



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
**INTERNATIONAL  
RELIGIOUS  
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# INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The smell of ash lingers in the ruins of the Roman Catholic sanctuary, although it is far from Ash Wednesday. Yet sunbeams stream through the skylights above—rays of hope in the darkness.

Nicaragua's Ortega-Murillo regime has increasingly sought to stifle dissent. It has harassed, arrested, tried, and deported numerous members of the Catholic clergy—leaders of the country's largest religious community. It has used intimidation and manipulation to force into exile leaders of the indigenous Moravian Church, including those who appear on the cover of this year's United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report. It has arrested members of the Mountain Gateway ministry, including U.S. citizens—despite that community's historically positive relationship with the government. The regime has permitted violent attacks on houses of worship, including an arson attack that destroyed the 400-year-old crucifix inside the Chapel of the Blood of Christ in Managua, depicted on the cover.

Religious communities in Nicaragua have continued to show remarkable resilience in the face of such threats. Their members meet discreetly—sometimes in the middle of the night—to exercise their freedom of religion or belief. They continue to provide aid to each other while meeting communal spiritual needs, although the Nicaraguan government views each of these modest acts as deplorable. Like the light streaming through the church skylights, they represent the government's failure to extinguish the human desire for freedom. Ultimately, the tragedy of religious freedom in Nicaragua is not found in the intimidation, arrests, or deportations; it is rather the tragic short-sightedness of a government lacking the moral courage to allow accountability from its own people or to respect as basic a right as freedom of religion or belief.

Unfortunately, such persecution and religious freedom violations are not unique to Nicaragua. In many other parts of the world, a common denominator of authoritarian rule continued to drive restrictions on religious freedom in 2024. In Afghanistan, the Taliban implemented dozens of religious edicts severely limiting the religious freedom of women and girls while disproportionately restricting the same for Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians. China continued its corrosive sinicization policy, forcing the Chinese Community Party's (CCP) ideological agenda into every facet of religious life for Buddhists, Catholic and Protestant Christians, Muslims, Taoists, and others. Russia continued to deploy antisemitism and Holocaust distortion, ban Jehovah's Witnesses, target and harass vulnerable communities, and persecute groups such as the Protestant Word of Life Church and the Church of Scientology.

Governments also failed to adequately protect religious minority communities from mobs or individuals taking out their anger over such conflicts, perhaps most evident in antisemitic harassment and attacks on Jews—despite the remarkable resilience of Jewish communities in the face of such threats. In Tunisia, protesters attacked and destroyed a Jewish religious site, while a spate of attacks on synagogues systematically targeted Canada's Jewish community. In Germany, Berlin's police chief warned Jews to hide their identity in certain parts of the city to avoid danger. Governments moved quickly to respond to antisemitic threats and violence in each of these cases, and yet Jewish communities around the world continued to experience a worsening environment of fear that impeded their free practice of their religion or belief.

Armed conflicts contributed to the displacement of many individuals, forcing them to seek refuge while causing destruction to houses of worship and severely impeding the ability of many individuals, families, and communities to practice their religion or belief. State and nonstate actors alike invoked religion or belief to justify atrocities that, in many cases, disproportionately impacted or even targeted religious groups.

As a result of religious persecution around the world, including ongoing armed conflicts, scores of refugees and internally displaced persons fled their homes in fear for their lives. Many faced immense restrictions on their freedoms, even after fleeing intolerable conditions in their places of origin. While some governments made efforts to house and temporarily provide for these refugees, they also threatened to refoul them back to their home countries at grave risk to their personal safety.

In June, Pakistan began a mass deportation of Afghans, including religious minorities, women, and girls who face serious religious restrictions or even mortal peril upon their return to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Nigeria's government has continued to forcibly close camps hosting displaced Christians who fled violence by Boko Haram, despite persistent security concerns in their communities of origin. In July, the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on India to refrain from the forcible deportation of predominantly Muslim Rohingya refugees to Burma. Waves of refugee displacement continued to prompt religious intolerance and acts of violence as in prior years, particularly against Muslims and Muslim diasporas.

These Muslim communities demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of state and societal harassment, assaults, and violence throughout the year. In June, State Security Service officers in Uzbekistan arrested an estimated 100 Muslim men in the Kashkadarya region. In 2024, some United Kingdom (UK) government officials engaged in anti-Muslim rhetoric, contributing to a worsening climate of intolerance.

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### KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in China remained among the worst in the world. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Xi Jinping continued to lead efforts to update and enforce China's "sinicization of religion" policy, which requires the complete loyalty and subordination of recognized religious groups to the CCP, its political ideology, and its policy agenda. February amendments to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Religious Affairs Regulations reinforced sinicization policy and continued to impose stringent restrictions. In March, Ma Xingrui, CCP secretary of Xinjiang, insisted on sinicizing Islam in that province, calling it an "inevitable trend."

China continued to use high-tech surveillance outside places of worship and other means to repress religious freedom throughout the country. It also weaponized transnational repression and disinformation by using emerging technologies to quash voices critical of the country's religious freedom and related human rights violations. Chinese authorities threatened Uyghur and Tibetan diaspora communities with surveillance, blackmail, and threats against their families living in China to force them into silence. Authorities further promoted tourism to Xinjiang to whitewash its genocidal violations there and dismiss international criticism.

In August, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) acknowledged the lack of progress on human rights for religious minorities in Xinjiang, citing existing problematic laws and policies, limited access to information, and fear of reprisals against individuals cooperating with the United Nations (UN). Authorities continued to imprison Uyghur Muslims for their religious activities, including for charitable contributions and religious instruction. In February, 96-year-old Imam Abidin Damollam died in prison while serving a nine-year sentence for allegedly "promoting religious extremism."

Officials persisted in restricting religious activities of Tibetan Buddhists. Authorities reportedly banned admission of new monks at a monastery in Chamdo prefecture, prohibited religious activities during Saga Dawa in Lhasa, and forced residents to remove religious symbols displayed outside their homes in Sichuan Province. Authorities closed Tibetan monastery schools and enrolled students in state-run boarding schools to forcibly assimilate them, while police arrested and imprisoned Tibetan Buddhists for public and private mentions of the Dalai Lama. Authorities indicated that they intend to interfere in the Dalai Lama's succession process and punish Tibetans who oppose.

Chinese authorities detained, forcibly disappeared, or refused to disclose the whereabouts of underground Catholic clergy who declined to join the state-controlled Catholic organization. Independent house church Protestants faced similar retribution from law enforcement for refusing to join the state-controlled Protestant organization, as police raided house churches and harassed, detained, fined, and imprisoned members on reportedly fabricated charges, including "fraud" and "subversion." In January, a court sentenced Protestant Pastor Kan Xiaoyong to 14 years in prison on groundless allegations.

The government continued to target Falun Gong practitioners, the Church of Almighty God (CAG), and other unrecognized religious groups as illegal "cults." Falun Gong and CAG sources documented thousands of adherents—including Falun Gong practitioner Xu Na and CAG member Mo Xiufeng—who faced arrest, imprisonment, and mistreatment, including deaths resulting from abuse in custody.

Human rights activists continued to express concerns about Hong Kong's new national security law, Article 23, and its impact on religious freedom. Some imprisoned Hong Kong activists have alleged that prison authorities deny them access to religious materials.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate China as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Coordinate with international partners to sanction Chinese officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations, including those engaging in transnational repression against religious minorities on behalf of the Chinese government as well as CCP officials who interfere in the Dalai Lama's plan of succession; and
- Work with like-minded partners to address China's use of technology to

commit religious freedom violations by establishing binding multilateral export controls to counter China's economic coercion, reduce economic and trade dependence on China, and diversify supply chains, including rules governing the development and use of artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies such as genetic sequencing and collection.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Consider legislation to tighten restrictions on China's use of technologies that facilitate human rights abuses and suppression of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB),

including through amendments to the Uyghur Forced Labor Act and the Export Control Act of 2018;

- Ban paid lobbying in the United States by agents representing the Chinese government and its state-affiliated commercial entities that undermine religious freedom and related human rights; and
- Raise China's religious freedom conditions through delegation visits, meetings, and hearings, including through the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, and Select Committee on the CCP.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- [Factsheet: Sinicization of Religion: China's Coercive Religious Policy](#)
- [Factsheet: Misinformation and Disinformation: Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) and Appendix 2

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## Background

According to U.S. government estimates, 18 percent of China's 1.4 billion population are Buddhist (including Tibetan Buddhist), five percent are Christian, and two percent are Muslim. Other significant religious traditions include Taoism, Falun Gong, and folk religious practices. Although China is officially an atheist state, the government formally recognizes five religions—Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Taoism—and regulates them through state-controlled religious organizations.

## Sinicization

Religious groups who refuse to submit to the government's all-encompassing control over religious affairs face widespread persecution. State-controlled religious organizations implement sinicization through intrusive oversight and "Five-Year Sinicization Work Plans" which emphasize loyalty and conformity to CCP ideological requirements. Authorities used sinicization as a pretext to commit gross religious freedom violations against ethnoreligious minorities, including predominantly Muslim Uyghurs, Hui Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists. Authorities forcibly sinicized many Hui Muslim mosques by replacing domes and minarets with Chinese-style pagodas and other CCP-approved architecture, including the Grand Mosque of Shadian. In Xinjiang, the government reportedly turned religious occasions into celebrations of communism, and it banned Muslims from fasting and breaking fasts collectively during Ramadan. State-controlled churches continued to push similar CCP subordination on Christian places of worship and religious activities among both clergy and laity. China also continued to prohibit minors from engaging in religious activities or receiving religious education.

## International Accountability

In 2024, the UN Human Rights Council conducted its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of China. UN member states urged China to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; respect FoRB; allow UN Special Procedures to visit Xinjiang and Tibet; repeal policies persecuting, discriminating against, and forcibly assimilating ethnoreligious minorities, including in Xinjiang and Tibet; and implement the OHCHR's 2022 recommendations for Xinjiang. In March, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk called on China to implement the OHCHR and other UN bodies' recommendations to address fundamental rights violations, including in Xinjiang and Tibet. Human rights organizations accused several Western and Chinese companies of complicity in employing government-backed Uyghur forced labor in their supply chains.

## Transnational Repression and Malign Activities

The Chinese government continued to engage in transnational repression against diaspora religious communities and activists with ties to China. In September, reporting emerged that pro-CCP diaspora groups with ties to the United Front Work Department and support from Chinese diplomats engaged in strategic, coordinated, and violent suppression of Uyghur, Tibetan, and Hong Kong activists protesting President Xi's 2023 visit to San Francisco. Chinese authorities

sought to crack down on diaspora activists and dissidents through collective punishment, such as targeting their families in China with intimidation, forced evictions, travel bans, and criminal proceedings.

## Key U.S. Policy

U.S. officials across the government regularly elevated religious freedom and other related human rights issues in China. In July, the U.S. Department of State imposed visa restrictions on unnamed Chinese officials involved in repressing marginalized religious and ethnic communities in China. Both the State Department and Congress condemned China's persecution of Falun Gong and called for the release of FoRB prisoners, including Jimmy Lai, Ilham Tohti, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, and Gulshan Abbas.

In January, the United States participated in China's UPR, joining its call for an end to transnational repression, forced assimilation, genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, and human rights abuses in Tibet and Inner Mongolia. Then U.S. Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken raised similar concerns during his trip to China in April. Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) and Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR) urged then Secretary Blinken to impose a Level 4 travel advisory to Xinjiang due to China's ongoing genocide against Uyghurs and its promotion of tourism in the region.

Congress raised concerns about ongoing violations of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA), and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security blacklisted additional China-based companies for violating the UFLPA. In September, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden placed new rules on the de minimis exemption following requests from Congress to curb such exemptions from China that violated the UFLPA. The administration also issued new export controls on advanced technologies to protect "national security and foreign policy interests." In December, Congress renewed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act for another five years.

In July, federal prosecutors indicted U.S. citizen Ping Li for providing information to a Chinese state security official about U.S.-based Falun Gong practitioners. That same month, U.S. residents John Chen and Lin Feng pledged guilty to charges in relation to similar Falun Gong targeting. In September, federal prosecutors charged Linda Sun, a former high-ranking New York State government employee, with several crimes, including failure to register as a foreign agent for China. The accused reportedly prevented the governor of New York from publicly addressing China's mass incarceration of Uyghurs based on feedback from a Chinese government official.

In March, the U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva highlighted China's efforts to erode the "unique linguistic, cultural, and religious identity of Tibetans." In June, members of Congress met with the Dalai Lama in India, and U.S. administration officials met with him in New York in August. In July, then President Biden signed into law the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act (S. 138), which instructs the State Department to combat Chinese propaganda and disinformation about Tibetan institutions, including the Dalai Lama.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last redesignated China as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

and Telegram to follow a soccer match between a Dutch and Israeli team. The following night, police conducted a series of arrests after assailants in the city set a train on fire while shouting "cancer Jews." Throughout the year in Weimar, Germany, police investigated the vandalism of at least seven Holocaust memorial stones with antisemitic messages including "Jews are criminals." In early 2024, police investigated on "suspicion of discrimination and a call to hatred" a ski shop at the Pischa mountain resort in Davos that posted a sign saying, "we no longer rent skis to our Jewish brothers." In Lithuania, in April, the Vilnius Regional Prosecutor's Office announced their conclusion that Member of Parliament Remigijus Žemaitaitius had incited hatred against Jews via antisemitic posts on social media.

Elsewhere, in Australia, unknown assailants firebombed a Melbourne synagogue while worshipers were inside, resulting in one injury and extensive damage to the building. Shortly thereafter, vandals spraypainted antisemitic graffiti in a Sydney suburb that is home to Australia's largest Jewish community. Dozens of Jewish institutions across Canada received anonymous bomb threats in August, leading to an investigation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Gunmen fired at a Jewish elementary school in Toronto on three separate occasions throughout the year, prompting a police investigation and the arrest in October of two people connected to the shootings. In addition, police opened an investigation after an unidentified arsonist firebombed a Montreal synagogue in December. In February, rioters in Tunisia set fire to a synagogue courtyard in Sfax, prompting police to arrest a suspect the following month. European governments have condemned and investigated a spate of antisemitic physical assaults, antisemitic hate speech, desecration of property, and vandalism at Holocaust memorial sites across the continent.

In February, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva engaged in Holocaust distortion and inversion, comparing Israel's military campaign against Hamas to the Nazi extermination of Jews in World War II. Despite this disinformation, the provinces of Goias and Sao Paulo endorsed the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Working Definition of Antisemitism. In May, Colombian President Gustavo Petro severed the country's diplomatic relations with Israel, after describing Israeli officials as "neo-Nazis" during the previous year. In April, Chilean Jewish community leaders instructed Jewish students to change out of their school uniforms, which feature logos with Jewish symbols, to avoid harassment and intimidation while outside of school grounds. In March, protesters organized an anti-Israel rally outside a Santiago Jewish community center and threw stones at Jewish individuals attending a wedding there. Chilean Jews wearing kippahs in public faced harassment throughout the year, and vandals targeted a number of Jewish community sites with antisemitic graffiti and other damage.

### **Transnational Repression Affecting FoRB**

A growing number of countries have engaged in FoRB repression beyond their borders in recent years, including in 2024. In August, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer accused Russia of amplifying misinformation on social media to stoke ongoing anti-Muslim riots in the United Kingdom. Several countries, including Russia, China, Belarus, and Turkey, exploited the International Criminal Police Organization's (INTERPOL) Red Notice system to target dissidents on the basis of their religious identity. Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan, have also increased their abuse of INTERPOL mechanisms, leveling fabricated

extremism charges against those who fled the country due to state persecution for their peaceful religious activities.

Several governments also continued to target religious dissidents abroad with violence. India targeted a Sikh activist for assassination in New York, while Canadian police arrested three men in May for their connection to an alleged Indian government assassination of Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Surrey, British Columbia in 2023. Countries also pursued family members of dissidents to silence their relatives living in-country. For example, in July, the sister of Saudi dissident Manahel al-Otaibi reported near-daily harassment, from individuals linked to the Saudi government, over her social media posts in support of her sister who is serving an 11-year prison sentence in Saudi Arabia for advocating for reforms to that country's male guardianship system. Media outlets alleged in August that Saudi government agents had abducted a Saudi woman in Melbourne who had fled the male guardianship system, forcibly repatriating her to Saudi Arabia.

### **Artificial Intelligence and New Technologies Threatening FoRB**

States continued to harness new and emerging technologies to target disfavored religious communities throughout the year. As USCIRF previously reported, the Chinese government regularly uses artificial intelligence (AI); big data; and facial, voice, and gait recognition to conduct mass surveillance against Christians, Falun Gong practitioners, and ethno-religious groups like Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists. Moreover, China has exported its "smart city" products and services—which employ such technologies—and its underlying techno-authoritarian governance to over 100 countries, posing threats to human rights and religious freedom beyond China's borders. In addition, various governments, including India, have used online platforms, including social media, to spread misinformation and disinformation about religious groups. This messaging amplifies intolerance and leads to harassment, intimidation, and threats against those groups. The Russian government increased its use of AI technologies to repress dissent, surveil citizens, and strengthen censorship and narrative control online. The Iranian government also began to employ AI-based technologies to monitor internet traffic and apply its interpretation of Islamic moral standards to digital content. In Egypt, the government, too, has reportedly used AI in conjunction with its 2018 cybercrime law to further political repression and surveillance of dissidents.

In response to such trends, U.S. policy has begun to incrementally address the current and emerging threats that AI poses to international religious freedom and broader human rights. In December, for example, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden further tightened export control of advanced semiconductors used in AI, in an effort to restrict China's development and use of such technologies for repressing human rights and advancing military capabilities.

### **Positive FoRB Related Developments**

Supported by bipartisan advocacy from members of Congress, the U.S. government worked throughout the year to release individuals detained or otherwise persecuted on religious grounds. In December, the Biden administration announced the resettlement in the

Dozens of victims are not facing any charges, yet they remained imprisoned or subjected to other violations that justify inclusion on the FoRB Victims List—such as enforced disappearance or forced renunciation of faith.

Common charges that directly violate international standards of religious freedom include anti-cult laws, blasphemy laws, and apostasy or conversion laws. More frequently, governments exploit or abuse laws that include restrictions on "banned organizations," terrorism laws, and hate speech laws, among many others. Other laws are overly broad by design, so that while they may not technically violate the UDHR, their vague framing or omission of important religious freedom exemptions lead to the limitation of rights in practice. Such laws include those that proscribe spreading propaganda, fomenting separatism, and refusing military service. An exploration of the database can further demonstrate the diversity of such laws that governments have used and abused to deny their people religious freedom, as identified and categorized by USCIRF.

### Types of Violations

Of the documented violations on the FoRB Victims List, the most common type is imprisonment, with 1,592 cases, followed by detention, with 666 cases. House arrest, enforced disappearance, and forced renunciation of faith were much lower with only 51, 18, and 6 respective documented cases. Other categories only applied to 2 cases.

USCIRF has documented 201 cases in which torture was reported. The top five countries and entities accused of torture with the most documented cases are China (79), Uzbekistan (29), Iran (21), Saudi Arabia (20), and Russia (18). USCIRF has also documented 151 cases in which medical neglect was reported. The countries with the top five most reported cases of medical neglect include Iran (62), Russia (20), China (17), India (14), and Saudi Arabia (9).

### Perpetrators

For the 2024 reporting year, the FoRB Victims List included more than 2,335 individuals targeted by 28 different governments and entities. USCIRF has records that indicate more than 1,342 of those victims remain in some form of custody, while more than 696 have been released. The detention status of approximately 283 cases remains unknown and, tragically, 9 individuals are reported to have died in state custody.