

China Christians voice concern over punishment proposals

Zhejiang authorities aim to standardize penalties against 'law-violating' churches

- [ucanews.com](#) reporter, Hong Kong
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The Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission in China's Zhejiang province's is proposing introducing standard administrative punishments for a slew of activities, a move that many believe will have a more negative impact on Christians than its cross-removal campaign.

Though its cross-removal campaign seems to have eased, provincial authorities have begun a crackdown on lawyers and church leaders seeking to put a stop to the campaign through legal means.

At the same time, authorities want to introduce administrative punishments for so-called offenses carried out by Christians.

It is estimated that the eastern coastal province has more than 2 million Christians.

The proposal was revealed Aug. 24 for public consultations until Sept. 10 and will take effect on Oct. 1. It has 23 articles in eight provisions, detailing each penalty and its legal basis and criterion for imposing punishments.

The first article deals with punishments for foreign teachers at religious education institutions, which violate Chinese laws or disrespect China's independent principles on religions.

Other articles deal with organizing large-scale religious activities without permission, violations of rules on independence and autonomy, and illegally accepting foreign donations.

Punishments range from church closures, confiscation of church property, fines, replacement of administrative heads, and the cancellation of registrations.

Article 8, which states that the commission would be responsible for the interpretation of the law and implementation of punishment, is "particularly worrisome" since it would have the authority to punish without going through judicial procedures, Anthony Lam, senior researcher at the Hong Kong diocese's Holy Spirit Study Center, told [ucanews.com](#).

Holding Mass or other services could fall under Article 10, which penalizes religious groups for organizing large-scale religious activities without permission, while a few articles are judgmental

on values, such as the independent principles of churches, he said.

"Articles related to foreign relations could also have a direct impact on Christian churches in Zhejiang," Lam added.

"The proposal shows the government's control over religions ... from venues, formation, religious personnel to church structure," said a Zhejiang Protestant layperson who did not wish to be named.

"This proposal affects both government-sanctioned churches and unregistered ones," he told ucanews.com.

"Unofficial churches can be easily labelled as illegal simply by subjective judgment while the autonomy of government-sanctioned seminaries would be further reduced by the proposal," he said.

"If it is implemented, there could be negative impacts on gatherings at universities and on overseas contacts," he added.

A Wenzhou Catholic who identified himself as John criticized what he called the deceptive nature of the public consultation.

"Even if we offer opposing views, would the authorities amend it?" he said.

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