



## **Supporting Activists against CCP Repression**

**Written Testimony by Yaqiu Wang**

*Research Director for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House*

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Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Chinese government's tactics to suppress political dissent. I ask that my full written statement be entered for the record. China's authoritarian regime poses one of the biggest threats to American democracy and security. It is in the fundamental interest of the United States to support Chinese people's fight for democracy.

This testimony draws on Freedom House's years of research and advocacy work on political prisoners, transnational repression, and internet freedom in relation to China.

Globally, Freedom House has tracked 18 consecutive years of decline in rights and freedoms, driven by worsening repression in autocracies and backsliding in democracies, including efforts to undermine electoral processes, armed conflicts, threats of authoritarian aggression, and attacks on pluralism—the peaceful coexistence of people with different political ideas, religions, or ethnic identities.

A growing trend is when states manipulate their own laws to crack down on dissent and criticism, whether it is by recognized organizations or individuals. Last year, people in 55 of the 70 countries surveyed in our *Freedom on the Net* report faced legal repercussions for expressing themselves online.

Democracies are not immune to these trends, and a growing number are imposing burdens on freedoms of assembly, association, and expression through legal mechanisms. These restrictions affect the rights of citizens in those countries, and have ripple effects around the world, as authoritarian regimes cynically use poor behavior by democracies to justify their own repressive rule.

China, which ranks among the least free countries in the world, has declined significantly since

Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012.<sup>1</sup> President Xi has consolidated personal power to a degree not seen in the country for decades. Following a multiyear crackdown on all aspects of life and governance, China’s civil society now has been largely decimated. Increasingly, the government is deploying national security laws—including National Security Law (2015), Foreign NGO Law (2017), Counterterrorism Law (2018), and Counterespionage Law (2023)—to criminalize independent human rights activism and journalism.

Numerous human rights activists are languishing in jail on bogus national security–related charges as we speak, such as prodemocracy movement pioneer Wang Bingzhang, who has been serving a life sentence for espionage since 2002; human rights lawyer Xu Zhiyong, who is serving a 14-year sentence for subversion of state power; and journalist Huang Xueqin, who is serving a five-year sentence for inciting subversion of state power. Others have been forcibly disappeared on unclear charges. Respected human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng has not been heard from in seven years.

China’s ethnic minorities are facing even worse conditions. Rahile Dawut, a Uyghur scholar, has been serving a life sentence since 2018 for separatism. Another Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti is serving a life sentence under the same charge. His family has not heard from him since 2017. Go Sherab Gyatso, a Tibetan monk and writer, is serving a 10-year sentence for inciting separatism.

Similarly, in Hong Kong, over a thousand people have been imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of assembly and expression, many on national security grounds. In 2020, Beijing imposed the draconian National Security Law (NSL) on the city, with broad provisions that criminalize an enormous range of activity both inside and outside Hong Kong. This March, Hong Kong’s legislature passed the Basic Law Article 23, the city’s homegrown national security law. Prominent political prisoners in Hong Kong include journalist and publisher Jimmy Lai, who is facing up to life imprisonment for sedition and collusion with foreign forces; human rights lawyer Chow Hang-tung, arrested for inciting subversion; and activist Joshua Wong, convicted of conspiracy to commit subversion.

These courageous individuals and many others in mainland China and Hong Kong have made extraordinary sacrifices for standing up to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is imperative that the US government stand by them.

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2024: China,” <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-world/2024>.

The CCP’s long arm of repression also stretches abroad, including on US soil. China conducts the world’s most comprehensive and sophisticated campaign of transnational repression, and is responsible for 25 percent of the cases Freedom House has documented in our database. The sheer breadth and global scale of the campaign is unparalleled.<sup>2</sup> Beijing’s tactics span the full spectrum: from harassment and assaults, to co-opting other countries to detain and render exiles, to mobility controls, to cyberattacks, and to coercion by proxy.

China’s transnational repression activities are embedded in a broad framework of influence that encompasses cultural and professional associations, regional groups, and in some cases, organized crime networks, which places it in contact with a huge population of Chinese citizens, Chinese diaspora members, and minority populations from China who reside around the world. Last November, Chinese diplomats and hundreds of people belonging to pro-CCP diaspora groups organized demonstrations in San Francisco during President Xi Jinping’s visit that harassed and intimidated—and in some cases, violently assaulted—Chinese, Hong Kong, and Tibetan activists who came to protest Xi.

The CCP also poses the biggest transnational repression threat on American campuses. Some Chinese students studying here reported that they were intimidated by fellow students for speaking critically about the Chinese government, or that their families back in China were harassed by Chinese authorities.<sup>3</sup> Beijing’s digital surveillance has also made organizing prodemocracy activities and recruiting like-minded students difficult in the first place. Chinese social media and messaging apps such as WeChat, which are heavily used among first-generation Chinese diaspora, are also heavily censored by the Chinese government.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, one of the biggest challenges facing Chinese activists as well as ordinary people who care about human rights and democracy both inside and outside China is the CCP’s sophisticated censorship and surveillance apparatus. Freedom House’s *Freedom on the Net* report has consistently ranked China’s regime as the world’s worst abuser of internet freedom.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Freedom House, “NEW DATA: More than 20 Percent of the World’s Governments Engage in Transnational Repression,” February 16, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-data-more-20-percent-worlds-governments-engage-transnational-repression>.

<sup>3</sup> Yana Gorokhovskaia and Grady Vaughan, *Addressing Transnational Repression on Campuses in the United States*, Freedom House, January 2024, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/TNR\\_UniversityReport\\_2024.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/TNR_UniversityReport_2024.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Freedom House, *Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022: Authoritarian Expansion and the Power of Democratic Resilience*, September 2022, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/BGMI\\_final\\_digital\\_090722.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/BGMI_final_digital_090722.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom on the Net 2023: China,” <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-net/2023>.

In recent years, the US government has stepped up its response to CCP influence operations that undermine human rights and democracy within the United States. The Department of Justice has issued a number of indictments in cases linked to the CCP, most recently this month when Linda Sun, a former top aide to New York governor Kathy Hochul and former governor Andrew Cuomo, was charged with acting as an agent of the Chinese government. A few weeks earlier, in two separate cases, US authorities convicted Chinese dissident Wang Shujun and charged another, Tang Yuanjun, for spying on the overseas Chinese prodemocracy community on behalf of the CCP.

The growing focus on the threat is certainly needed and a positive development, but US officials face the challenge of maintaining a targeted, proportionate, and rights-respecting approach while also intensifying their overall efforts. Walking this line will require thoughtful policies, updated laws, and careful execution.

Despite intense repression, Chinese people everywhere continue to show inspiring resilience. In late 2022, protests over a deadly fire in Ürümqi grew into one of the most open challenges to the CCP since the 1989 Tiananmen democracy movement. The protests, dubbed the White Paper protests, also drew widespread support from the Chinese diaspora, as hundreds staged rallies in cities from Paris to Sydney, from Washington DC to Raleigh, North Carolina.

As Washington and Beijing engage more and more overtly in geopolitical competition, we should not lose sight of the passionate longing for freedom that people in China are trying to express. We should support their aspirations at every opportunity.

In this context, Freedom House calls on Congress to:

- **Continue to call public attention to political prisoners in China and urge their release. Meet regularly with family members of prisoners and advocacy groups, both in public and in private.** When calling for the release of political prisoners, emphasize that releases should be unconditional. All charges should be dropped and expunged from the prisoner's record. There should be no bail conditions, travel restrictions, asset freezes, or other measures that restrict their ability to work and live. In private, executive and legislative officials and staff should meet with families to show support, share updates on their loved one's case, and gather information relevant to advancing their release. Private meetings with advocacy groups and others are also important for information gathering and message coordination. Public appearances by government officials on behalf of the imprisoned individual, when appropriate and

condoned by the prisoner or family, demonstrate support for the prisoner and signal to perpetrating governments that they should expect a sustained campaign to free them. Many political prisoners and their families fear they will be forgotten. Efforts to secure the release of political prisoners should go beyond the most high-profile imprisonments and include advocacy on behalf of lesser-known individuals, as giving political prisoners a higher profile through advocacy work can improve their treatment in prison and prompt governments to expedite cases.

- **Continue to provide funding to support political prisoners, their families, and their lawyers, including adequate support after release.**
- **Establish a limited visa category to provide precleared at-risk human rights defenders and democracy activists with a multiple-entry, multiyear nonimmigrant visa.** This would allow those facing unjust imprisonment or physical threats due to the nature of their work to continue their work from the safety of the United States, before they are able to safely return home. Vulnerable human rights defenders could be nominated by US embassy personnel in close consultation with civil society partners and likeminded democratic governments. Freedom House is pleased to support the Human Rights Defenders Protection Act, led by Chairman Cardin and supported by a number of members on this committee, which, among other things, creates a temporary visa for human rights defenders under threat.
- **Pass legislation to address gaps in the US government’s response to transnational repression.** This includes codifying a definition of transnational repression, ensuring government officials who may encounter perpetrators or victims of transnational repression receive the training necessary to recognize and respond to the problem, and strengthening sanctions authorities to make it easier to hold perpetrators accountable. The Transnational Repression Policy Act, which was introduced by Senators Merkley, Rubio, Cardin, and Hagerty, includes provisions in all these areas. We urge its passage.
- **Impose targeted sanctions on or add to the Bureau of Industry and Security’s Entity List Chinese tech companies responsible for or complicit in human rights abuses.** For example, companies that knowingly provide surveillance systems used for repressive crackdowns in places like Xinjiang should face economic penalties. In the United States, the Global Magnitsky Act allows for targeted sanctions on private companies.

- **Provide funding to support the development and dissemination of open-source, user-friendly, and privacy-protecting anticensorship technologies.** Anti-censorship technology, such as virtual private networks, are critical for people in China to circumvent state censorship and protect themselves against surveillance and other forms of repression. Relevant programming should prioritize supporting tools that are open-source, align with the highest standards of privacy and security, and are user-friendly and localized to the targeted communities to increase their uptake in use.
- **Scrutinize international censorship and surveillance by Chinese companies.** Congress should hold hearings to better understand the scope, nature, and impact of politicized censorship and surveillance on Tencent’s WeChat platform and other Chinese social media and messaging apps, then explore avenues for pressuring the companies to uphold users’ rights to free expression and privacy. Politicians who choose to use Chinese platforms to communicate with constituents should monitor messaging closely to detect any manipulation, register their accounts with international phone numbers when possible, and republish messages on parallel international social media platforms.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.