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## Human Rights in China

Over thirty years after the June 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, the Communist Party of China (CCP) remains firmly in power. People's Republic of China (PRC) leaders have maintained political control through a mix of repression and responsiveness to some public preferences, delivering economic prosperity to many citizens, co-opting the middle and educated classes, and stoking nationalism to bolster CCP legitimacy. The party is particularly wary of unsanctioned collective activity related to sensitive groups, such as religious and labor groups, ethnic minorities, political dissidents, and human rights activists. PRC authorities have implemented particularly harsh policies against Tibetans, Uyghurs, and followers of the Falun Gong spiritual exercise.

### Trends

Under the previous PRC leader, Hu Jintao (2002-2012), the CCP tolerated limited public criticism of state policies and some human rights advocacy around issues not seen as threatening to CCP control. During the final years of Hu's term, however, the party began to reassert its control over society, a trend that has intensified and expanded since 2013 under the leadership of CCP General Secretary and State President Xi Jinping. One of Xi's first targets was the budding network of Chinese rights activists, including the detention in July 2015 of more than 250 human rights lawyers and associates. Authorities charged and convicted more than a dozen of them of subversion, "disturbing social order," and other crimes.

The PRC government has enacted laws and policies that enhance the legal authority of the state to counter potential ideological, social, political, and security challenges, including three new major laws in 2017. A law regulating foreign non-governmental organizations places them under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Security, tightens their registration requirements, and imposes greater controls on their activities, funding, and staffing. The Cybersecurity Law gives the government broad powers to control and restrict internet traffic, and places greater burdens upon private internet service providers to monitor online content and assist public security organs. The National Intelligence Law obliges individuals, organizations, and institutions to assist and cooperate with state intelligence efforts.

Since 2013, China has dropped three places, from 173 to 177 (out of 180 countries), on Reporters Without Borders' *World Press Freedom Index*. The government blocks access to 8 of the 25 busiest global sites. State authorities and private companies also monitor and regulate social media use in order to prevent sensitive topics and information from being discussed and disseminated.

PRC methods of social and political control are evolving to include sophisticated technologies. The government seeks to develop a "social credit system" that aggregates data on individuals' credit scores, consumer behavior, internet use, and criminal records, and scores citizens' "trustworthiness." China has deployed tens of millions of surveillance cameras, as well as facial, voice, iris, and gait recognition equipment, to reduce crime generally as well as to track the movements of ethnic Tibetans and Uyghurs and other sensitive groups.

The government's response to the Coronavirus outbreak that was centered in Wuhan, China, in January-March 2020 highlighted the PRC's expansive social control apparatus, and in particular its restrictions on freedom of expression. The case of "whistleblower doctor" Li Wenliang, who was reprimanded by Wuhan authorities after he communicated on social media his concerns about the new virus, three weeks before government media acknowledged it, elicited online calls for free speech. Li contracted the Coronavirus from a patient and died on February 7, 2020. The government then further censored unauthorized online discussion about the virus and the government's response, and detained independent reporters.

**Further Reading:** CRS Report R45956, *Human Rights in China and U.S. Policy: Issues for the 116th Congress*, by Thomas Lum and Michael A. Weber; CRS Report R43781, *The Tibetan Policy Act of 2002: Background and Implementation*, by Susan V. Lawrence; CRS In Focus IF10281, *Uyghurs in China*, by Thomas Lum; and CRS In Focus IF10803, *Global Human Rights: International Religious Freedom Policy*, by Michael A. Weber.

### Religious and Ethnic Minority Policies

In 2016, President Xi launched a policy known as "Sinicization," by which China's religious practitioners and ethnic minorities are required to conform to Chinese culture, the socialist system, and communist party policies. Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group in China, make up about 91% of the country's population and dominate its culture. The party's Sinicization policy and the 2018 amendments to the government's Regulations on Religious Affairs have affected all religions to varying degrees. New policies further restrict religious travel to foreign countries and contacts with foreign religious organizations and tighten bans on religious practice among party members and religious education of children. All religious venues now are required to raise the national flag and teach traditional Chinese culture and "core socialist values."

China's Sinicization campaign has intensified government efforts to pressure Christian churches that are not formally approved by the government, and hundreds reportedly have been shut down in recent years. PRC authorities have

ordered mosques throughout China to be “Sinicized”—minarets have been taken down, onion domes have been replaced by traditional Chinese roofs, and Islamic motifs and Arabic writings have been removed.

## Tibetans

Following anti-government protests during the spring of 2008, authorities in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and other Tibetan areas in China imposed more intrusive controls on Tibetan religious life and culture. These include the curtailment of rights and freedoms to a greater degree than elsewhere in China, arbitrary detention and imprisonment of Tibetans, and ideological re-education of Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns. The PRC government insists that Chinese laws, and not Tibetan Buddhist religious traditions, govern the process by which lineages of Tibetan lamas are reincarnated, and that the state has the right to choose the successor to the Tibetan spiritual leader, the 83-year-old 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, who lives in exile in India.

## Uyghurs

In the past decade, PRC authorities have imposed severe restrictions on the religious and cultural activities of Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic group who practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam and live primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Demonstrations by Uyghurs and ethnic unrest erupted in 2009, including Uyghur violence against Han Chinese and government reprisals. Subsequent periodic clashes between Uyghurs and Xinjiang security personnel spiked between 2013 and 2015. PRC leaders sought to “stabilize” the XUAR through more intensive security measures, including arrests, extensive electronic surveillance and monitoring of internet use, and collecting biometric data of Uyghurs for identification purposes.

Since 2017, the XUAR government has arbitrarily detained up to an estimated 1.5 million Uyghurs, out of a population of about 10.5 million, and a smaller number of ethnic Kazakhs, in ideological re-education centers. Many of them had engaged in traditional religious and ethnic cultural practices that the government now perceives as manifesting “strong religious views” that may constitute or lead to separatism, extremism, or terrorism. Since 2019, thousands of Uyghurs, including many former detainees, reportedly have been employed in textile and other labor-intensive industries in Xinjiang and other provinces, under circumstances that some observers argue indicate the use of forced labor. Experts say that the government’s forceful attempts to transform the thought and customs of Uyghurs and assimilate them into Han culture will result in the destruction of Uyghur culture and identity.

## Selected Policy Tools

- **Democracy Programs:** Since 2001, the Department of State has administered human rights, democracy, rule of law, civil society, internet freedom, and environmental programs in China and promoted sustainable development, environmental conservation, and preservation of indigenous culture in Tibetan areas.
- **National Endowment for Democracy (NED):** Funded primarily by an annual congressional appropriation,

NED has sponsored programs that promote human rights and democracy in China since the mid-1980s.

- **International Media:** U.S. government-funded Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) provide external sources of independent or alternative news and opinion to audiences in China. Both media outlets broadcast in Mandarin, Cantonese, and Tibetan. RFA Uyghur is the only Uyghur language news service outside of China.
- **The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-330):** Requires the Department of State to report to Congress annually regarding the level of access PRC authorities grant U.S. diplomats, journalists, and tourists to Tibetan areas in China, and bars entry into the United States or revokes U.S. visas of PRC individuals involved in policies that restrict U.S. access to Tibet.
- **The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (P.L. 114-328, Subtitle F, Title XII):** Authorizes the President to impose economic sanctions and visa denials or revocations against foreign individuals responsible for “gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.”
- **Export Restrictions:** The United States may impose restrictions on the export of U.S. goods and services to Chinese entities on the basis of human rights concerns. In October 2019, the U.S. Department of Commerce announced the addition of 28 PRC entities to the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) “entity list” under the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) because of the role of these entities in human rights abuses in Xinjiang.
- **Forced Labor Import Restrictions.** Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930 (19 U.S.C. 1307) forbids the importation of “goods, wares, articles, and merchandise” into the United States that were produced with forced labor. Pursuant to this provision, in October 2019, U.S. Customs and Border Protection blocked the import of certain apparel items produced by a Chinese company believed to have used forced labor in Xinjiang.
- **The Tibetan Policy Act of 2002** (Foreign Relations Authorization Act, FY2003, P.L. 107-228) supports “the aspirations of the Tibetan people to safeguard their distinct identity.” The act established in the Department of State the position of Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, which has been vacant since 2017.
- **International Financial Institutions:** The Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 and annual foreign operations appropriations legislation permit U.S. representatives to international financial institutions to support projects in Tibet only if they do not encourage the migration and settlement of non-Tibetans into Tibet or the transfer of Tibetan-owned properties to non-Tibetans.

## Selected Recent Legislation

Bills introduced in the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress related to human rights in China include S. 178; H.R. 1025; S. 2386; S. 2972; H.R. 4331; H.R. 6210; and S. 3471.

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