



Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
Written Evidence for the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission Inquiry
into human rights in China 2016-2020

1 May 2020

Reporters Without Borders - known internationally as Reporters sans frontières (RSF) - works to promote and protect press freedom around the world. RSF has consultative status with the United Nations, UNESCO and the Council of Europe. Created in 1985 and headquartered in Paris, it has 15 regional bureaus and a network of correspondents in 130 countries.

The People's Republic of China is ranked extremely low on Reporters Without Borders' (RSF's) 2020 World Press Freedom Index at 177th out of 180 countries. On paper, its constitution guarantees "freedom of speech [and] of the press" but in practice, the government constantly infringes on these freedoms, despite its mandate to implement and defend them.

Under Xi Jinping, who took over in 2013, censorship and surveillance have reached unprecedented levels, and both state and privately-owned media are now under even stricter control by the Communist Party. More than 100 professional and non-professional journalists are currently held in conditions that pose a threat to their lives. Both **Liu Xiaobo**, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and recipient of the RSF Press Freedom Prize, and **Yang Tongyan**, a dissident blogger, died in 2017 from cancers that were left untreated while they were detained.

Recently, Beijing has used the COVID-19 crisis to further tighten its grip on the Chinese media, banning the publication of any reports that question how it has been managed by the Chinese authorities. The government has also imposed strict controls on social networks, censoring many keywords linked to the coronavirus. In addition, since the start of the pandemic, the authorities have been orchestrating a global disinformation campaign designed to drown out critics who point out that Beijing's censorship of early warnings delayed the adoption of public health measures, allowing the virus to spread.

Furthermore, RSF is concerned about the danger that China's repressive model is spreading to other countries, especially those involved in the "Belt and Road" economic development project. The Chinese government is actively promoting a "new world media order" based on censorship and surveillance that leaves no room for journalistic ethics or the public's right to independently report news and information.

Media under Party control



Both state and privately-owned media are under the close supervision of the Chinese Communist Party Publicity Department (CCPPD), which supervises the activities of 14 ministries. Every week it summons media editors to a meeting, and every day it gives them a list of stories they should highlight and a list they should ignore, at the risk of sanctions.

Since 2017, the Cyberspace Administration of China has banned journalists from citing information from social networks if it has not been “confirmed” by the authorities. Chinese journalists are also forbidden from keeping a blog or personal web page, or cooperate freely with foreign media outlets.

China-based foreign reporters are not spared. The latest report of the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China (FCCC) said the authorities were making it increasingly difficult for its members to do their work. The harassment to which they are subjected includes being followed, arrested, and roughed up. Their sources are also harassed. Furthermore, since the start of this year, Chinese authorities have expelled 16 foreign journalists.

More than 100 journalists in prison

China has still not ratified the the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 7 of which stipulates, “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”, and Article 10, which says “all persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person”.

The country remains among the world’s biggest jailers of journalists, with more than 100 professional journalists and non-professional journalists currently detained, according to RSF’s tally. Uyghurs are particularly targeted by the Chinese regime with 58 journalists, editors and publishers from the Xinjiang region currently in jail.

The government no longer sentences press freedom defenders to death but it subjects detainees to “mistreatment” and denial of medical care, in some cases until they die. Journalists who stray from the Party line are almost systematically accused of “picking quarrels and stirring up trouble” or “divulging state secrets”, a charge that carries a possible life sentence.

Defenders of freely reported news and information are among the leading targets of the practice known as “residential surveillance at a designated place”, under which dissidents are held incommunicado and tortured.

Ten notable examples:

- **Ilham Tohti**, 50, a citizen journalist and recipient of the Sakharov Prize and the Václav Havel Prize, who is serving a life sentence because he reviewed the economic, political and social aspects of the autonomous province of Xinjiang.

- **Gulmira Imin**, 41, former administrator of the Uyghur language information website *Salkin*, was sentenced to life in prison for "separatism" and "disclosing state secrets" because she criticised the government.
- Fifty-nine year-old political commentator **Lu Jianhua (Wen Yu)** was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment for having written articles for the *Singapore Straits Times* commenting on the Chinese economic, political and social situation. His family requested medical release due to the deterioration of his state of health but was denied.
- **Zhang Haitao**, 48, political commentator was sentenced to 19 years in prison for "inciting subversion of state power" and "disclosing state secrets abroad" because he criticised the Chinese government on social media and in interviews for foreign media, including *Boxun*, *Radio Free Asia*, and *Voice of America*.
- **Qin Yongmin**, 66, chief editor of the association newsletter *China Human Rights Watch*, was sentenced to 13 years in prison in July 2018 for "inciting the subversion of state power" by promoting the idea of a peaceful transition to a constitutional democracy.
- **Huang Qi**, 56, recipient of the RSF Press Freedom Prize in 2004 and founder of *64 Tianwang* (a site awarded the RSF Prize in 2016), was sentenced to 12 years in prison for having written articles on the victims of abuses from the state apparatus. He suffers from serious cardiac and hepatic problems due to mistreatment.
- Hong Kong-based publisher **Yiu Mantin (Yao Wentian)**, 78, was sentenced in 2014 to 10 years in prison despite his age and poor health because he planned to publish a book criticising President Xi Jinping.
- **Wu Gan**, 47, blogger, was sentenced to eight years in prison in 2017 for drawing attention to corruption within the state apparatus. He suffers from blood pressure and heart problems due to past electrocutions.
- Fifty-year-old cartoonist **Jiang Yefei** was sentenced to six and a half years in prison for "inciting subversion of state power" because he made satirical cartoons criticising the human rights situation in China and President Xi Jinping's policies.
- Chinese-born Swedish publisher **Gui Minhui**, 55, was kidnapped in Thailand in violation of international law in 2014, when he was about to publish a book about President Xi's mistresses. He was held in China and is being denied medical care for symptoms associated with a serious neurological condition.

Furthermore, since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, Beijing has silenced several Chinese citizens who bravely decided to fight the censorship imposed by the government by gathering and sharing information concerning the epidemic.

- **Li Wenliang**, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital where the first coronavirus cases were seen in November and who was among the first to blow the whistle on the possibility of a coronavirus pandemic, was forced by the police to sign a statement recognising that he had “spread false rumours”. He died from COVID-19 on 7 February.
- **Chen Qiushi**, a blogger who interviewed the families of victims in Wuhan and visited an exhibition centre which has been turned into a quarantine zone. He was put “in quarantine” by the authorities on 7 February and has not reappeared since.
- **Fang Bin**, an ordinary textile businessman living in Wuhan who documented the saturation of the hospital. He reported being harassed by the police before completely disappearing on 9 February.

The authorities also arrested **Guo Quan**, **Xu Zhiyong**, and **Ren Zhiqiang**, three famous political commentators who openly criticised the censorship of the information related to the virus.

The “Great Firewall” of censorship and surveillance

China’s sophisticated system of online censorship, known as the “Great Firewall” because it keeps the country’s 772 million internet users away from foreign news websites, is said to employ at least two million people (a censor for every 386 persons). Online communications are now closely controlled; last year, anonymous comments on the internet were banned, and ordinary citizens have been given jail sentences for comments posted on forums or on messaging services.

Thanks to a strictly regulated and protectionist internet business model, China has spawned huge firms such as Baidu, Tencent, Alibaba and the smartphone manufacturer Xiaomi that are extremely powerful in the domestic market and cooperate with the regime’s surveillance and control initiatives.

China has gradually suppressed foreign VPN services. Apple set off an international outcry in 2017 when it rid its Chinese app store of secure communications apps and VPNs, which can be used to circumvent the Great Firewall, and again more recently when it surrendered control of all iCloud data in China, including encryption codes, to a company linked to the government. Apple’s rivals, Google and Facebook, are still banned in China but are actively wooing the regime and could be forced to make similar concessions in return for access to the gigantic Chinese market.

Seeking to establish a “new international information order” since 2011, China exports its censorship and surveillance tools. A Portuguese-language version of China’s leading search engine Baidu was launched in Brazil in 2014. Called Busca, it blocked content that was “sensitive” by Chinese criteria but, after an outcry, the censorship filters were apparently



removed. China is also trying to promote international versions of its unencrypted messaging service WeChat, in which all data is available to the authorities, including the actual conversations.

Recommendations for what the UK could do:

- Raise press freedom concerns in all bilateral relations with China – in particular the need for the immediate release of professional and non-professional journalists detained in connection with their reporting.
- Raise press freedom and freedom of information concerns in China at international fora such as the UN, and urge the Chinese government to ratify the ICCPR.
- Call on the Chinese authorities to put an immediate stop to the abduction, arrest, detention, torture, mistreatment, searches, and harassment of journalists and defenders of freely reported news and information.
- Demand that the Chinese authorities cease the harassment of journalists, media outlets, publishers and academics based abroad, and ensure the protection of exiled Chinese journalists resident in the UK.
- Require complete transparency from Chinese media about their shareholders and sources of funding, including advertising.

Contact details:

Cédric Alviani
East Asia Bureau Director
calviani@rsf.org

Rebecca Vincent
UK Bureau Director
rvincent@rsf.org

Reporters Without Borders
Free Word Centre
60 Farringdon Road
London
EC1R 3GA
www.rsf.org/en