

China continues efforts to exert party control over religious groups

The UN has received reports of Muslim minorities being detained; Christians recount churches raided, crosses destroyed, and Bibles burned.

by Associated Press and [Christian Century staff](#) in the [October 10, 2018](#) issue

Pastors and a group that monitors religion in China said the government is ratcheting up a crackdown on congregations, while a United Nations committee expressed concerns that Muslims are being detained and tortured.

Under President Xi Jinping, China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong, religious believers are seeing their freedoms shrink dramatically even as the country undergoes a religious revival.

Though religious freedom was written into the Chinese constitution in 1982, there is [a campaign to Sinicize religion by demanding loyalty to the officially atheist Communist Party](#) and eliminating any challenge to its power over people's lives.

A [recent statement from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination](#) said it had received "numerous reports of detention of large numbers of ethnic Uighurs and other Muslim minorities held incommunicado and often for long periods, without being charged or tried, under the pretext of countering terrorism and religious extremism."

The committee further cited mass surveillance and police targeting of Uighurs and said that people were being "forced to spend varying periods in political 're-education camps' for even nonthreatening expressions of Muslim ethno-religious culture like daily greetings." The committee stated that there was no official data on the number of people detained, but it ranged upward from tens of thousands. Party officials denied the reports.

Meanwhile, Christians reported government actions such as raiding churches, destroying crosses, and burning Bibles. Bob Fu of the U.S.-based group China Aid

said that the closure of churches in central Henan province and a prominent house church in Beijing in recent weeks represents a “significant escalation” of the crackdown.

Fu said for the first time since Mao’s radical 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution, Christians have been compelled to make declarations renouncing their Christian faith, under pain of expulsion from school and loss of welfare benefits.

A pastor whose church was raided, who asked not to be identified to avoid repercussions from authorities, said the church had been in discussions with local authorities who demanded it “reform” itself, but no agreement had been reached or official documents released. A city government official disputed the account.

Chinese law requires religious believers to worship only in congregations registered with the authorities, but many millions belong to so-called underground or house churches.

Ezra Jin Mingri, pastor of Zion, known as the largest house church in Beijing, with six branches, said it was shuttered in early September by some 60 government workers accompanied by buses, police cars, and fire trucks.

“Churches will continue to develop,” Jin said. “Blocking the sites will only intensify conflicts.” —Associated Press; *Christian Century* staff

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “China continues efforts to exert party control over religious groups.”