

PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN CHINA TODAY

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Golden Lampstand Church

Freedom House, an independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom (including religious freedom) and democracy around the world, noted in its 2016 Report that Xi Jinping has maintained the Communist Party's stance on religion and continued specific policies initiated by his predecessors.

Xi has been more vocal than Hu Jintao in his effort to harness the party-state's religious and cultural traditions to shore up CCP legitimacy, linking them to his own signature concepts of the "China Dream". Concurrently, in the context of a broader ideological campaign to limit the influence of so-called Western values, Xi has warned against foreign infiltration of the religious sphere.

Although authorities have intensified many of their restrictions, resulting in an overall increase in religious persecution, believers have responded with a surprising degree of resistance.

This escalating cycle of repression and pushback illustrates a fundamental failure of the Chinese party-state's religious policies. The CCP's rigid

constraints have essentially created an enormous black market, forcing many believers to operate outside the law.

Efforts to stem the spread of Christianity have increased. As the larger of the two main Christian denominations in China, Protestants have been particularly affected by cross-removal and church-demolition campaigns, punishment of state-sanctioned leaders, and arrests of human rights lawyers who take up Christians' cases.

In 2015, one of Xi's top lieutenants tore down crosses from 1,200 to 1,700 churches and jailed hundreds of house church leaders. In one incident, 50 church members were injured when they were beaten back by police.

Catholics in China

For the estimated 12 million Catholics, relations between Beijing and the Vatican have improved since 2013. Six decades after China broke off diplomatic relations with the Vatican, the two sides are now negotiating an agreement to re-establish formal ties and appear to be on the verge of a breakthrough agreement governing the appointment of bishops. This would legitimize China's state-sanctioned churches while further cementing its control. While China attempts to exert greater control over official Catholic churches, authorities continue to pressure the underground churches, making arrests on trumped up charges to try and pressure them to join official congregations. This only reinforces the concerns underground churchgoers have about state churches. See, for example, the protests by Hong Kong Catholics:

<http://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2018/02/13/hong-kong-catholics-hold-prayer-vigil-to-oppose-vatican-deal-with-beijing/?platform=hootsuite>

In its 2017 Report, Freedom House noted that the National Conference on Religious Work had taken place for the first time in fifteen years.

Authorities asserted that religion must serve as an instrument for national unity and social stability, and called on religious groups to "Sinicize" by "endorsing the political system, conforming to Chinese society, and embodying Chinese culture."

A campaign against Protestant churches in Zhejiang Province, the heartland of Christianity in China, resulted in the demolition of over 1,200 crosses and numerous churches in recent years. In 2016, Hu Shigen, a

leader of underground churches, was sentenced to over seven years in prison for “spreading subversive ideas”.

We here tonight must ask ourselves how we would feel if authorities unexpectedly burst into St. Andrew’s, attacked members of the congregation, broke the beautiful stained-glass windows such as the ‘St. Andrew’ window or the ‘Love, Truth, and Justice’ window, smashed the Guibault-Thérien organ, and then seized and incarcerated the Rev. Dimock. How would we feel? What would we do?

Persecution also extends to Chinese Christian missionaries working abroad. Last June, after two young Chinese missionaries (Meng Li Si and Li Xinheng) were murdered by extremists in Pakistan, many hoped the Chinese government would make an effort to protect the country's Christians. Instead, the government blamed the two victims and began cracking down by arresting four preachers, banning them from preaching the gospel and prohibiting them from giving any media interviews.

Many suspect that China's economic interests in Pakistan kept it from condemning the Pakistani terrorists who murdered Chinese citizens Meng Li Si and Li Xinheng. China is investing more than \$55 billion in Pakistan, a key country in its plan to connect Asia and Europe with its “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

We must ask ourselves how we would feel if any of our Presbyterian missionaries lost their lives while away on their missions and then were blamed for their actions by the government.

In China itself, it is the underground churches that are most at risk. Last September, *The Diplomat* published an excellent article by Eugene K. Chow titled “China’s Thriving Underground Churches in Danger.”

Chow senses that, threatened by the rapid growth of Christianity, the Communist Party is gearing up for a sweeping crackdown.

China is officially an atheist nation, but Protestant Christianity is thriving. There are thought to be as many as 115 million Protestants in China - one of the fastest growing demographics in the country. Some predict that by 2030, China will have more than 247 million Christians - the world’s largest congregation.

Most Chinese Christians meet in underground churches. Only state-sanctioned religious organizations are allowed to operate in China; official churches are closely watched.

Many state-sanctioned churches have been pressured to install surveillance cameras. Their preachers are selected by the government and are monitored to ensure that they are preaching in a Communist way and training their congregations to practice in a Communist way.

State churches must avoid potentially subversive portions of the Bible such as the Old Testament book that tells the story of Daniel, who is exiled and refuses to worship the king as he is ordered and instead worships God. This story is seen as “very dangerous.”

Preachers are pressured to show their loyalty to the Communist Party by praising President Xi Jinping and incorporating party propaganda into their sermons.

It is for these reasons that many Chinese Christians turn to underground churches. Of China’s estimated 93 to 115 million Christians, fewer than 30 million attend official state churches.

Last September, new regulations to curb underground churches were passed.

The new law took effect earlier this month, on February 2nd. It imposes heavy fines on organizers of unofficial religious events and prohibits them from carrying out basic functions such as receiving donations, providing religious information online, or teaching children.

The Communist Party seems to feel that Christianity is becoming an opposition political force undermining its authority and fears that it could be used by the West to overthrow the Communist party-state.

In advance of the new law taking effect, underground churches began meeting in smaller groups or on weekdays to avoid detection. Larger WeChat groups for churches were also cut back to smaller groups.

Golden Lampstand Church

But the persecution continues. Just one month ago, paramilitary People's Armed Police forces used excavators and dynamite to demolish the Golden Lampstand Church in the city of Linfen in Shanxi province.

ChinaAid, a U.S.-based Christian advocacy group, said explosives were planted in an underground worship hall to destroy the church, which was built with ~ \$3 million in contributions from worshippers in one of China's poorest regions.

The church, with a congregation of more than 50,000, had been attacked in 2009, when Bibles were seized and church leaders were charged with illegally occupying agricultural land and assembling a crowd to disrupt traffic, and subsequently given long prison sentences.

Freedom of religion is technically guaranteed under China's constitution, so local authorities use technicalities such as land or building violations and disturbing the peace to attack unregistered churches.

The reason given for the demolition of the Golden Lampstand Church last month was that it was illegally constructed in violation of building codes nearly a decade ago.

Husband and wife evangelists Wang Xiaoguang and Yang Rongli had built it as a permanent home for their followers, replacing improvised spaces such as factory dormitories and greenhouses. Authorities originally did not block the church's construction.

President Xi is dedicated to ensuring that the Communist Party reigns supreme in all walks of life. Religious expression will be allowed to continue in a token form as long as it conforms to the standards set by party officials.

The Communist Party has developed increasingly sophisticated ways to manipulate its citizens, but can it successfully subvert a religion that has withstood repeated repression over its 2,000-year history? Because of Christianity's long, enduring track record, let us pray that Chinese Christians will continue to thrive and be able to surmount all challenges imposed by Xi and his henchmen.

Thank you.