

Human Rights & Religious Freedom

ARE CIVIL AND POLITICAL LIBERTIES IMPROVING OR WORSENING?

CHINA BALANCE SHEET

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Background

- China's record on human rights and religious freedom is rightly open to criticism, both from within China and from the international community. Amnesty International reported that "thousands of people who pursued their faith outside officially sanctioned churches were subjected to harassment and many to detention and imprisonment" in 2007.
- In December 2005, the UN special rapporteur on torture concluded a visit and found that "the practice of torture, though on the decline—particularly in urban areas—remains widespread in China."
- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2008 annual report found that "over the past year, religious leaders have been imprisoned and followers detained and fined for 'illegal cult activity,'" noting that 693 Protestant leaders and followers were detained, with 38 receiving prison sentences of one or more years. At least 30 Roman Catholic bishops or priests remain under arrest, imprisonment, or detention.
- According to the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, the whereabouts of over 1,200 Tibetans detained following the March 2008 unrest are unknown; others involved have received sentences ranging from three years to life imprisonment. In the Xinjiang region, minors are prohibited from participating in any religious activity or instruction before the completion of nine years of compulsory education.

Current Situation

- The outlook for human rights in China is currently uncertain. Some important progress is evident: Beijing no longer simply dismisses international norms and concerns but feels compelled to respond to them. Permitting the visit of the UN special rapporteur on torture in 2005—albeit after some 10 years of negotiation—was a step in the right direction.
- China has ratified the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and signed, but not yet ratified, the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In December 2005, despite rejecting the findings of the UN special rapporteur, China "expressed willingness to work with him and the United Nations on future visits."
- The U.S. State Department notes that China's modernization has "improved dramatically the lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese, increased social mobility, and expanded the scope of personal freedom. This has meant substantially greater freedom of travel, employment opportunity, educational and cultural pursuits, job and housing choices, and access to information."
- China has also agreed to discuss human rights as part of the ongoing "senior leaders dialogue" with the United States, and it carries out a formal human rights dialogue with the European Union.

THE FREEDOM HOUSE SURVEY FOR 2008 RANKS CHINA AT 7 AND 6 FOR POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES, RESPECTIVELY, ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 7, WITH 7 DESIGNATING THE LEAST FREE COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD. HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH 2008 CLAIMS THAT CHINA "CONTINUES TO DENY OR RESTRICT ITS CITIZENS' FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION, AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION." AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AND THE U.S. CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA EFFECTIVELY ECHO THESE FINDINGS.

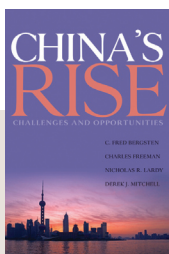
Current Situation

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- According to a 2007 survey reported in the official media, some 300 million Chinese are “religious,” almost three times the figure reported by the government in 2005. About 40 million Chinese citizens identify themselves as Christian, and 200 million identify themselves as Buddhist, Taoist, or worshippers of “legendary figures.” According to government data, there are approximately 20 million Muslims. There are also thought to be hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners across China.
- Notwithstanding improvements in some areas, nearly all outside observers have found a general backsliding in China for human rights and religious freedom under the new Hu-Wen leadership. The Party continues to crack down on civil and particularly religious groups that may generate political loyalties to persons or authorities beyond its control.

Implications

- The human rights situation in China presents a mixed picture. Whether the current backsliding is another example of the tightening and loosening that has traditionally characterized the Party’s approach to human rights and religious freedom, or a sign of a fundamental shift in policy, needs to be closely monitored.
- Pressing Beijing for improvements in its human rights record should be an indispensable part of the United States’ China policy. At the same time, such efforts should be accompanied by informed and realistic expectations.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:
SEE CHAPTER 3: “CHINA’S DOMESTIC TRANSFORMATION: DEMOCRATIZATION OR DISORDER?”
IN *CHINA: THE BALANCE SHEET: WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS TO KNOW NOW ABOUT THE EMERGING SUPERPOWER* BY C. FRED BERGSTEN, BATES GILL, NICHOLAS LARDY, DEREK J. MITCHELL