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Human Rights in China

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, relatively unfettered dissemination of news and exchange of opinion on social media on some topics, 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. In July 2015, the government launched a crackdown on more than 250 human rights lawyers and associates, detaining many of them and charging and convicting 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*. More than 60 PRC journalists and bloggers are in detention. The PRC government, which oversees one of the most extensive internet censorship systems in the world, 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.

Since August 2018, public security agents in Beijing have attempted to silence student labor activists at Peking University, one of the country's most prestigious institutions of higher learning. The party appears to fear that the student movement could help workers to independently organize and stage protests at a time when labor demonstrations are rising across the country, or encourage other forms of social activism.

Further Reading: 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; CRS In Focus IF10803, *Global Human Rights: International Religious Freedom Policy*, by Michael A. Weber; and CRS Report R44605, *China: Economic Sanctions*, by Dianne E. Rennack.

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 14th Dalai Lama, who lives in exile in India. Since 2009, 154 Tibetans within China are known to have self-immolated, many apparently to protest PRC policies in the TAR and other Tibetan areas. Talks between PRC officials and representatives of the Dalai Lama have been stalled since 2010.

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). Ethnic unrest erupted in 2009, involving Uyghur violence against non-Uyghurs and government reprisals. Subsequent periodic clashes between Uyghurs and Xinjiang security personnel spiked between 2013 and 2015, and PRC leaders have sought to “stabilize” the XUAR through more intensive security measures. Measures include extensive electronic surveillance and monitoring of internet use and collecting biometric data of Uyghurs for identification purposes.

Xinjiang authorities have undertaken the mass internment of ethnic Uyghurs; many of whom 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 2017, the XUAR government has detained an estimated over one million Uyghurs, out of a population of about 10.5 million, and a smaller number of ethnic Kazakhs in ideological re-education centers. Of this total, nearly 400 Uyghur intellectuals reportedly have been detained or their whereabouts are unknown. PRC officials describe the centers as “vocational education institutions” in which “trainees” learn job skills and undergo “de-extremification.”

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):** The act 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:** Enacted as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2017 (P.L. 114-328), the act authorizes the President to impose economic sanctions and visa denials or revocations against foreign individuals responsible for “gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.” The Administration thus far has sanctioned one Chinese security official, Gao Yan, in 2017 pursuant to the act. The Administration is believed to be considering sanctions against officials in Xinjiang, but these actions reportedly have been delayed or set aside in the midst of the U.S.-China bilateral trade negotiations.
- **Export Restrictions:** Originally imposed under the Tiananmen sanctions (Foreign Relations Authorization of 1990-1991, P.L. 101-246), the U.S. government also continues to restrict exports of crime control and detection equipment to China due to China’s designation as a “country of particular concern” for religious freedom, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA, P.L. 105-292).
- **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 116th Congress related to human rights in China include S. 178; H.R. 649; H.R. 1025; H.Res. 393; and S.Res. 221.

Thomas Lum, tlum@crs.loc.gov, 7-7616

Michael A. Weber, mweber@crs.loc.gov, 7-2212

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