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## **Nervous China ramp up religious persecution**

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WASHINGTON – President Xi Jinping’s China is becoming a more fearful place. The government has cracked down both on dissent and contact with the West. Religious persecution also is rising: the communist god that failed fears competition.

A new Freedom House report details how “the authorities have intensified many of their restrictions, resulting in an overall increase in religious persecution” since Xi took power in November 2012.

Persecution reveals a leadership which is nervous, even scared. The Chinese Communist Party is filled with ambitious time-servers, people too smart to believe Marxist and Maoist nonsense but too venal to reject the fictions by which China’s rulers justify their power.

In recent decades reforms have expanded the space for expressions of religious faith. That liberty is not easily retracted.

Explains Freedom House: “Rather than checking religion’s natural expansion and keeping it under political control, the CCP’s rigid constraints have essentially created an enormous black market, forcing many believers to operate outside the law and to view the regime as unreasonable, unjust, or illegitimate.” In turn, “believers have responded with a surprising degree of resistance, including in faith communities that have generally enjoyed cooperative relationships with state and party officials.”

Worse from Beijing’s viewpoint, religious believers are adopting tactics that can easily be adapted for political protests. Christians “have published joint letters, boycotted ceremonies, worshipped outdoors, asserted their legal rights, and physically blocked demolitions or cross removals. Many Christians also employ more subtle tactics to reduce the impact of state controls, such as incorporating religious outreach into charity work, attending private mountainside trainings, or cultivating cooperative relations with local officials.”

The Xi government may regret what it has inadvertently triggered.

Freedom House estimates there are some 350 million believers in China, more than a fourth of the population. There may be 185 million to 250 million Buddhists, 60 million to 80 million Protestant Christians, 21 million to 23 million Muslims, 7 million to 20 million Falun Gong

practitioners, 12 million Catholic Christians, and 6 million to 8 million Tibetan Buddhists. (There are no numbers for Taoists.)

Persecution is low to very low for Taoists, Chinese Buddhists, and Hui Muslims. Catholics face moderate restrictions; Protestants high persecution. Very high levels of repression are applied to Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims and Falun Gong.

Xi's record has been negative, but not entirely so. For instance, Falun Gong practitioners and Catholics may be doing slightly better, the latter because of improving relations between China and the Vatican.

Little has changed for Taoists and Chinese Buddhists. Hui Muslims are somewhat worse off, suffering "some intensified restrictions and Islamophobia." So, too, Tibetan Muslims, who face new punitive measures.

Uighur Muslims face greater persecution. Details Freedom House: "Controls on religion have deepened and expanded in" Xinjiang.

Also topping the Xi government's recent campaign are Protestants. Notes Freedom House: "As the larger of the two main Christians denominations in China, Protestants have been particularly affected by cross-removal and church-demolition campaigns, punishment of state-sanctioned leaders, and the arrest of human rights lawyers who take up Christians' cases."

Freedom House's findings are backed by other analysts and organizations. For instance, the State Department issues an annual report on religious liberty.

The latest issue points to "reports that the government physically abused, detained, arrested, tortured, sentenced to prison, or harassed adherents of both registered and unregistered religious groups for activities relating to their religious beliefs and practices." The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom rates China as a Country of Particular Concern for "its systematic, egregious, and ongoing abuses."

Of course, abstract summaries do not convey the individual and community hardship involved. Believers die, go to prison, and lose their livelihoods while attempting to live out their faiths. Religious persecution is a crime, not a policy.

Despite the intensive and extensive repression detailed by Freedom House, religious beliefs and groups "have survived or spread, representing a remarkable failure of the party's repressive capability. Meanwhile, official actions are generating resentment, assertiveness, and activism among populations that might previously have been apolitical and largely content with CCP rule."

In short, while the hardship faced by individual believers is very real, the long-term prospects for religious liberty look promising. Either China's rulers come to their political senses and choose to accommodate religious believers. Or Beijing continues on its current repressive course, making political upheaval and the collapse of communist rule more likely. Either way, the Chinese people eventually will be free to worship any god as they wish.

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