

China's Religious Policies in the 40 years of "Reform and Liberalization" (1978-2018)

1. With the liberalization policy launched by Deng Xiaoping, the followers of various Religions could resume open practice of their faith.

Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (from 1978 to 1989), Chinese officials responsible for religious affairs set out to reestablish the pre-Cultural Revolution policy and to regain full control. In February 1979, a national meeting on religious work was held to plan the restart of religious activities of the officially recognized "Five Great Religions", namely Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholic Church and Christian or Protestant Church. The policy on Religion was strictly linked with the policy towards national minorities. The guidelines included liberation from prison and rehabilitation of religious personalities; restoration and reopening of temples and churches; re-establishment of the patriotic religious organs and structure; reopening of seminaries, monasteries and convents and the start of formation courses for new religious personnel; publication of religious scriptures, books and bulletins; and the renewal of contacts with coreligionists abroad. All these new initiatives were motivated not only by the open policy, but also by the need for national unity especially in regions inhabited by religious minorities.

The Communist Party admitted the existence of Religions and of their activities once again, but the traditional policy of control was kept and made official in Document 19 (circulated in March 1982) entitled *The Basic Viewpoint on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period*. Although the document emphasized that the policy no longer centered upon class struggle but on social reconstruction and modernization, it kept the traditional attitudes and allowed for detentions and arrests of people who refused to cooperate.

"Freedom of religious belief" was also reaffirmed by the new State Constitution, promulgated on 4 December 1982.

Meanwhile, strictly forbidden was any infiltration under the cover of religion from abroad, especially from the Vatican. Oversight was increased after the repression of long-standing demonstrations of students in Tian'anmen Square and the arrest of dissidents (天安門事件 or 六四事件) on 4 June 1989, aiming at the complete elimination of all unofficial religious forces, including the underground Catholics.

2. Under the leadership of Jiang Zemin (from 1989 to 2002), in November 1993, the President himself proposed the "Three Points" on religious work: 1. The Party's religious policy is to be comprehensive and correctly implemented; 2. The management of religious matters is to be strengthened according to the law; 3. Religion is to be

positively guided in the adaptation to the socialist society. From then on, these points, and especially the adaptation of Religion to Socialism, became a constant refrain.

On 1 May 1994, the Decrees “Regulations on the Management of Venues for Religious Activities” and “Regulations on the Supervision of the Religious Activities of Foreigners in China” were published.

Official control was kept tight throughout these years. The authorities continued to issue secret documents of the Chinese authorities (from April 1999 to October 2001) about the “pernicious cults” (mainly Falun Gong) with measures to eliminate them.

3. Under the leadership of President Hu Jintao (from 2001 to 2013), on 30 November 2004, the new *Regulations of Religious Affairs* were signed, and became effective from March 2005.

Norms for the Registration of the Religious Professionals in China and the *Norms for the Registration of the Responsible Clergy of a Site for Religious Activities* went into effect in March 2007. All religious operators should be evaluated as to their qualifications by the patriotic religious bodies and presented for registration to the corresponding government authorities of State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) on the national, provincial or district levels.

On 21 May 2010, during a meeting to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the above-mentioned *Regulations for Religious Affairs*, SARA officials decided to carry out the registration of all religious venues and personnel within three years (by April 2013).

It seems that in this period the main emphasis was shifted from the hard measure of detention and arrest to the more legalistic method of registration, but always with a view to eliminating unofficial churches and their members.

4. Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, since 2013, the official policy continued along the traditional lines, with emphasis on strengthening regulations over religious activities of foreign nationals, and on resisting foreign infiltration under the pretext of religion. On a practical level, the initial concern was for speeding up the registration process of both religious venues and personnel.

The sector of Charity Services also came under scrutiny with new regulations for local social institutions in 2012, and foreign NGOs in 2016.

The year 2014 saw a worsening of the policy, starting mainly in Zhejiang province. Crosses that were considered too visible were demolished and churches that were said to violate building codes were pulled down. These measures were accompanied by a campaign for Marxist ideology in all educational institutions. Both trends still continue and spread, with further restrictive measures.

In May 2015, all the restrictions on religions were justified by the campaign for the “Sinicization of Religion”, launched by President Xi Jinping at the closure of a national meeting on United Front Work, and reiterated in April 2016 at the National Conference on Religious Work. It aims at guiding religious believers to love their country and to protect the unity of the motherland, but mainly to accept the leadership of the Party and support the system of Socialism with Chinese characteristics.

In March 2018, SARA was placed directly under the *United Front Work Department (UFWD) of the Communist Party*. It meant that the religious affairs and organizations must in future be administered exclusively by the Party and not by the State.

Starting from February 2018, the revised Regulations for Religious Affairs went into effect, with more restrictions. At the same time, even harsher measures were implemented: children were not allowed to attend church activities; courses and camps for the education and training of youths under 18 years old were forbidden; the national flag must be raised at religious venues with the singing of the national anthem; churches should reserve a place for the stationing of a supervisory committee of Party members, who are responsible for the order and implementation of the regulations; religious propaganda and the sale of religious books online have to stop; the demolition of crosses and of churches still continues; everything takes place under the name of the Sinicization of Religion.

The implementation of these measures started in Henan but gradually spread to other provinces, becoming almost a daily event. Indeed, for the first time since Mao Zedong, a methodical program of religious oppression has been introduced by Xi Jinping, together with his personality cult.