

China's Communist Party to hold meeting on religion

China's ruling Communist Party has officially signaled that it will hold its long-awaited first summit on religion for 10 years in coming weeks, as it prepares to make sweeping changes to its regulations on religious affairs.

The meeting, which reports said could be chaired by party leader Xi Jinping, comes amid growing concerns by the party about surging interest in major religions including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and its home-grown offshore Daoism. There is also rising concern in Beijing about violent fundamentalism among ethnic Muslim Uighurs.

There are more than 100 million religious believers in China, with about 6 million Catholics and 23 million Protestants,



according to government statistics. However, the figures are often disputed as underestimated. Chen Zhongrong, vice director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), told a meeting of religious officials Nov. 10 that the central government has planned to convene a national meeting on religious work this year.

Chinese authorities are revising the regulations on religious affairs, he said, according to a Nov. 20 report on SARA's website. The regulation was promulgated in 2005 following a party summit in 2001.

Chen said at the meeting that a key focus of the religious affairs department will be to implement the newly amended regulations through the intensive training of religious officials.

The Chinese government has been laying plans to revise the regulations since early this year with Yu Zhengsheng, one of Xi's key party allies and chairman of the top advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, making three visits to the religious sectors.

In 50 days from January to March, he visited headquarters of the five officially recognized religions in Beijing, made a field trip to Baoding — a Catholic stronghold in Hebei — and participated for the first time in the discussion of the conference's religious affairs committee. The topic of adapting religions to the socialist country was the subject of a major speech by Xi in the first central meeting for the United Front Work Department in May.

Since then, there have been conferences and learning classes about the "Sinicization of religions and Christianity" in almost every province. In particular, two were held for the Catholic Church in Shandong and in Guizhou during and immediately after a Vatican delegation visited Beijing Oct. 11-16.

New regulations, aimed at Muslims in Xinjiang, have also been introduced. Xinjiang issued a ban on burqas in January and urged residents to inform on women wearing them and young men with "large beards." T-shirts and flags featuring the Islamic crescent — the symbol of the pro-independence East Turkestan flag — also are banned.

As well, there has been a two-year campaign to remove crosses in Zhejiang province. The latest one occurred at Shizhu Church in Taizhou on Nov. 30, the first known cross removal since September. On Nov. 30, Zhu Weiqun, chairman of the ethnic and religious affairs committee of the top advisory body to the country's legislature, wrote in the state-run "Global Times" that reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism is a political matter and Beijing would not give up its authority.

In an exclusive interview with Hong Kong-based "Wenweipo" in March, SARA director Wang Zuoan told the pro-Beijing Chinese newspaper that the time was ripe to revise the comprehensive administrative regulations and it would be best to get it done by this year. He said the government faced new issues in regulating religion such as property rights and use of the Internet. While the Chinese authorities are amending the regulations, some scholars renewed the call for a religious law. However, others maintained that each religion has its different aspects and thus a religious law needs careful consideration.

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