

Freedom of religion in China: Silence is not golden

Written by Thomas Mann on 8 April 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

As China continues to flout the internationally protected right to freedom of religion in the harshest possible ways, the EU's silence on the matter is unsettling, writes Thomas Mann.



Thomas Mann | *Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual*

Over the course of the past year, China has seen a significant deterioration in the recognition and defence of the internationally-protected right to freedom of religion.

There are multiple reports of millions of Chinese citizens being imprisoned, driven from their homes, attacked and even killed because of their religious practices.

The Chinese government has used a range of repressive tactics that directly fly in the face of international moral and legal principles.

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Some examples of these tactics can be found in the retroactive legitimisation of 're-education camps', the obligation of Christian and Muslim believers to sign forms renouncing their faith and the empowerment of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officers to enter homes to collect religious books or objects and then burn them publicly.

Chinese policies that regulate religious practice affect all religious minorities. However, the brunt of this initiative is arguably borne by around one million ethnic Uyghurs, Tibetans and Falun Gong practitioners currently held in so-called 're-education camps'.

The Christian minority is also affected. Due to China's policy of Sinicisation, churches are being shut down and pastors are being arrested and tortured; the last Christmas mass was held under high surveillance.

China has divided religious activities into two separate categories, those that are 'normal' and those that are 'illegal'.

"There are multiple reports of millions of Chinese citizens being imprisoned, driven from their homes, attacked and even killed because of their religious practices"

A normal religious activity must be specifically authorised by the government; for example, a pastor must be legally registered and religious buildings must have the required permit.

All other activities organised by the members of the religious group that do not fall under the control of the CCP are deemed 'illegal'. Punishment for these 'illegal' activities is severe.

It is notoriously difficult to get accurate reports out of China, as the government employs technology that masks any visible infrastructure developments and endeavours to prevent its citizens from sending uncensored reports outside of the country.

Furthermore, the isolated regions inhabited by the Uyghur make observation and reporting even more challenging. However, some asylum seekers have fled China and are now beginning to speak out about the atrocities.

A new measure introduced in 2018 is emblematic of China's unwavering commitment to eradicate all traces of religions from the country.

The patriotic association obliges churches and any religious institution to assimilate Chinese culture into their teaching.

The ultimate goal of these practices appears to be the placement of Xi Jinping, president of the

Communist Party, as God of the great Communist Party.

In recent months, several events have been organised within the European Parliament, which heard the testimonies of people that had escaped the re-education camps, non-governmental organisations, MEPs and other stakeholders.

Such events must be encouraged; they send a message that the EU believes in human rights principles and values freedom of expression; it does not condone the practices of the CCP.

While some people at European level are now speaking out and raising awareness on what is happening in China, a common EU response is yet to be adopted.

The EU and the rest of the world need to respond to these reports.

Continuing to negotiate with China over investment and trade issues while ignoring reports of human rights abuses, means the international community is failing to respect its own set of values.

About the author

Thomas Mann (DE, EPP) is a member of Parliament's delegation to South Asia

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