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# China Primer: Human Rights

## Overview

The People's Republic of China (PRC or China)'s party-state is an "authoritarian regime" that "has become increasingly repressive in recent years," according to the nongovernmental human rights organization Freedom House. Some analysts argue China has moved in a totalitarian direction. The party-state is dominated by Xi Jinping, who became Communist Party of China (CPC) General Secretary in 2012 and began a norm-breaking third five-year term in 2022. Xi has attempted to enforce greater ideological and cultural conformity and tighter control over society, aided by digital technologies. PRC leaders long have asserted that human rights standards vary by country, that economic development is a key human right, and that a country's human rights policies are an "internal affair."

Amid apparent deepening repression in China, U.S. policymakers have implemented measures intended to deter PRC human rights abuses, prevent U.S. complicity in such abuses, and/or hold perpetrators accountable. Since 2020, U.S. actions have focused, in particular, on responding to reports of mass detentions and forced labor of ethnic Uyghur and other Muslim minority groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and elsewhere in China. The U.S. Department of State first assessed in January 2021 that PRC policies and practices in the XUAR constitute crimes against humanity and genocide, and reaffirmed this assessment most recently in its annual human rights reports covering 2024 (the department has not yet released human rights reports covering 2025). In the PRC's Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), measures adopted by both central PRC and local HKSAR authorities have eroded Hong Kong residents' civil rights and stifled the city's civic culture and media. See CRS In Focus IF12070, *China Primer: Hong Kong*.

## Selected Human Rights Issues

Under Xi's leadership, China has further restricted and suppressed civil society, religious and ethnic minority groups, human rights defenders, speech, and media. The party-state has closed much of the space that previously had existed for limited social activism. The PRC oversees one of the most extensive internet censorship systems in the world, which blocks major foreign news and social media sites, censors domestic social media platforms, and bans foreign messaging apps.

According to the U.S. Department of State, arbitrary arrest, detention, and enforced disappearance are "systemic" in China, and police target religious leaders and adherents, rights lawyers and activists, independent journalists, and dissidents and their family members. As of March 2025, the nonprofit Dui Hua Foundation identified 7,157 active cases of political prisoners in China.

## Civil and Political Rights

The PRC constitution provides for many civil and political rights, including the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and demonstration. Other provisions in China's constitution and laws, however, circumscribe or place conditions on these freedoms, and the state routinely restricts these freedoms in practice.

Popular protests in China are common and often focused on local and/or economic grievances. China Dissent Monitor, a Freedom House initiative that tracks protest activities in China, identified 5,014 instances of dissent in 2025. Protests in China generally are quashed before becoming widespread, highly-publicized demonstrations. One exception was in 2022, when people across the country protested COVID-19 lockdown conditions and the government's suppression of information and speech. Following the protests, the CPC cracked down on the budding protest movement, but also moved quickly to end lockdown measures.

## Rights of Religious and Ethnic Minorities

The Department of State has consistently designated China as a "Country of Particular Concern" for "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-292, as amended). In 2016, Xi launched a policy known as "Sinicization," by which the CPC requires religious and ethnic minorities to "assimilate" or conform to majority Han Chinese culture as defined by the CPC and adhere to "core socialist values." The PRC government has mandated, for example, that schools and other institutions use Mandarin rather than minority languages. Since 2018, regulations have required religious organizations to obtain government permission for nearly every aspect of their operations, submit to greater state supervision, and register clergy in a national database. The government enacted regulations in 2022 to restrict internet use and online worship among religious groups. The government has continued to arrest and to persecute practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual exercise.

**Tibetans:** Human rights issues in Tibetan areas of China include religious and political repression, forced assimilation, and the incarceration of hundreds of political prisoners. Since 2018, the PRC government has required Tibetan monks and nuns to undergo education in CPC ideology and demonstrate "political reliability." Authorities have arbitrarily detained and imprisoned hundreds of Tibetan writers, intellectuals, and cultural figures on broad charges of "separatism." PRC assimilation policies in Tibetan areas have included resettling and urbanizing nomads and farmers, policies that include elements of forced labor, according to some reports.

**Uyghurs:** Between 2017 and 2019, XUAR authorities arbitrarily detained more than 1 million ethnic Uyghur and other Muslims in “vocational education and training” facilities, also known as “reeducation” centers. Detainees generally were not accused of crimes, but rather were held on the basis of past religious, cultural, scholarly, social, and online activities, as well as foreign travel, that the government deemed “extremist,” “pre-criminal,” or potentially terrorist. Detainees were compelled to renounce many of their Islamic beliefs and customs as a condition for their release. Treatment in the centers reportedly included food deprivation, psychological pressure, sexual abuse, forced sterilization, medical neglect, torture, and forced labor. Since 2019, the XUAR government appears to have released some detainees, prosecuted many as criminals, and sent others to work in factories. In 2026, UN human rights experts said that PRC policies to relocate millions of other Uyghurs through labor transfer programs are in many cases “so severe that they may amount to forcible transfer and/or enslavement as a crime against humanity.”

### Women’s Rights

The protection of women’s rights in China is uneven, and authorities sometimes harass and arbitrarily detain women’s rights activists. Facing a looming demographic crisis, the CPC in the past decade has pivoted away from its “one child” policy, which limited women’s reproductive choices to suppress population growth. It is now implementing pro-natalist policies, some of which exacerbate existing challenges faced by women, such as domestic violence, discrimination, and economic inequality, according to some observers. PRC authorities reportedly continue to conduct forced abortions and sterilizations of Uyghur women.

### Selected U.S. Policy Tools

**Foreign Assistance:** Congressional appropriations have funded efforts to promote human rights, the rule of law, civil society, and internet freedom in China, as well as Tibet-related programs that promote sustainable development, environmental conservation, and the preservation of indigenous culture. These have included programs supported by relevant agencies as well as by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a private nonprofit organization funded primarily by congressional appropriations. As part of its 2025 foreign aid review, the Trump Administration reportedly terminated numerous China-related human rights programs. The Administration also sought to withhold appropriated funding for NED.

**International Media:** Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA), funded by the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), have provided external sources of news and opinion to audiences in China and PRC exiles around the world. Pursuant to a March 2025 executive order targeting “unnecessary” elements of the federal bureaucracy, the Trump Administration has reduced USAGM’s staffing and operations, resulting in China-related VOA and RFA service disruptions and reductions.

**Targeted Legislation:** Congress has enacted laws to respond to human rights developments and related issues in Tibet and Xinjiang specifically. U.S. policy toward Tibet is largely guided by the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 (Title VI,

Subtitle B of P.L. 107-228, as amended). Other Tibet-related legislation includes the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-330), the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020 (Division FF, Title III, Subtitle E of P.L. 116-260), and the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act (P.L. 118-70). Xinjiang-focused legislation includes the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-145) and the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA, P.L. 117-78). Some provisions of broader enacted bills also have addressed human rights issues in China (e.g., Section 7401 of P.L. 118-31).

**Targeted Sanctions and Export Restrictions:** The executive branch has made use of broad authorities enacted by Congress, including the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328; implemented through Executive Order 13818), to impose economic sanctions and visa restrictions against some PRC individuals and entities responsible for human rights abuses. The United States also has imposed restrictions on the sale or transfer of U.S. goods and services to certain PRC entities for human rights reasons, pursuant to the Export Control Reform Act (Title XVII, Subtitle B of P.L. 115-232).

**Forced Labor Import Restrictions:** Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930 (19 U.S.C. §1307) forbids the importation of products into the United States that were produced with forced labor. UFLPA in part creates a rebuttable presumption that Xinjiang-related imports are made with forced labor.

### Congressional Considerations

The CPC generally appears to view U.S. human rights advocacy as a challenge to its hold on power, and some analysts contend U.S. capacity to deter PRC human rights violations is limited. Others argue that sanctions and international pressure can help moderate China’s practices. Congress may debate the overarching goals of U.S. human rights policy and the differing possible benefits, costs, risks, and likelihoods of success of these goals, as well as assess the effectiveness of U.S. actions to date.

Relative to other administrations, the second Trump Administration has downgraded human rights as a U.S. foreign policy concern and has taken actions (some noted above) that appear to have curtailed certain longstanding U.S. efforts to promote human rights in China. The Administration’s immigration policies (e.g., concerning refugees) also may have implications for victims of human rights abuses in China seeking protection in the United States. As with prior administrations, Congress may conduct oversight over executive branch actions and consider whether to accept, reject, or seek to modify executive branch policy approaches. The consolidated FY2026 appropriations bill enacted in February 2026 (P.L. 119-75) appropriates resources for certain activities to promote human rights in China that the Trump Administration has curtailed or sought to curtail.

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**Michael A. Weber**, Specialist in Foreign Affairs  
**Caitlin Campbell**, Analyst in Asian Affairs

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