

Why the U.S. Government Should Prioritize the Release of Christian Pastor Wang Yi

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

In December 2019, Wang Yi, a Chinese Christian pastor, was sentenced to nine years in prison, fined, and stripped of his political rights.

Pastor Wang's sentencing is symptomatic of China's broader crackdown on religion—a policy that has been further codified in new regulations on religious affairs.

The U.S. government should actively press the Chinese government to release Pastor Wang.

On December 30, 2019, a well-known Christian pastor in China, Wang Yi, was sentenced to nine years in prison, fined, and stripped of his political rights for three years on trumped-up charges of “illegal business activity” and “inciting subversion of state power.”¹

Pastor Wang's sentencing is symptomatic of China's broader crackdown on religion—a policy that was further codified in new regulations on religious affairs instituted in February 2018.² These regulations characterize all independent religions as extremist and mandate a policy of Sinicization that attempts to secularize religion and conform it to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) political priorities.

What has resulted is a massive crackdown on persons of all faiths, including the arbitrary imprisonment of an estimated 2 million Uighur Muslims in political reeducation camps, heightened restrictions

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on Tibetan Buddhists, rising persecution of Hui Muslims, and deals inked with the Vatican that grant the Pope veto power over bishops appointed by the Chinese government.³

Given the severity of religious persecution in China, the U.S. government has been highly critical of China's policies of persecution. Additionally, China has been designated a "country of particular concern," the worst designation a country can receive, in the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom report every year since 1999.⁴

The U.S. should raise the profile of China's threats to religious freedom by more actively pressing for the release of Pastor Wang, encouraging the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to adopt him as a Religious Prisoner of Conscience,⁵ and instituting targeted sanctions to hold the Chinese government accountable for its actions.

Background on Pastor Wang's Case

Wang was installed as pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church in 2011, where he oversaw a congregation of approximately 500 individuals.⁶ Early Rain Covenant Church is an unregistered, underground house church with links to the Presbyterian denomination.⁷

Prior to pastoring the church, Wang was a highly regarded public intellectual, professor, and lawyer.⁸ After his conversion to Christianity in 2005, Wang redirected his intellectual fervor toward advocating for religious freedom.

One of Wang's better-known efforts was his publication of a Chinese "95 Theses"—a hat tip to Martin Luther's original 95 theses that ushered in the Protestant Reformation.⁹ Wang's theses focused on the separation of church and state and provided guidelines for how China's house churches should relate to the CCP.¹⁰ Wang saw these efforts as an attempt to distinguish house churches from China's state-sanctioned Three-Self Movement that attempted to effectively secularize Protestantism in China and force it to advance the CCP's interests.¹¹

In addition to his 95 Theses, Pastor Wang also spearheaded an open letter signed by more than 400 Chinese house church leaders voicing concerns over a renewed crackdown on house churches that came on the heels of the institution of new regulations on religious affairs. The letter was released in the summer of 2018, a few months prior to Wang's arrest in December 2018.¹² The letter outlined Pastor Wang's belief that civil disobedience is warranted when the state asks—or in China's case, requires—Christians to do things that contradict core tenets of their faith.

In most other countries, Pastor Wang's activities would be considered a normal part of freedom of expression, assembly, and religion, but in China,

they are considered subversive.¹³ This is largely due to the fact that the CCP sees all religious activity as political. Therefore, any attempts by Wang to keep the Chinese government out of the sphere of individual conscience is characterized by the Chinese government as inherently political.

Knowing the character of the Chinese Communist regime, Wang wrote a letter last year titled, “My Declaration of Faithful Disobedience,” and gave it to his congregation to publish were he ever to be imprisoned. In the letter he explicitly says that his goal is not to undermine the Chinese state:

[I] am not interested in changing any political or legal institutions in China. I'm not even interested in the question of when the Communist regime's policies persecuting the church will change. Regardless of which regime I live under now or in the future, as long as the secular government continues to persecute the church, violating human consciences that belong to God alone, I will continue my faithful disobedience. For the entire commission God has given me is to let more Chinese people know through my actions that the hope of humanity and society is only in the redemption of Christ, in the supernatural, gracious sovereignty of God.¹⁴

Nevertheless, authorities in China were set on silencing him. On December 8, 2018, Pastor Wang was detained along with his wife and 100 members of the Early Rain congregation. Although his wife and the congregants were later released, Pastor Wang was held for over one year before he was sentenced on December 30, 2019, for engaging in so-called illegal business activities and incitement to subvert state power. The latter charge is one frequently levied against political opposition in China; Pastor Wang's case is no exception. His sentence is apparently the longest prison term handed down by Beijing to any Chinese Christian pastor in more than one decade.¹⁵

Pastor Wang's sentencing is indicative of broader persecution of the underground church in China. According to a 2017 report by Freedom House, the 60 million to 80 million Protestants living in China faces high levels of persecution.¹⁶ This same report documented rising persecution since 2014—and since the report's release in 2017, persecution is intensifying.

The Chinese authorities removed crosses from churches, bulldozed or confiscated church grounds, and detained numerous Christian pastors and congregants.¹⁷ Even lawyers who defend Christians face consequences.¹⁸ Around the same time that Pastor Wang was originally detained, three major unregistered churches were closed, including Early Rain Covenant Church, Rongguili Church in Guangzhou, and Zion Church in Beijing.¹⁹ More continue to be closed.

It is not unusual for Christianity, or for religion in general, to be viewed with suspicion by governments of authoritarian countries. Peaceful protest movements with Christian, religious overtones, did, after all, contribute to the collapse of previously Communist regimes in Russia, Poland, and Romania. And Karl Marx himself made clear that Communism is incompatible with religion, as its ideology prizes the state as the ultimate source of authority over any deity.

U.S. Response to Pastor Wang's Case

The U.S. has strongly condemned the arbitrary imprisonment of Pastor Wang. Immediately after his sentencing was issued last December, State Department Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus called on China to “to uphold its international commitments and promises made in its own constitution to promote religious freedom for all individuals, including members of ethnic and religious minorities and those who worship outside of official state-sanctioned institutions.”²⁰

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was quick to follow, posting on Twitter “I am alarmed that Pastor Wang Yi, leader of Chengdu’s Early Rain house church, was tried in secret and sentenced to nine years in prison on trumped-up charges. Beijing must release him and end its intensifying repression of Christians and members of all other religious groups.”²¹

These strong statements should be followed by action. The State Department has an especially promising track record when it comes to securing the release of political prisoners—including those detained on religious grounds. During the Trump Administration, for example, the State Department, in conjunction with USCIRF, managed to secure the release of American pastor Andrew Brunson from Turkey after he was held on charges of abetting terrorism.²² Brunson was adopted as a Religious Prisoner of Conscience by USCIRF Commissioner Kristina Arriaga, who helped advocate for and negotiate his release. Being adopted by USCIRF as a prisoner of conscience raises the profile of a case and can lead to congressional hearings, greater civil society engagement, and prioritization of the individual prisoner’s case by the executive branch.

The U.S. has a long track record of success in securing the release of political prisoners, including in China. One example is the release of Pastor Cai Zhuohua, who was imprisoned for printing Bibles and Christian literature in China. He was later released due to the high-profile advocacy of former President George W. Bush and a legal team enlisted by the U.S. nongovernmental organization ChinaAid to press for Pastor Cai’s release—a team that

included Wang Yi in his previous capacity as a lawyer. The U.S. was also successful in securing the release of lawyer Zhang Kai, who was detained after he took on cases from Christians. The former Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom under the Obama Administration, Rabbi David Saperstein, raised Kai's case every opportunity he had, including at the U.N., and eventually secured his release.

Elevating the case to cabinet-level or ambassador-level priorities has rendered impressive results when it comes to securing the release of political prisoners in China. The U.S. should consider the value of having Vice President Pence—or even President Trump—raise Pastor Wang's case, as well as the cases of other political prisoners detained in China on religious grounds.

Elevating Pastor Wang's Case

The U.S. government should take concrete action to respond to Pastor Wang's detention. It comports with broader U.S. strategy to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific and advances the Trump Administration's religious freedom agenda. Prioritizing Pastor Wang's case may also prove a useful opportunity to raise awareness of the persecution of persons of all faiths in China.

The U.S. government should:

- **Prioritize the release of Pastor Wang in diplomacy with China.** The U.S. should raise the issue of Pastor Wang's release in diplomatic engagement with China. At the annually held Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, the U.S. should also continue to be outspoken in its criticism of China's failure to respect the religious freedom of persons of all faiths. Pastor Wang's case should also be raised at the U.N. and in other international contexts when possible. Additionally, the President, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, and the Ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom should raise Wang's case.
- **Press for the release of *all* political prisoners in China.** Under Xi Jinping, many individuals have been imprisoned for practicing their religion. There are an estimated 2 million predominately Uighur Muslims held in political reeducation facilities today. The Trump Administration has pressed for their release—but should use Pastor Wang's case to continue to raise concerns over China's arbitrary detention of persons of all faiths.

- **The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom should adopt Pastor Wang as a Religious Prisoner of Conscience.** Being adopted by a USCIRF Commissioner means that a prisoner has a well-educated advocate for religious freedom to advance his or her case in the U.S. government. Adopting Pastor Wang would elevate the profile of his case and would mean that he would have an advocate who can liaise with members of the executive and legislative branches to ensure high-level attention.
- **Sanction officials and entities under Global Magnitsky for their violations of religious freedom and other human rights.** Global Magnitsky sanctions authorities permit the U.S. Treasury Department to designate individuals on human rights and corruption grounds. Violating religious freedom qualifies under Global Magnitsky guidelines—and the U.S. government should consider making more active use of these authorities to respond to Pastor Wang’s case, in light of broader threats to religious freedom transpiring in China today.
- **Continue to designate China as a country of particular concern in the U.S. State Department’s International Religious Freedom report.** China has been designated as a country of particular concern since 1999. In spite of this designation, China has rarely, if ever, faced consequences for its violations of religious freedom. The U.S. government should ban “double-hatting” of religious freedom sanctions to ensure that no country is getting off scot-free when it violates religious liberty.²³

Conclusion

The Trump Administration has made religious freedom a top foreign policy priority. Individual cases like Pastor Wang’s have the ability to further elevate religious freedom as a priority—and securing his release is clearly something that the U.S. is capable of achieving. The U.S. should press China to release Pastor Wang and others detained on politically motivated and religious grounds.

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