

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

From January to March 2023, CSW recorded 82 incidents of violations affecting religious or belief groups throughout China.

The [Two Sessions](#) - annual meetings of China's rubber-stamp legislature and top political advisory body - took place from 4th to 13th March this year. Xi Jinping was officially handed an unprecedented third term as state chairman and chairman of the Central Military Commission.

From early February to mid-March, the Chinese authorities [tightened security](#) throughout the country. Some dissidents, rights activists and religious leaders were reportedly taken away from their cities by police, ostensibly for 'tourism', or placed under 24-hour surveillance, banned from travelling or even leaving their home. Such 'stability maintenance' measures have been routinely in place during politically sensitive periods in recent years, but religious communities have been impacted by their increased extent and reach.

On 19 March Early Rain Covenant Church issued a statement and described the 'crazy wave of repression' the church was experiencing: all of its preachers had been either detained, forced to leave Chengdu, or placed under surveillance; all of its deacons had been heavily guarded and prevented from leaving their homes to serve at services; and many members had been threatened, intimidated and harassed (see CSW's [report](#)).

Apart from judicial harassment, ill-treatment and deprivation of the right of access to legal counsel while in detention, religious adherents are also subject to forced evictions and heavy fines as punishment.

During this period, news emerged of house church leaders being [tortured](#) in secret detention, and 19 [Falun Gong practitioners](#)* and at least one [Tibetan](#) monk who died in police custody. At least one Protestant church and one Catholic convent were forcibly demolished.



A priests' and nuns' convent in Datong diocese, Shanxi province, was demolished on 22 February 2023 despite protests from the local Catholic community. Source: AsiaNews.

Part 1 – Sinicization of religion

- Bishop urges religious communities to 'self-purify'

CSW everyone
free to believe

Bishop Shen Bin, Chair of Bishops Conference of Catholic Church in China (BCCCC), gave a keynote [speech](#)* as the representative of religious communities on 7 March during the Two Sessions. ‘The Sinicization of religions in China should be further promoted so that [religions are] better adapted to socialist society with Chinese characteristics,’ he said.

The bishop claimed that ‘many insightful people in the religious communities have proposed that religions should be strictly managed’. He suggested that the religious communities should ‘courageously self-purify’ and that religions should be managed ‘in a comprehensive and strict manner’.

■ Tighter ideological control in places of worship

On 24 March 2023, the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) issued drafted Measures for the Administration of Religious Activity Sites.

Article 3 states that places of worship should ‘support the leadership of the CCP, support the socialist system, carry out an in-depth implementation of Xi Jinping’s thought of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations, rules and relevant provisions on management of religious affairs, practice the core values of socialism and adhere to the direction of Sinicization of religion’.

The following statement inscribed on an outer wall of ChangZhi South Mosque clearly follows the lines of the state-run Islamic Association of China (IAC) and gives us a good glimpse of what is required for a place of worship to obtain and maintain the official permission to operate:

‘In the name of Allah...we will hold high the great banner of patriotism and actively promote the adaptation of Islam to socialist society in China...sincerely love and firmly support the wise leadership of the Communist Party of China...’



A propaganda plaque at Changzhi South Mosque, Shanxi province.

Part 2 – Policy watch

■ Searchable religious personnel database

In February 2023, the Chinese authorities launched an online searchable database, where the public can check if a Buddhist or Taoist monk or nun has been officially recognised.

A Buddhist monk Shi Daoguo told [RFA](#)* that when he logged on to the official website of the Buddhist Association of China, he found his personal information had been excluded from this official list. He has been a key target of surveillance by the authorities in Shandong province. Without the official accreditation, monks like him will struggle to survive.

The official website of China’s State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) shows that databases for Islam, Catholicism and Christianity will also be launched in the future.

■ ‘Smart Religion’ app

Prior reservation and approval is required for anyone wanting to attend services in churches, mosques or temples in Henan province, according to a [report](#) by ChinaAid. Adherents of religions must register with their personal details through an app called ‘Smart Religion’.

One of the top officials in Henan, Zhang Leiming, who heads the provincial United Front Work Department (UFWD), gave a [talk](#)* to religious leaders across the province on 24 February 2023. He emphasised ‘a comprehensive and strict approach

to religion’ and ‘guiding the believing masses to follow the Party unswervingly’.

Part 3 – Wives speak up for detained Christian leaders

This quarter, several Christian women took to the Chinese microblogging platform Weibo and told the stories behind their spouses’ detention.

On 5 January 2023 Cui Yanqin, wife of Wu Jiannan, an elder at the Deyang Green Pastures (‘Qingcaodi’) Church, posted an [open letter](#)* to the Deyang authorities on Weibo. Mr. Wu has been detained since 17 November 2021 on fraud charges. She asked, ‘There is no victim in this case, and no church members accuse him of fraud. Where does the fraud charge come from?’



On 8 January 2023 Yang Yufeng, wife of Hao Ming, another elder of Deyang Green Pastures Church detained on suspicion of fraud, posted an [article](#)* on Weibo. ‘65-year-old Hao Ming has been wrongfully detained for more than a year. He is innocent. Please release him home!’ She reveals that Mr Hao had never received salary from the church since he started working for the church in 2008. The article has been censored.

On 8 January 2023, Chen Ying, wife of Han Xiaodong, a preacher at Linfen Covenant Home Church, posted an [article](#)* on Weibo. Mr Han was detained on 19 August 2022 on fraud charges. Ms Chen described how the police put him under illegal secret detention, denied him access to a lawyer, and deprived him of sleep for three days to force him to give a false statement. Church members were summoned by police. When they refused to write a report against their church leaders, police pressured them and threatened them with their jobs and personal freedom, and even verbally threatened

their underage children. Many members were detained for over 24 hours.

By such measures, police fabricated fake charges against Mr Han. ‘This is persecution of Christians and of the Christian Church in the name of the law,’ Ms Chen wrote.

The article has since been deleted. Ms Chen’s Weibo page now only shows this message: ‘This user is currently banned from posting for violating the relevant laws and regulations.’

On 9 January 2023 wife of Pastor Lian Xuliang posted her family’s [story](#)* on Weibo. Both Lian Xuliang and his father Pastor Lian Changnian have been detained since 17 August 2022. She wrote, ‘On that day, our innocent lives ended and have henceforth been associated with crime...’ The article was also censored shortly afterwards.



Senior Pastor Lian Changnian and his son Pastor Lian Xuliang.
Source: CSW

On 29 March 2023 Kong Yan, wife of Xu Feng, the headmaster of a Christian musical school in Harbin, posted an [article](#)* on Weibo. Mr Xu has been detained since 3 September 2022 after a police raid on the school. She rebuked the trumped-up charges of ‘illegal business operation’ and explained that the school did not charge students tuition fees. It aimed to serve those children who love music and cannot attend mainstream schools. Pupils only needed to pay basic expenses covering food and accommodation.

Ms Kong described how Harbin police treated the pupils on 3 September 2022: searching their personal luggage and wallets, interrogating them one by one, making them sleep on the floor without bedding, forcing them to wake up at the middle of the night to sign documents – ‘they would not let the children go back to sleep until they signed the documents with things that they knew nothing about.’

Part 4 – Muslim scholars face lengthy prison sentences

According to CSW sources, at least four Muslim scholars have been detained in Pingyuan township, Yanshan county, Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomic Prefecture, Yunnan province, for more than a year. They were indicted for ‘promoting extremism’. The prosecutors have recommended lengthy jail terms: eight years for Lin Yingzhai of Maolong Mosque; six years and five years and six months for Ma Jingwei and Ma Wu respectively, both of Songmaopo Mosque; and five years for Ma Changsheng, an imam who was visiting the area. Read CSW’s new report: [The Yunnan Model](#).



Imam Ma Changsheng. Source: CSW

Local Muslims say that they were targeted for refusing to cooperate with the authorities’ policies with regard to mosque demolitions/renovations and dismissing students from Arabic schools. They have been punished for insisting on the values and legitimacy of offering Islamic education in mosques.



Songmaopo Mosque before the renovation project. Source: baike.com



Songmaopo Mosque now. Source: CSW

Notable reports

- [Will the Hui be silently erased?](#) – CHRD
- UN experts alarmed by [separation of 1 million Tibetan children from families and forced assimilation at residential schools](#)
- [Desecration in Drago County](#) - Free Tibet and Tibet Watch
- US Department of State 2022 [Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: China](#)
- [“Persisting in Resisting”](#) — CHRD Annual Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in China (2022)
- UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR): [Concluding observations on the third periodic report of China](#)
- [Freedom in the World 2023](#) – Freedom House