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WOem1tgDMc

Outside the camps, authorities have demolished thousands of mosques in XUAR in what the Uyghur Human Rights Project's Zubayra Shamseden describes as "a wholesale attack on Uyghur religion, culture and ethnic identity."¹³

Even small-scale, peaceful everyday religious activities and expressions of religious identity are viewed as suspicious by the authorities. The well-documented and extreme levels of surveillance imposed on XUAR residents, and in particular Uyghur, Kazakh and other non-Han ethnic groups, mean that communal gatherings of any nature are tightly controlled, and religious meetings outside of registered venues, for any community, are prohibited.

Civil servants are being placed in Uyghur homes to monitor their behaviour day and night. Uyghurs are not allowed to practise their religion, play traditional instruments, or use their language freely. Children whose parents are detained are being taken from their families and placed in state facilities. A Uyghur worker at a regional orphanage told RFA that his facility was seriously overcrowded, with children as young as six months "locked up like farm animals in a shed."¹⁴

The Chinese government claims that the camps are vocational training centres and that they are combating extremism. In fact the mass incarceration of over one million individuals constitutes a human rights crisis and is now increasingly being recognised as such. In October 2019 23 countries issued a joint [statement](#) calling on the Chinese government to uphold its national laws and international obligations, and commitments to respect human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Xinjiang and across China.¹⁵ The following month, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office [called](#)¹⁶ on China to allow United Nations (UN) observers "immediate and unfettered" access to XUAR.

In 2019 and 2020 reports by think tanks, NGOs and academics including the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI),¹⁷ Initiatives for China,¹⁸ the Center for Strategic and International Studies,¹⁹ and Adrian Zenz, Ph.D.,²⁰ revealed evidence of forced labour occurring in XUAR and beyond on a massive scale. This mass labour project involves not only Uyghurs detained in the camps and in the prison population, but also those remaining behind in their villages, where Uyghurs are coerced and pressured into taking manufacturing and other jobs under the banner of 'poverty alleviation.' In some cases, forced labour involves Uyghurs being transported to other parts of the region and even outside XUAR, where they are housed in factory dormitories. Although it is difficult to verify reports of what life is like in these factory compounds, individual accounts together paint a picture of strict

¹³ Uyghur Human Rights Project Blog, 'Zubayra Shamseden Speaks at the Second Annual China Human Rights Lawyers Day', 11 July 2018 <https://weblog.uhrp.org/zubayra-shamseden-speaks-at-the-second-annual-chinese-human-rights-lawyers-day/>

¹⁴ Radio Free Asia, 'Dozens of Uyghur Children of Xinjiang Village Camp Detainees Sent to Live in Orphanages', 2 July 2018 www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/orphanages-07022018143057.html

¹⁵ Joint statement on human rights violations and abuses in Xinjiang, 29 October 2019 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/joint-statement-on-xinjiang>

¹⁶ BBC, 'UK urges China to give UN access to Xinjiang region' 26 Nov 2019

¹⁷ Uyghurs for Sale 'Re-education', forced labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>

¹⁸ Cotton: The Fabric Full of Lies, report by Initiatives for China <https://www.citizenpowerforchina.org/?p=229998>

¹⁹ *Forced Labour: "Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang: Forced Labor, Forced Assimilation, and Western Supply Chains"*, CSIS Human Rights Initiative. 16/10/2019 – summary already written <https://www.csis.org/analysis/connecting-dots-xinjiang-forced-labor-forced-assimilation-and-western-supply-chains>

²⁰ *Beyond the Camps: Beijing's Long-Term Scheme of Coercive Labor, Poverty Alleviation and Social Control in Xinjiang*, Journal of Political Risk, Vol. 7, No. 12, December 2019

control over all aspects of workers' lives, including the food they eat, the language they speak, their communication with their families, and their religious practice. Normal religious observance is impossible in these conditions.

The government's actions in Xinjiang are an attack on Uyghur identity, culture and religion. They are breaking up families, and leaving children and elderly people alone and vulnerable. The devastating and long-term impact of these actions cannot be overstated.

Protestant and Catholic churches

Both registered and unregistered Protestant churches and pastors have been individually and collectively penalised for peaceful religious activities. Registered churches under the Three Self Patriotic Movement have been forced to sing national and pro-Communist songs during services, to fly the national flag and to remove religious images. Across the country churches have had their crosses removed, and many report that under-18s are now banned from attending religious activities. Meanwhile unregistered churches have been forcibly closed, their premises and property confiscated and their leaders sometimes detained or even sentenced to prison terms.

Living Stone Church, an unregistered Protestant church founded in 2009 in Guiyang City, Guizhou Province, has experienced increasingly repressive measures by the authorities. The church's rapid growth – at one time the church had over 700 members – drew the attention of the authorities. On 6 January 2017 Pastor Yang Hua was sentenced to two and a half years in prison. Another pastor in the church, Su Tianfu, was sentenced to one year in prison, suspended for two years with a further six months' residential surveillance, in May 2018.

In December 2018 the authorities launched a large-scale crackdown on Early Rain Church in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, arresting over 100 members. Pastor Wang Yi and his wife Jiang Rong were accused of 'inciting subversion'; Jiang has been released on bail but Wang has since been sentenced to nine years in prison. Other church members are also in detention and many more are under police surveillance. In May 2018, authorities detained or removed over 200 members of Early Rain Church in order to prevent them from holding a prayer vigil for victims of the Wenchuan earthquake of 2008. Pastor Wang has criticised the government's policy towards unregistered or independent churches and the revised regulations on religious affairs which came into effect this year.

Among Catholics, historically some have attended churches under the state-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), while others belong to communities led by bishops recognised by the Vatican but not by the government: the government insists that all religious groups must be 'independent and autonomous,' without foreign oversight.

On 22 September 2018, the Holy See and the People's Republic of China signed a Provisional Agreement on the appointment of bishops; however, the details have not been made public. It is unclear what the long-term implications will be for 'underground' or independent communities where the bishop is not recognised by Beijing, but so far the agreement has not resulted in greater religious freedom.

In fact, since the agreement, there have been several developments concerning individual clergy, including incidents of detention, house arrest, and disappearance.²¹ A number of clergy were

²¹ For examples see <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020-china-report>

imprisoned or detained before the agreement and remain in some form of detention, including Bishop James Su Zhimin who was detained on 8 October 1997 in Hebei. In 2019 his family reported that his whereabouts were unknown.

Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhists' religious practice is tightly controlled by the authorities. There are ongoing reports of religious services being disrupted, religious institutions intrusively monitored, religious sites closed, property confiscated, as well as cases of arbitrary detention and restrictions on religious teaching and training.

A 'renovation' campaign by the authorities launched in July 2016 resulted in the demolition of hundreds of homes at Larung Gar Buddhist institute in Sertar, Sichuan Province. Larung Gar is believed to be one of the largest Buddhist teaching centres in the world, with a population of over 10,000; a demolition order detailed plans to reduce the number of residents to 5,000.

Falun Gong

The largest group classified as a 'xie jiao' (usually translated as 'evil cult' or 'heterodox teaching') in China, Falun Gong, has been banned since 1999. It is widely reported by lawyers and Falun Gong organisations that a task force, the 610 Office, was established specifically to eradicate Falun Gong: adherents outside China continue to report the torture in custody of Falun Gong practitioners across the country.

A series of reports by human rights lawyer David Matas, former Canadian cabinet minister David Kilgour, and China analyst Ethan Gutmann, provide evidence to suggest that Falun Gong practitioners and other prisoners of conscience, including other ethnic and religious minorities, have been victims of forced organ harvesting. CSW is not able to independently verify these reports but is deeply concerned by the conclusions of an independent people's tribunal into forced organ harvesting of prisoners of conscience in China, which concluded that "forced organ harvesting has been committed for years throughout China on a significant scale," and that crimes against humanity against the Falun Gong and Uyghurs have been proved beyond reasonable doubt.²²

Conclusion

Freedom of religion or belief in China is in rapid decline: almost daily new details emerge about the use of technology in surveillance and profiling of Uyghurs in XUAR, alongside news of another church closure, or another anti-*xie jiao* campaign. The Chinese government continues to deny reports that it violates the right to FoRB.

The deterioration of religious freedom has not gone unnoticed outside China. As mentioned above, in November 2018, both UN member states and UN bodies expressed concern about FoRB at the third UN Universal Periodic Review of the Chinese government's human rights record, with numerous recommendations relating to the protection of the right to FoRB and minority rights. A European Parliament resolution adopted on 18 April 2019 described the current situation in China as a "new low point" for freedom of religion and conscience, expressing deep concern about the "increasingly repressive regime that many religious and ethnic minorities, in particular Uyghurs and

²² See: <https://chinatribunal.com/who-we-are/>

Kazakhs, Tibetans and Christians face.”²³ Parliamentarians across the world have called on their governments to raise FoRB concerns with the Chinese government, and as mentioned above, in October 2019 23 UN member states came together to issue a joint statement calling on the Chinese government to respect human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Xinjiang and across China.

However, as welcome as these developments are, statements must be backed by concrete actions in order to address the grave and ongoing human rights violations in China. Furthermore, the voices already speaking out within the international community must be joined by governments which have yet to raise these issues either publicly or privately for fear of upsetting a key trading partner.

As the world struggles with the spread of COVID-19, some of the religion or belief communities described in this submission are among those most vulnerable to the virus – most notably those detained in the so-called ‘re-education camps’ in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where conditions are dangerously overcrowded and unsanitary. Other prisoners of conscience, including Falun Gong practitioners, Christian leaders, Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns, and lawyers and activists who stand up for FoRB or other human rights, are also at risk of the virus and other serious health issues.

Now more than ever, it is vitally important for the international community to call for freedom of religion or belief in China, and to stand with and support Chinese civil society, the real hope for change.

Recommendations

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- At every possible opportunity, in public and in private, urge the Chinese government to respect, protect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief for all people in China
- At every possible opportunity, in public and in private, condemn the use of re-education camps, and all forms of extra-legal detention, enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention.
- Investigate and monitor cases of human rights abuses including violations of the right to FoRB.
- Support all available means of investigation into human rights abuses in XUAR, including inquiries into whether abuses perpetrated by the Chinese government constitute crimes against humanity and cultural genocide.
- Consider sanctions against officials responsible for human rights abuses including those responsible for the abuses in XUAR.
- Ensure that individuals from XUAR and other individuals belonging to ethnic and/or religion or belief minorities at risk of persecution are not forcibly deported to China.
- Companies operating in China or involved in the sale of surveillance technology to the Chinese government and companies should conduct robust human rights due diligence to assess the impact of their transactions on religious and ethnic minorities, meeting with civil society stakeholders and technology and human rights activists engaged on these issues.

²³ European Parliament, ‘China, notably the situation of religious and ethnic minorities’, 18 April 2019 www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0422_EN.pdf?redirect