News



A man walks out from a pavilion near the Xishiku Catholic Church during a rainy day in Beijing, May 9, 2025. (AP/Andy Wong, File)

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Chinese authorities are increasing pressure on underground Catholic communities to join the state-controlled official church while tightening surveillance and travel restrictions on all of China's estimated 12 million Catholics, a rights group said Wednesday.

The detailed report from Human Rights Watch said the heightened pressure was part of a decade-old campaign to ensure that religious denominations and independent churches are loyal to the officially atheist Communist Party, a claim the Chinese government rejected, saying the group is "consistently biased against China."

China's Catholics have been divided between an official, state-controlled church that didn't recognize papal authority and an underground church that remained loyal to Rome through decades of persecution.

Pope Francis, in 2018, sought to ease Vatican-China tensions with a deal giving the state-controlled church a say in naming bishops — a task traditionally exclusive to the pope.

Despite that deal, "Catholics in China face escalating repression that violates their religious freedoms," said Yalkun Uluyol, a China researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Pope Leo XIV should urgently review the agreement and press Beijing to end the persecution and intimidation of underground churches, clergy, and worshippers."

The Vatican spokesman, Matteo Bruni, didn't immediately respond Wednesday when asked to comment on the report.

In a statement sent to The Associated Press, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Office said Human Rights Watch "fabricates all manner of lies and rumors, and lacks any credibility whatsoever." It added that the government "oversees religious affairs in accordance with the law and protects citizens' freedom of religious belief and normal religious activities."

Human Rights Watch said its researchers are not allowed into China. It said its report is based on input from people outside China "who had firsthand knowledge of Catholic life in China," as well as experts on religious freedom and Catholicism in China.

Under the 2018 agreement, Beijing proposes candidates for bishop that the pope can then veto, though the agreement's full text has never been made public.

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Last June, a month after becoming pope, Leo made his first appointment of a Chinese bishop under the agreement. And in a subsequent interview, Leo specified that he would continue with the agreement "in the short term."

"I'm also in ongoing dialogue with a number of people, Chinese, on both sides of some of the issues that are there," Leo said. " It's a very difficult situation. In the long term, I don't pretend to say this is what I will and will not do, but after two months, I've already begun having discussions at several levels on that topic."

Since 2018, according to Human Rights Watch, Chinese authorities have pressured underground Catholic communities to join the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association "by arbitrarily detaining, forcibly disappearing ... and subjecting underground Catholic bishops and priests to house arrest."

The report described some of those actions, attributed to people who had left China and who were not named in the report.

The government has also intensified ideological control, surveillance, restrictions on religious activities, and foreign ties in official churches, according to Human Rights Watch. It said that regulations adopted in December subject foreign travel by Catholic clergy to state approval.

The Chinese government officially recognizes five religions — Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam — and tightly supervises them.

In 2016, President Xi Jinping said he would "Sinicize" the country's religions — increasing oversight and ideological control in a bid to align religious practice with the Communist Party's ideology and leadership.

Since then, Human Rights Watch asserted, the authorities have demolished hundreds of church buildings or the crosses atop them, prevented adherents from gathering in unofficial churches, restricted access to the Bible, and confiscated religious materials not authorized by the government.

The Sinicization campaign has also meant severe repression of Tibetan Buddhism and Islam, Human Rights Watch said.

In October, a pastor of a prominent underground Christian church was detained, according to his daughter, a church pastor and a group that monitors religion in China.

They said Pastor Ezra Jin Mingri of the Zion Church was detained at his home in Guangxi province, along with dozens of other church leaders across China.

Zion Church is among the largest so-called underground or house churches that are unregistered with the Chinese authorities. They defy government restrictions requiring believers to worship only in registered congregations.

Last month, ChinaAid — a U.S.-based group advocating for religious freedom in China — urged U.S. President Donald Trump to demand Mingri's release ahead of his planned meeting with Xi in May.

"The Chinese Communist Party has escalated its systematic campaign to eradicate independent religious life," said Bob Fu, ChinaAid's president. "The United States must respond with consequences — not just concern."