

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 April to June 2023, CSW recorded 101 incidents of violations affecting religious or belief groups throughout China. Cases included in this update highlight how religious leaders who refuse to 'follow the Party' have been victimised, physically or mentally through the use of detention, imprisonment, surveillance, house arrest, censorship, defamation, harassment and ideological 're-education'.

This quarter saw three of China's leading human rights campaigners handed heavy jail terms: 14 years for [Xu Zhiyong](#), 12 years for [Ding Jiaxi](#) and 8 years for [Guo Feixiong](#) (aka Yang Maodong). Prominent human rights lawyer [Yu Wensheng](#) and his wife Xu Yan were detained en route to EU embassy in Beijing; both have been arrested for 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble'.

In April, members of [Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church](#) (aka 'Mayflower Church') were granted asylum and arrived in the United States. After [fleeing China](#) in 2019, they had spent more than three years in seeking refugee status in South Korea and then Thailand, where they were detained by immigration police for about a week.

While members of this church will finally be able to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief and no longer need to fear deportation, detention and harassment, we need to remember the numerous religious groups who are still living in that fear each day in China. [CSW's study](#) on the province

of Yunnan sheds light on Chinese government's harsh enforcement of repressive religious policies and its impact on religious communities in recent years.

In May, a mass protest by Muslims against forced dome removal at Najjiaying Mosque in Yunnan drew international attention to Hui Muslims' struggle in China's Sinicization of religion campaign (read more in Part 1). There have also been unconfirmed [reports](#) of forced cremation of Muslims of the Zhuang ethnic group in Yunnan.



Police officers outside Najjiaying Mosque on 27 May 2023.
Source: Twitter @AyishaMuhamad

From May to June, the authorities subjected dissidents, human rights activists and religious leaders to increased surveillance, arbitrary detention and house arrest before and on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Images such as tanks, candlelight, large crowds and 'objects placed in a row' were reportedly [banned](#) on China's video media app Douyin from 3 June to 5 June.

On 4 June, no public candlelit rally was allowed in Hong Kong, for the fourth year in a row. More than 20 people were taken away for spontaneously taking to the street to mark the event as individuals, at which the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [expressed](#) its ‘alarm’.

Part 1 – Sinicization of religion

■ Forced ‘rectification’ of mosques

Across China, most mosques have undergone compulsory ‘rectification’, which involves removal of Arabic-style domes and minarets and replacing them with tiled pagodas.

On 27 May 2023, the authorities in Tonghai county, Yunnan, deployed hundreds of armed police officers to blockade [Najiyang Mosque](#), violently removing sit-down protesters who were trying to protect the mosque from forced dome removal, resulting in clashes between police and Hui Muslims. An unknown number of protesters were detained, including an imam.

‘The transformation of the so-called Arabic appearance of mosques over the years has destroyed almost all the new mosques built after the reopening of China on the ruins of those that had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The extent of the destruction and the scale and depth of its historical impact has surpassed what happened in the Cultural Revolution.’

- A Hui Muslim scholar, May 2023

■ Sinicization training for senior Protestant clergy

From 27th to 30th June 2023, the government-sanctioned Christian bodies China Christian Council (CCC) and Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) held [training sessions*](#) in Changchun city for senior

Christian teachers and pastors in Northeast China. Officials from the UFWD were present at the opening ceremony. Five training courses were taught: studying the report of the 20th National Congress of the Party, advancing the Sinicization of Christianity, church regulations, church management, and resisting heresy and cults.

It is the last one in this round of CCC&TSPM’s nationwide training programme. Similar conferences took place in East China (April 2019), Northwest China (November 2019), Southwest China (December 2020), South Central China (May 2021), and North China (April 2023).

Sinicization of Christianity involves ‘resisting external penetration’ but on the other hand, its success would be a ‘major contribution from Chinese Christian communities to Christianity worldwide’, said Pastor Kan Baoping, Vice Chairman of TSPM, in his keynote [speech*](#).

■ Catholic bishops

On 4 April 2023, Shen Bin, head of the state-sanctioned body Bishops Conference of Catholic Church in China (BCCCC), was [installed](#) as Bishop of Shanghai, without prior approval from Vatican. Bishop Shen vowed to ‘implement the Party’s instructions’ and ‘adhering to the direction of Sinicization of the Catholic Church’.

Meanwhile, auxiliary bishop of Shanghai [Ma Daqin](#) has reportedly been under house arrest since he announced leaving his role at Catholic Patriotic Association in 2012; in Hebei, Vicar of Xuanhua diocese [Zhang Jianlin](#) has been detained since 2021 for criticising illegitimate ordinations.



Zhang Jianlin, general vicar of Xuanhua diocese.
Source: AsiaNews

■ Tibetan Buddhists

In June 2023, China-appointed Panchen Lama [Gyaltzen Norbu](#) visited several eastern Tibetan regions, including Chamdo and Batang, before undertaking a series of religious and social activities in Lhasa.

Gyaltzen Norbu was used by the Chinese authorities to replace the 11th Panchen Lama, [Gendun Chogyi Nyima](#). It is widely believed that he will play a role in the CCP's ploy to illegally appoint the next Dalai Lama. Gendun Chogyi Nyima disappeared along with his family in 1995 at the age of six after he had been recognised as the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama by the 14th Dalai Lama. He is still missing.

■ Hong Kong Islamic community

On June 28, 2023, Islamic organisations held a flag-raising ceremony at Kowloon Mosque to mark the 26th anniversary of the establishment of HKSAR. Officials from the Liaison Office were present. This is the first time that the Islamic community in Hong Kong has held the raising of the Chinese flag at a mosque to celebrate the return of Hong Kong to China. See Part 2 for a patriotic education law that is being introduced in China.



'Love the Party, love the country, love socialist' event organised by Longyan Buddhist Association on 7 May 2023.

Source: Fujian Buddhist Association.

Part 2 – Policy watch

■ A nationwide state-approved religious leaders' database

On 23 May 2023, China's state-run Islamic, Catholic and Protestant Christian bodies launched online information query systems which identify officially approved religious leaders. The equivalent systems for Buddhist and Taoist leaders went live in February 2023. According to a Xinhua [report](#), the nationwide database was introduced because 'in recent years, cases of fraudulent impersonation of clergy have occurred from time to time'.

The Chinese government's surveillance and oppression of religious leaders has intensified in recent years. See Part 3 for cases of house church leaders accused of 'fraud'.

■ Patriotic Education Law

The Chinese authorities plan to introduce a [Patriotic Education Law](#), which covers all citizens, not just children and young people. A draft of the law was submitted to the Standing Committee of the 14th National People's Congress for consideration on 26 June 2023. It even has provisions for Taiwan residents and overseas Chinese, not to mention residents in Hong Kong and Macao.

The draft stipulates that the State will guide and support religious groups, religious institutions and places of religious activities to carry out patriotic education and enhance the 'identification of religious clergy and believers with the great motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Chinese Communist Party and socialism with Chinese characteristics'. This signals the Party's further tightening of ideological control of religious groups.

Part 3 – Fraud: a 'pocket crime'

While [a large number of house church leaders](#) charged with 'fraud' are held in prolonged pre-trial detention, the Chinese authorities have been targeting more Christians with this crime: three members of a house church in Guangzhou; three

Christian women in Suining, Sichuan; four leaders including [Pastor Wang Changchun](#)* of Bengbu Living Stone Church in Anhui. [Two leaders](#)* of a youth church in Hefei, Anhui, have reportedly been convicted of ‘fraud’ and sentenced to three years and three years and six months respectively.

Other Church leaders jailed on fraud charges include Pastor Zhang Shaojie (12 years, 2014), Pastor Bao Guohua and his wife Xing Wenxiang (14 and 12 years respectively, 2016), and Pastor [Hao Zhiwei](#) (8 years, 2022). If convicted of fraud, the three leaders of [Linfen Covenant House](#) Church in Shanxi Province will also face lengthy jail terms.

Read our [blog](#) on this issue.

‘The space for house churches [in China] has shrunk again. Now it's like back in the 1990s.’

- A house church leader, June 2023

Notable reports

- [The Yunnan Model](#): How religious communities are managed with a grid system under strengthened Party leadership – CSW
- US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2023 Annual Report: [China](#)
- U.S. Department of State 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: [China](#)
- [Surveillance, Slander, and Censorship](#): How the Chinese Communist Party’s Persecution Impacts Falun Gong Believers on US University Campuses - Falun Dafa Information Center
- HRMI Rights Tracker: [China](#)
- [Report into Media Freedom in Hong Kong](#): the case of Jimmy Lai and Apple Daily - All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Hong Kong
- [Trapped: China’s Expanding Use of Exit Bans](#) – Safeguard Defenders

Part 4 – Serving a life sentence for religion or belief

- [Gong Shengliang](#), Xu Fuming and Hu Yong, leaders of Huanan Church, imprisoned since 2001
- [Merdan Seyitakhun](#), a Uyghur Muslim, imprisoned since 2009
- [Jampel Wangchuk](#), senior monk at Drepung Monastery, imprisoned since 2008
- [David Lin](#), a US resident and Christian missionary, imprisoned since 2009
- [Lorang Konchok](#), a monk at Kirti Monastery, imprisoned since 2013
- [Wu Zeheng](#), a Buddhist leader, imprisoned since 2015