

January 11, 2024

President Omar Zniber
United Nations Human Rights Council
Office of the Director, Human Rights Council and Treaty Mechanisms Divisions (CTMD)
E-mail: OHCHR-hrcngo@un.org

Dear President Omar Zniber,

In advance of the upcoming Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of China at the United Nations, the undersigned write to convey the imperative of taking a principled stand against the increasingly severe suppression of religious freedom in the People's Republic of China. As leaders and practitioners of differing faiths, we speak in solidarity with all our brothers and sisters enduring the Chinese government's oppression.

Since the third cycle of China's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2018, the situation has deteriorated significantly. Violations perpetrated by the Chinese Communist Party and those who do its bidding have been widespread and systematic. A few examples are illustrative:

Policies to erode Tibetan Buddhism are expanding, including punishment for even the slightest expression affirming of the leadership of the His Holiness the Dalai Lama, participation in open religious ceremony, and the demand that Beijing approve designation of clergy.

Similarly, Muslims, and notably Uyghur Muslims, endure severe oppression marked by widespread arbitrary detentions, pervasive surveillance, and stringent restrictions on religious practices. This includes the systematic destruction of mosques in the Uyghur region, prolonged sentences for participating in Quran lessons, and the prohibition of fundamental Islamic acts such as praying, exchanging Islamic greetings, and mentioning God. The Chinese Communist Party is actively engaged in efforts to rewrite not only the Quran but also other essential religious texts, exacerbating the alarming reality of religious persecution in China.

Meanwhile, Christians who refuse to register at official churches under the government's influence are subjected to constant surveillance, police raids, false charges, and illegal detainments. For example, the nine-year sentence given to Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church on charges of "inciting subversion of state power" and "illegal business activity" have increasingly become a trend seen across China to separate influential leaders from their churches.

These alarming developments have recently met with repeated and increased concern by United Nations treaty bodies, such as the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

While each faith community encounters or experiences the CCP's pervasive persecution in specific ways, the atheist Chinese government remains dedicated to eroding any meaningful religious expression, period. The CCP's policies to eradicate religion itself by supplanting all aspects of religion that do not align with the Chinese Communist Party ideals and party loyalty represent the foundation of Chairman Xi Jinping's goal of total control. We must not ignore the very real possibility that entire communities will face such pervasive and vicious assaults that the very survival of their faiths within China will fall into question. Against this sobering backdrop, the truth of the Chinese government's agenda must be fully exposed, and the UPR is an optimal place to do so. This will be the last chance for this body to comprehensively review the Chinese government's authoritarian behavior for the

next five years, making it vital that the fourth UPR cycle scrutinizes the CCP's brutal and insidious actions against freedom of religion and belief.

Unless the international community speaks with one voice, takes concrete actions, and uses its votes to hold Beijing accountable, it is certain that many millions of individuals from a diverse range of faith communities and belief traditions will suffer hardship, censure, torture, and even death. The United Nations must not stand by and allow this to occur with impunity.

However, this moment transcends the Chinese government's malfeasance, alone. While China is one of the world's worst offenders, it is far from the only country with a government that regularly assaults the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief. With the world watching, the United Nations Human Rights Council and every nation within that body has an opportunity, and a profound responsibility, to express that freedom of religion is a universal, foundational right. It must be defended vociferously wherever persecution occurs. Failure to do so with a nation whose oppression of religion is so palpable will encourage other persecutors of religion to feel they too will enjoy impunity for their blatant violations of religious freedom. For this reason, it is urgent and imperative that our global leaders and the United Nations itself directly confront the Chinese government's relentless suppression of religious freedom. This must be done not only in the name of reform and progress in China, but also as a call for religious freedom for every faith and every human being everywhere.

To do so is our collective responsibility legally and, most importantly, it is our ethical duty.

Sincerely,

Sam Brownback

Former US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom

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René Cassin, the Jewish Voice for Human Rights, Executive Director

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