



Xi Jinping's Persecution of Chinese Christians

Doug Bandow

March 31, 2024

The problem when standing on the mountaintop is that you also may be standing at the precipice. That appears to be the situation facing Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping. His word is law, but that leaves him with no one to blame for the plethora of challenges facing his regime.

Economic growth has slowed, the real estate market risks collapse, high debts bedevil China's state banks, corruption continues to undermine military readiness, and Xi has been forced to purge political and military ranks of his own appointees. His tight control over almost every aspect of Chinese life, including the economy, is discouraging domestic entrepreneurship and foreign investment. The People's Republic of China faces potential demographic collapse, with the population having begun a long and sharp decline. Doubts are growing that the PRC's economy will ever surpass America's.

In China believers face harassment, arrest, torture, and imprisonment.

Perhaps worst of all, the regime continues its retreat to Maoist tyranny. Political controls have grown stifling. Only Xi's personal experience with the Cultural Revolution, which convulsed his family as well as the nation, might have prevented the reappearance of the infamous Red Guards, waving books of Xi's rather than Mao's sayings. Nevertheless, the insistence that everyone in every endeavor spout Xi-isms has left some liberal-minded Chinese in despair. One told me that once they could look forward to some political change every ten years. No longer.

Although Xi might believe himself to be a new god, the influence of previous supreme leaders, including Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, Nicolae Ceausescu, Enver Hoxha, and Saddam Hussein vanished almost overnight on their deaths. Xi's legacy might disappear equally swiftly.

Indeed, his regime's ruthless repression of religious believers, especially of what Beijing views as "foreign" faiths, suggests that Chinese communism hopes to become theology as well as ideology. Rather than seeking to close all churches, the regime has attempted to absorb them, requiring them to display Xi's photo and CCP propaganda. The party is even determined to reinterpret if not rewrite the Bible, as presented in China. As such, Xi should consider the fate of Herod Agrippa, as related in Acts 21-23: "Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man.' Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died."

Certainly, religious believers are suffering from increasing persecution. ChinaAid's latest annual assessment, "ChinaAid's Annual Persecution Report 2023," details the Chinese state's continuing assault on all religions, and particularly Christianity. The organization begins with the regime's call to Sinicize — in reality communize — religion.

For instance, politburo member Shi Taifeng called on the official religious associations “to fully implement the CCP’s theories, principles, and policies regarding religion, adhere to the direction of the Sinicization of Chinese religions, and actively guide religions to adapt to the socialist society of China.” The regime also promoted “faculty reinforcement for Marxist religious studies and research,” which obviously is intended to override personal faith. Moreover, new rules were issued “to regulate the inspection, approval, and registration of religious activity sites, their organization and structure, management of legal obligations.”

The CCP detailed a long list of prohibitions, such as holding religious activities outside of religious venues, naming them “after any church, denomination, or person,” and creating “affiliation relationships.” Most formidable is the requirement that practicing believers “endorse the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system, thoroughly implement Xi Jinping’s thoughts about socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era ... practice core socialist values, and adhere to the direction of the Sinicization of Religion.” In other words, abandon their religious beliefs, at least any serious ones.

Throughout the year the party went to great effort make churches a de facto subsidiary of the CCP. Little expense was spared in obnoxious propaganda and officious regulation. Significant barriers were created to religious activities, celebrations, and education, as well as youth ministries and evangelism. Activism on behalf of democracy and human rights was punished.

However, millions of believers have resisted such efforts, causing the regime to turn to more traditional repression. Among the tactics employed:

1, Destroying churches.

For instance, “On the evening of January 11, without an agreed compensation plan, the Ruian county government of Wenzhou city, Zhejiang province, dispatched a large number of SWAT agents to forcibly demolish Nangang Church Feiyun Street, Nangang village, in order to build commercial buildings on its site. The church covered an area of 8 acres and was worth tens of millions of RMB. Two videos of the forced demolition were circulated on the Internet. One of them showed that dozens of police stood fully armed, wearing helmets, masks, police uniforms, and raincoats, confronting Christians attempting to defend the church. The other video showed several police officers surrounding Christians who came to stop the demolition of the church.”

2. Shutting churches and arresting members.

But one example: “In the morning of May 21, joint law enforcement agents stormed Zhongxing Christian Church, a member church of Chinese Evangelical Fellowship in Zhengzhou city led by Pastor Ma Teng. A dozen agents from the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau, Civil Affairs Bureau, and the Urban Management Brigade broke into the church and destroyed personal property. They also issued a notice to ban the church and sealed off its front door. Personal belongings left at the scene by some church members, including an engagement ring, were all stolen.”

3. Prosecuting lay Christians and church leaders.

Age is no obstacle: “Accused of illegally selling lawfully printed Bibles, Wang Honglan of Inner Mongolia’s Hohhot was charged with ‘illegal business operations’ and arrested on April 14, 2021, along with 11 preachers and co-workers. As of the latest, three of them are on bail awaiting trial and nine of them remain in police custody, including Wang Honglan (68 years old; suffers from cerebral infarction, heart disease, adrenal tumor, purpura, kidney stones); Wang’s husband Ji Heying (73 years old); suffering from hypertension and diabetes); Ji Guolong (son of Wang and Ji); Wang Jiale (Wang’s nephew); Liu Wei and his wife 23 Liu Minna (suffers from heart disease), Zhang Wang, Yang Zhijun (his wife Yu Lina was released on bail; they have a child), and Ban Yanhong (63 years old).”

4. “Disappearing” church personnel.

One among many examples of this totalitarian practice is Wang Honglan, “charged with ‘illegal business operations’ and arrested on April 14, 2021, along with 11 preachers and co-workers. As of the latest, three of them are on bail awaiting trial and nine of them remain in police custody, including Wang Honglan (68 years old; suffers from cerebral infarction, heart disease, adrenal tumor, purpura, kidney stones); Wang’s husband Ji Heying (73 years old); suffering from hypertension and diabetes); Ji Guolong (son of Wang and Ji); Wang Jiale (Wang’s nephew); Liu Wei and his wife 23 Liu Minna (suffers from heart disease), Zhang Wang, Yang Zhijun (his wife Yu Lina was released on bail; they have a child), and Ban Yanhong (63 years old).”

5. Concocting criminal charges against church leaders.

Victims of this practice include “Kan Xiaoyong (65 y.o.) and his wife Wang Fengying (63 y.o.) are natives of Wuhan, Hebei province. Kan was a successful businessman before he left his secular career to become a church pastor. In 2018, they established ‘Discipleship Home Fellowship’ online in Liaoning province’s Dalian city. They donated generously to charity and sponsored 100 children with anemia. Wang Fengying had won national awards as a model schoolteacher. She followed her husband to Dalian to help with evangelism.” They were tortured and tried based on the fabricated charges.

6. Fining churches and members.

For instance, “On June 11, the venue rented by a Christian from Shengjia Church in Shunde District, Foshan city, Guangdong province, was raided by Shunde District Public Security, Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau, Street Neighborhood Committee, and other government agencies. They took away some church belongings and asked the members present to make written statements. On August 31, Shunde District Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau issued an ‘Administrative Penalty Decision’ to Preacher Deng Yanxiang, Deacon Zhu Longjiang, and Deacon Wang Weicai who were held at a detention center on the grounds that they organized illegal religious activities in the name of ‘Shengjia Church.’ The Decision also imposed a fine of 4,800 yuan (~\$658). On September 1, Shunde District Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau issued an ‘Administrative Penalty Decision’ to Elder Zhu Longfei, who was held at a detention center. For the same reason, a fine of 4,800 yuan was imposed.”

7. Abusing church leaders.

An example is Ru Zongren, who “returned to his hometown to serve as a pastor at Chengxi Christian Church. On May 19, 2015, Ru Zongren’s church was forcibly demolished by the local government. Ru stepped in to defend the church, but was beaten up and injured, which caused kidney failure, so he has to rely on kidney dialysis to sustain his life since then. The local authorities continued to persecute him. In July, 2023, due to the upcoming visit of the Central Government’s Inspection Team to Anhui province, the local government once again arbitrarily detained Ru Zongren. The most outrageous is that when Ru Zongren needed hemodialysis and local government officials had to take him to the hospital for treatment, they kept him handcuffed and shackled, and bound him to the hospital bed for nearly five hours.”

8. Prohibiting evangelism.

Sharing the Gospel is dangerous: “On September 13, Ms. Yan, a staff member of Dao’en Presbyterian Church in Xuzhou, Jiangsu province, was summoned by the police for leading street evangelism, and later administratively detained for five days for allegedly ‘organizing an outlawed social group to continue its activities’.”

9. Harassing and threatening believers.

For instance, “Liao Enxin, a young house church pastor in Pingxiang, Jiangxi province in southern China, has been active in evangelism and publishing faith-related articles on the Internet for many years. Some of his articles regarding church and state relations have attracted a great number of readers. As a prominent house church leader in Pingxiang who insists on holding Christian meetings, he has become an eye sore to local authorities. Liao was often summoned by security personnel. In January of this year, local security personnel brought police into his home and asked him to accept their friend request on WeChat (a social media platform) to ‘strengthen ties’.”

10. Treating religious contributions as criminal fraud.

An example was the Wangjia Hunli Church, which in 2016 was raided by the local religious bureau. “Officials confiscated more than 40 computers and 300,000 yuan (~\$44,310) from the church, and arrested Pastor Wei Xiaomei, her husband Li Bingxin, and Zhang Tao. Both the couple and Zhang Tao were charged with fraud in 2017, and released on probation in October, 2018. In 2021, however, authorities again imposed multiple administrative penalties on this church, including confiscations, fines, and late payment fees totaling 36 million yuan (~\$5,317,200). The church hired a legal team to respond to the lawsuit, and the case went through a trial and administrative reconsideration phase, followed by an administrative litigation request to the Zhuhai Intermediate People’s Court, which still has not gained any progress. On July 7, 2022, the three Christians involved in the case received an ‘administrative compulsion’ letter serving 42 as a reminder and request for them to pay the hefty fine or the court would enforce it.”

ChinaAid includes a long list of those who have been tried, currently face charges, or have suffered in other ways. Particularly useful is the report’s review of court cases and publication of names of those arrested and facing trial. Victims deserving attention, protest, and prayer include

pastor Lian Changnian, pastor Lian Xuliang, and preacher Fu Juan of Xi'an Church of Abundance; house church evangelist Chen Lijun; three Christian laywomen, Li Bingrong, Huang Qiuyan, and Jie Lihong; pastor Zhou Songlin, elder Ding Zhongfu, preacher Mao Junma, preacher Pei Defei, and church management staff Yang Peiyun; and elder Zhang Chunlei. They should be remembered not only by their Christian brothers and sisters around the world, but also by all who believe in freedom of faith and conscience. Particularly noteworthy is the harassment and prosecution of those associated with the Early Rain Covenant Church: preacher Dai Zhichao, along with many other staffers and members

Also, worth reading is ChinaAid's companion volume, "Top 10 Persecution Cases in China 2023." Much shorter than the annual report, this volume details the worst ten Chinese assaults on religious liberty. In China believers face harassment, arrest, torture, and imprisonment. They pay an increasing price for their faith.

Ironically, Xi's attempt to enforce theological conformity to the CCP is likely to backfire. By and large, Chinese Christians are focused on God, not the party, and are seeking to care for their community, not overthrow the state. However, the regime has turned the established political order into something that looks like "the Beast" of Revelation imagery, which only spurs opposition. Denied freedom to live faithful lives, Christians have no choice but to organize and resist. With more Christians than party members in the PRC, repression is more likely to destabilize than strengthen the regime.

Xi's attempt to make the CCP into a substitute deity has failed. Rising popular dissatisfaction has given rise to the "let it rot" and "lying flat" movements, which reject the party's attempt to determine the purpose of life. For that the Chinese know they must go elsewhere. The more fervently the regime attempts to crush those who look beyond politics for answers, the more likely it will make religious faith their ultimate destination.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and editor of the political magazine Inquiry. He writes regularly for leading publications such as Fortune magazine, National Interest, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Times.