



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

New measures tighten control over religious clergy, accelerate CCP's Sinicization policy

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In line with its current strategy to regulate religion in accordance with its larger governance plan, Beijing adds another regulation to its growing legal framework for religious management in China. On January 8, 2021, the State Administration of Religious Affairs –renamed as National Religious Affairs Administration in English in recent years-- passed new measures regulating the administration of religious clergy. The new measures, which comes into force on May 1, 2021 standardizes state management of clergy, raise the clergy as religious talents to serve ideological and political interests of the state and legally underpins the “Sinicization” of religion policy in China.

Titled ‘Measures for the Administration of Religious Clergy’ (Order no.15)¹, the regulation expands the reach of the religious affairs department, explicitly enforces new behavioral requirements and introduces more comprehensive controls and information collection measures. This addition to religious governance institutionalizes the suppression of Tibetan Buddhist practice by expanding already significant government powers in monitoring, controlling and limiting the practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

Article 15 in the regulation explicitly reaffirms the state’s role in management and approval of Tibetan reincarnate lamas as per the 2017 Regulation on Religious Affairs and the 2007 Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism and other relevant regulations. Out of the five officially authorized religions to operate in China, the regulation is only explicit in reaffirming state management of Tibetan Buddhist reincarnate teachers and Catholic bishops (article 15 and 16).

By further curtailing freedom of religion, the promulgated regulations implement the Communist Party’s goal to permeate and regulate every aspect of religious life.

The regulations in detail:

Recognizing utility of religion and the clergy in serving the Party’s goals, the measures stand out for clearly obligating religious practice and the clergy in service to the Communist Party and the state in the name of “patriotism.” Article 3 requires religious personnel “love the motherland, support the leadership of the Communist Party of China, support the socialist system’, as well as ‘adhere to the Sinicization of religion in our country and maintain national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony and social stability’. Religious clergy should also safeguard national and social interests (Article 6(1)), guide religious citizens to be patriotic and law-abiding (6(4)), and improve individual qualities to play a role in promoting the Sinicization of religion in our country (Article 7).

The language used in articles 6 and 7 of the new regulations represent an expansion of ideological goals prescribed by the state, for example compared to the 2017 update to the Regulation on Religious Affairs, and are consistent with recent statements by Communist Party leaders. In Article 4 of the 2017 update, religious

¹ National Religious Affairs Administration, 9 February 2021, ‘宗教教职人员管理办法’ (Measures for the Administration of Religious clergy, Order no.15), <http://www.sara.gov.cn/bmgz/351322.jhtml>.

groups are to “practice the core socialist values; and preserve the unification of the country, ethnic unity, religious harmony and social stability”. While this already represents a significant overreach of the state, the new regulations go further, by explicitly tasking religious personnel as talents to support the Communist Party leadership, its messaging and the indoctrination efforts of the Party.

The inclusion of the term ‘Sinicization’ in the Article 3 and Article 7 is notable, as it reflects further institutionalization of the Sinicization agenda, which has roots in the said 2017 update to the Regulation on Religious Affairs². The term and the requirement to ‘adhere to the Sinicization of religion’ began to appear in religious regulations from 2019, with the 2019 ‘measure on managing religious groups’ (Order 13, Article 5)³ and the 2020 ‘measures for managing Islamic Hajj affairs’(Order no. 14, Article 1)⁴.

The popularisation of the term is also consistent with Xi Jinping’s goal to Sinicize ‘ethnic groups’ and religions in China, which were announced as early as 2016 at the National Religious Work Conference and publicly declared at the 19th Party Congress in 2017⁵. The 5-year plan to Sinicize Buddhism released by the Buddhist Association of China in 2019 is another example of this⁶.

New behavioral controls

While the new regulation expands the procedural administration of religious clergy, it is most interesting for the new behavioral controls stipulated in Chapter two: rights and obligations of religious clergy. Article 12 is comprehensive in listing banned behaviors purportedly: ‘endangering national security’, ‘undermining national unity’, ‘dividing the country’, ‘unauthorized acceptance of appointments by overseas religious groups or institutions, and other acts that violate the principle of religious independence and self-management’. The regulations also prohibit religious clergy from ‘organizing, presiding over or participating in religious activities outside religious venues without approval’ and preaching at public welfare events, schools and other educational institutions.

While Article 15 reaffirms China’s claim to being the sole authority to identify tulkus (reincarnate Buddhist Lamas), Article 12(3) is distinct for prohibiting religious clergy from accepting unauthorized appointments by overseas religious groups or institutions; a reference to foreclose the exile Tibetan Buddhist masters and the Vatican’s authority on Tibetan Buddhist and Catholic believers respectively.

Bureaucratic expansion: Strengthening information collection and supervision

² Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China, 7 September 2017, ‘宗教事务条例’ (Regulation on Religious Affairs, Order no.686), http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm.

³ National Religious Affairs Administration, 30 December 2019, ‘宗教团体管理办法’ (Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups, Order no.13), <http://www.sara.gov.cn/bmgz/322211.jhtml>.

⁴ National Religious Affairs Administration, 12 October 2020, ‘伊斯兰教朝觐事务管理办法’ (Measures for managing Islamic Hajj Affairs, Order no. 14), <http://www.sara.gov.cn/bmgz/344213.jhtml>.

⁵ Xinhua news, 23 April 2016, ‘习近平：全面提高新形势下宗教工作水平’ (Xi Jinping: Comprehensively improve the level of religious work in the new situation), http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c_1118716540.htm.

⁶ On 24 July 2019, the Buddhist Association of China officially adopted a five-year plan on the development of Buddhism titled ‘Outline of the Five-Year work plan for adhering to the Sinicisation of Buddhism (2019-2023) (坚持佛教中国化方向五年工作规划纲要 (2019-2023))’. See 中国佛教协会 (The Buddhist Association of China), 14 November 2019, ‘坚持佛教中国化方向五年工作规划纲要 (2019-2023)’ (Outline of the Five-Year work plan for adhering to the Sinicisation of Buddhism [2019-2023]), <http://www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/e/action/ShowInfo.php?classid=506&id=40672>.

The new regulation replaces two existing measures that govern the registration of religious personnel⁷, and further expands the reach of the religious affairs department. For example, all religious organizations must report to and be accountable to an office of the state administration of religious affairs. For record keeping, the State Administration for Religious Affairs establishes a database for all religious personnel and the local governments' Religious Affairs Departments are tasked to provide and update the data on religious personnel, rewards, punishments and other details for compliance with religious regulations (Article 33).

The Religious Affairs Department assigns a twelve-digit number code to all the religious personnel in the record (Article 19). The regulation is comprehensive in setting reporting and procedural requirements for all decisions relating to the conduct, education, and activities of religious clergy. Even the act of engaging in religious activities across jurisdictions (provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities) requires clergy to gain prior approval and report to the governing bodies in all concerned jurisdictions (Article 34). The religious facilities and personnel risk losing their credentials and face punishments, per Article 65 and 73 respectively of the Regulation on Religious Affairs, for deviance from the “correct” and only path approved by the state (Articles 47 and 48).

Expanded reporting and surveillance obligations are also introduced. Religious organizations are required to establish records on clerical personnel and to regularly update the religious affairs department (Article 39), as well as formulate an evaluation system to inform decisions on appointments, rewards and punishments (Article 38). Failure to establish a sound management system for clerics or follow filing procedures according to provisions may result in the closure of a religious venue, loss of license to preside over religious activities and/or criminal charges (Article 48). This is consistent with the less detailed provisions in the 2017 update, in Articles 36-39.



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⁷ The new measures are titled ‘Measures for recording religious personnel’ (宗教教职人员备案办法) (Order no.3) and ‘Measures for recording major teaching posts in religious activity sites’ (宗教活动场所主要教职任职备案办法) (Order no. 4).