

CCP Drawing Harder Line On “Sinicization of Religion”

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The CCP convened the National Conference on Religious Work on December 3-4, 2021, with the theme of “how to sustain and strengthen the ‘Sinicization of religion’”¹. The term “Sinicization of religion” appeared in 2012 at a symposium of experts organized by Peking University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences as a hardline policy of the CCP to strengthen its control over religions and to “maintain social stability”. At a time when the international community has shifted from criticism to sanctions over China’s human rights violations, the intensification of the “Sinicization of religion” shows that the CCP is maintaining even a harder line

stance on religions.

Evolution of “Sinicization of religion”

The CCP’s policy on religions in recent years can be roughly divided into three phases. The period from 2015 to 2019 was one of “praise the Party,” in which the government demanded religious groups support and serve the Party through “patriotic actions” such as raising of the national flag and singing the national anthem in temples and churches, in addition to praising Xi Jinping. The government also targeted Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions by demolishing their buildings, arresting

1. “Xi Jinping at the National Religious Work Conference Stressed the Importance of Insisting on the Direction of the ‘Sinicization of Religion’ in China and Actively Guiding Religions to Adapt to Socialist Society — Presided Over by Li Keqiang, Attended by Li Zhanshu, Wang Huning, Zhao Leji, Han Zheng, and Addressed by Wang Yang,” *Xinhua Net*, December 4, 2021. http://www.news.cn/2021-12/04/c_1128131454.htm.

organized underground assemblies, curbing the operation of unregulated organizations through registration requirements while strengthening control over organizations that had obtained permits.

After 2020, the “dereligionization” period, was when the government’s crackdown extended to the daily festivities of the general population². As local governments introduced bonus mechanisms to encourage people to report illegal religious activities,³ any act with religious connotations in daily life could be punished for violating the “Sinicization of religion” policy and thus caused chaos. For example, in late November 2020, a dormitory manager at a Harbin university was reported for handing out candy on Thanksgiving Day. The university backed the report and thus responded that “the university does not advocate religious ‘foreign holidays’ and firmly prohibits religious activities on campus.”⁴

The National Conference on Religious Work in 2021 epitomes the next, and third, phase of the CCP’s attitude toward religions. In addition to the continued suppression of religious groups, the CCP plans to further tighten its control over religious organizations and society. The difference can be seen in the contents of the 2016 National Religious Work Conference. Compared to the 2021 conference, the 2016 work report suggested using mass organizations (e.g., trade unions and Communist Youth League) and the United Front (e.g., socialism, patriotism) to publicize the Party’s policies and influence the public through treatment of religious communities with “promoting mutual cooperation, convincing with reason, and offering compassion with emotion.” However, these words did not appear in the 2021 version, but instead rhetoric emerged such as “Party leadership” and “strict governance” that emphasize the

2. Wang Yun, “The Current State of Beliefs and Conflicts in the ‘Sinicization of Religion’ in China,” *Exchange Magazine*, Issue 177 (June 2021). <https://www.sef.org.tw/article-1-129-12915>.

3. Yeh Jia-Jia, “China is Suppressing Religions: CCP Offers High Monetary Awards to Those Who Report on Banned Religious Groups,” *Bitter Winter*, July 31, 2020.

4. “Thanksgiving: China’s HITU Dorm Manager Criticized by Students for Celebrating ‘Foreign Holidays’ by Handing Out Candy, the University Supports Reporting,” *BBC News Chinese*, November 27, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-55099127>.

Party and the rule of law. In terms of Internet governance, the 2016 conference only emphasized promoting the government’s religious policies through the Internet, while the 2021 version reiterated the strengthening of Internet administration.⁵ This change implies that the CCP’s response to religious groups since 2021 has shifted from a two-pronged “cooperation and suppression” approach a more high-pressure approach of “deepening control by the Party”.

Impact of “Sinicization of religion”

The change shows that the CCP still continues to tighten its grip on religious groups even in the face of growing international criticism. In fact, this hardline religious policy stems from the CCP’s logic of governance: the threat of “foreign powers” arising from the origins and connections between Western religions and foreign countries,

and the conflicts alleged to be caused by ethnic minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang, which are critical to border security and regime stability, have led the CCP to resort to high-pressure tactics to curb the resistance of religious groups. Under such a development, Chinese people’s religious freedom will be even more limited. Although this may serve the CCP’s purpose of maintaining stability in the short term, forcibly restricting religious freedom in society may lead to more problems. First, can the religious elites, whether co-opted or appointed by the party, really lead followers to obey the party? The grassroots followers may not necessarily accept these elites, and the conflict between them may lead to more reactions and protests. Moreover, the functions originally provided by religious organizations, such as provision and social relief, may disappear as a result of changes in the religious system,⁶ which will inevitably raise the cost of

5. “Xi Jinping: Improve Works on Religions of All Levels Under the New Situation,” *Xinhua Net*, April 23, 2016. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c_1118716540.htm.

6. Under CCP administration, folk religions (e.g., Matzu) became a tool for the Party’s major foreign propaganda and united front effort, especially to Taiwan. For more details, see Gu Mingjun, “Matzu Culture as a Tool for CCP’s Influence Abroad,” *China Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (December 27, 2019), pp. 103-132.



governance for the Party. Amid the diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics by many foreign governments, the CCP’s extreme suppression of religions will, on the contrary, increase the risk of social instability and even more internal and external pressures.

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