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CHINA | Revisions to Religious Regulations Released

China's State Council recently released a set of revisions to the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs which strengthen state control over religious activities in China.

According to the state media agency Xinhua News, the revised regulations "protect freedom of religion belief." However, the revisions also clearly focus on the "management and supervision" of religious affairs for all religion and belief communities in China. The revised regulations will go into effect Feb. 2, 2018 and include special provisions on national security and foreign connections.

The revised Regulations on Religious Affairs maintain and strengthen the state's control over religious activities. Although the 2005 regulations already placed religion under the supervision of the state, in practice some religious communities, including a large number of unregistered churches, have existed in a grey area where they have been tolerated by the local authorities.

Under Xi Jinping, this grey area appears to be shrinking, and unregistered "house" churches are under increasing pressure to either register or disband. Many unregistered churches have objected to registration on the grounds that religious belief should not be controlled by the state. The focus on national security in the revisions is consistent with official comments on religion and other recently introduced legislation which treat religion as a potential tool of "foreign infiltration" harmful to national security. This includes the National Security Law, which in Article 27 opposes foreign interference in domestic religious affairs, and "shuts down cult organizations in accordance with law." On July 7, 2015 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern about the human rights implications of the National Security Law's "extraordinarily broad scope" and vague terminology.

"These regulations continue the practice of protecting only "normal" religious activities by state-approved groups. In practice this means there is no space for religious communities that do not wish to register with the government for reasons of conscience," Christian Solidarity

Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said. "Under Xi Jinping we have seen an increase in restrictions on both registered and unregistered Christian communities: when Christians have opposed government actions, such as the removal of crosses or the closure of churches, they have been harassed, beaten and detained. This downward trend in religious freedom fits into a broader pattern of increasing human rights abuses under President Xi. We call on the Chinese government to revoke legislation which restricts the right to freedom of religion or belief, and to cease violations against those peacefully exercising their rights."