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CHINA: Government blocks religious websites

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Chinese web-users are denied access to a range of religious sites based abroad, Forum 18 News Service has found after a two-month survey of how far the Chinese government's Golden Shield firewall, used to censor the internet, affects access to religious websites. Sites blocked include those related to the persecution of Christians and other religious faiths, the Dalai Lama, the Falun Gong religious movement, the Muslim Uyghurs of Xinjiang and a number of Catholic sites, including the website of the Hong Kong diocese and the Divine Word Missionaries in Taiwan.

In what is believed to be the largest survey to date of how far the Chinese government's Golden Shield internet firewall denies access to religious websites, Forum 18 News Service has established that while Chinese internet users do have access to a range of websites based outside the country that cover religious themes in Chinese or other languages, certain religious sites appear to be consistently blocked because the Chinese government does not like their content. Victims of automatic barring are sites that cover the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, the Falun Gong spiritual movement, sites about the Muslim Uyghurs of Xinjiang, sites run by the Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir movement, sites in Chinese detailing persecution of religious communities in China and a perhaps surprising number of Catholic sites. Not blocked are sites in European languages covering religious freedom issues, even those covering repression within China.

Internet censorship

While overall internet usage in China may be low by developed country standards, it has been rapidly growing, especially in the capital Beijing and the developed coastal region. The official China Internet Network Information Centre put the number of Chinese with access to the internet in June 2004 (its most recent figures) at 87 million. This number had been doubling every six months, but is now levelling off.

Internet censorship is part of a comprehensive attempt to censor all means of communication. While printed publications have long been censored in China, the authorities have also tried to keep up with technological developments. The Global Internet Policy Initiative warned in June of new technology from a Chinese firm that monitors "subversive" SMS text messages sent by mobile phone.

In a bid to maintain control over the internet, all internet service providers (ISPs) as well as internet content providers are required to be licensed by the government. Organisations such as Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch and the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China have reported extensively in recent years on China's denial of access to specific political, human rights, opposition and independent news websites.

In a bid to help remove "unacceptable" content from the web, the authorities launched a website in June encouraging web-users to report such "illegal" sites, including those on religious cult activity, violence, pornography or politically sensitive subjects. The website, <http://net.china.cn/chinese/>, is sponsored by the Internet Information Service Work Committee of the China Internet Association. After getting on the relevant page, which is indicated at the top of the homepage, "reporters" must provide their real name, gender, email address, telephone number, addresses, and the name and URL of the offending sites. They are then asked for details of the violations by the offending websites and the category of violations. There are eight categories, including "promoting cults" and "promoting violent superstitions". Other categories include sites that "violate constitutional principles", "attack the party and the government" and "violate social ethics (or morality)". There is one all-encompassing category called "other illegal and harmful messages". The "reporters" are assured of the confidentiality of the information they provide, but are warned that they bear personal responsibility for reporting erroneous information.

Forum 18's tests

To provide a reliable snapshot of the extent of censorship of specifically religious sites, Forum 18 tested several hundred religious sites of all sorts, including sites in a variety of languages (Chinese, Korean, Russian and Western languages) maintained by different denominations (including Christian, Muslim, Daoist, Buddhist, Jewish, Baha'i, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church, commonly known as the Mormons), Falun Gong and Jehovah's Witness), overseas Chinese-language religious communities

in South East Asia, Australasia and North America, religious rights groups, human rights groups, religious news agencies and magazines, religious educational institutions, religious political movements and foreign governments.

The tests were carried out over a two-month period - from mid-May to mid-July, which included the politically-sensitive date of 4 June, which marked the fifteenth anniversary of the violent crushing of pro-democracy student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in Beijing - and looked at access in a variety of locations in China. All the sites found by Forum 18 to be inaccessible in China were accessible in Europe and North America.

Some religious sites blocked

Access was impossible to the wide range of sites maintained by the Falun Gong movement (including www.falundafa.org, www.faluninfo.net and www.flgjustice.org, which details the Chinese government's campaign against the movement). Sites relating to the Dalai Lama were almost entirely inaccessible (including www.dalailama.com and even www.dalailama.org, a site held by a commercial company which has no information about the Dalai Lama himself). However, Forum 18 gained access to specific sites in Western languages covering the Dalai Lama's visits to Western countries (such as the site covering his May/June 2004 visit to the Scottish city of Glasgow, www.dalailama2004.org.uk), although it was unable to gain access to an Australian site (www.dalailama.org.au), which covered his 2002 visit to that country. Material in English on the Dalai Lama's receipt of the Nobel Peace prize in 1989 is accessible in China on the Swedish-based website of the Nobel Foundation.

Permanently inaccessible were various websites of Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), an Islamist political movement that aims to establish a worldwide Islamic caliphate (www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org, www.khilafah.com, www.khilafah.com.pk). The sites have material in up to seven languages and offer information by email in up to nine, though Chinese is not among them. Curiously, two other sites - www.hizbuttahrir.org and the Danish-based site www.khilafah.dk - seem to have avoided barring so far. An apparently unrelated US-based site, www.alkhilafah.info, an "anti-terrorism portal" which contains English-language reports and often graphic pictures of what it regards as victims of "atrocities against Muslims", including in the traditionally-Muslim province of Xinjiang, is not blocked.

The barring of the sites maintained by the human rights groups Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and Chinese exile human rights groups like Human Rights in China has long been documented, but Forum 18 found that specific Christian religious rights sites that report on persecution within China - especially those in Chinese - were also inaccessible. China Aid Association (www.chinaaid.org), a US-based group with up-to-date reporting on harassment of Protestant house churches, was inaccessible at all locations and on all the occasions Forum 18 tried to gain access. Also inaccessible were the sites of the US-based Committee for the Investigation of Persecution of Religion in China (www.china21.org and religiousfreedomforchina.org), which contain information in Chinese and English on persecution of Protestants. Indeed, on two separate occasions when trying to access religiousfreedomforchina.org in Beijing, Forum 18 was directed to a commercial site www.prescriptiondieting.com.

Similarly inaccessible was the site of US-based religious freedom group Free Church for China (www.freechurchforchina.org), as was the site of Free the Fathers (www.ftf.org), a US-based group highlighting the plight of Catholic priests who reject the government-sponsored Catholic Patriotic Association and remain loyal to the Vatican. Also inaccessible was the Italian-based site Asia News (www.asianews.it), which has a wide range of religious news in Chinese, Italian and English covering a variety of faiths.

The Fides Vatican missionary agency site (www.fides.org), which was reported to have been blocked when it added a Chinese-language section, was accessible, as was Vatican Radio's Chinese section and Taiwan-based Radio Veritas in Chinese. Beijing officials declared back in 1998 when Fides launched its Chinese-language service that they hoped the Vatican would not use the Internet to "interfere in China's internal affairs, including religious affairs".

Although a range of Chinese and English-language sites run by religious communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and other countries of the region (including Muslim, Daoist, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Adventist, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witness and LDS Church sites) were accessible, a handful were inaccessible. Catholic sites in the region were generally accessible, including the official Church site in Taiwan and that of the Jesuit-run Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong. However, the main site of the Hong Kong diocese (www.catholic.org.hk) was mostly inaccessible. On one occasion, Forum 18 could gain access to the English-language section of the site, but not to the Chinese-language section. On another occasion the page started to load, only to fail. Also inaccessible was the Taiwan-based website of the Chinese Divine Word Missionaries (www.svdchina.org). Freely accessible was the site of the official Church agency, the Union of Catholic Asian News.

One source told Forum 18 that the Hong Kong Catholic diocese's website was blocked after the deterioration of relations in 2003 between Hong Kong Bishop Joseph Zen Ze-kun and the mainland authorities. Improved relations as evidenced by his recent visit to Shanghai have not so far led to the renewal of access from China to the diocesan website.

Sites about missionary activity in China and those aiming to convert readers to a particular faith were not generally blocked. Forum 18 found only the Taiwan-based site of China Ministries International (www.cmi.org.tw), a Protestant missionary and aid group founded by the late Jonathan Chao, and its South Korean-based counterpart www.cmikr.com to be permanently inaccessible.

Sites containing religious scriptures and other holy books in Chinese (Muslim, Christian, Daoist and others) did not appear to be blocked. Nor was the Russian Orthodox Church's site on Orthodoxy in China blocked, although it contains historical information on the Church in China and prayers in Chinese.

Forum 18 found no sites by the international headquarters of major faiths (such as those of the Vatican, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other Orthodox patriarchates, the Adventist Church, the Baha'is, the LDS Church) or of international religious organisations (such as the Muslim World League, the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Baptist World Alliance and the World Evangelical Alliance) to be blocked. Nor was the site of the Hong Kong Christian Council (despite its criticisms of Hong Kong's Basic Law) or the Christian Conference of Asia.

Websites which present a rosy picture of religious freedom in China - such as the US-based site of the Amity Foundation of the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (www.amityfoundation.org), the US-based Christianity in China (www.christianityinchina.org) which declares that it "aims to be positive", or the British-based Friends of the Church in China (www.thefcc.org) – are not blocked.

General religious freedom and religious tolerance sites in Western languages (such as www.religioustolerance.org, www.religiousfreedom.org and the site of the International Religious Liberty Association and of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom) are not blocked. Nor is the site of the Atheist Network. Sites relating to persecution of faiths not related to China (such as www.thepersecution.org, covering persecution of Ahmadi Muslims, or www.muslimzbekistan.com, covering persecution of devout Muslims and Hizb ut-Tahrir members by the Uzbek authorities) are not blocked. Nor are sites run by foreign governments relating to religious freedom (such as the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and the US State Department, where even the annual religious freedom report on China is freely available in English).

The decision by the Chinese government to prevent the use of foreign internet search engines as a surrogate way to retrieve webpages from blocked sites has already been widely reported. A search for "Dalai lama" in English on the Chinese version of Google brought up numerous references on foreign websites, but Forum 18 could not access most of the actual pages either directly or through the cached version, though references on domestic websites were accessible. Searches on the Chinese version of Yahoo – whether in English or in Chinese characters - and on the English-language Google site from within China brought similar results. On one occasion when Forum 18 tried to search for "Dalai lama" using the Chinese characters on the Chinese version of Google, the server could not be found.

Unlike in Saudi Arabia, where for specific blocked sites a message appears stating bluntly that access is "not allowed", Chinese servers either tell the customer that the site is unavailable, that there is an error, or that the site cannot be found. On other occasions the attempt to access the site simply times out.

More research needs to be done on where the barring is taking place, whether at the national gateway or on ISP servers, although it is known the Chinese government is devoting a vast level of resources to creating increasingly sophisticated software to bar "unwelcome" material more efficiently.

Penalties for "unacceptable" web use

Not only is the government working hard to deny access to unwelcome content. It has taken steps to prevent religious communities and individual believers within China trying to use the internet for what it regards as unacceptable purposes. Article 19 of China's regulations on registering domain names, which went into force in September 2002, bars the registration of domain names if the site is used to harm state interests. Clause 5 of the regulations bans websites that violate "state religion policies or propagate cult and feudal superstition".

Amnesty International reports that Zhang Haitao, a computer engineer from Jilin Province, was arrested as far back as July 2000 for creating a Falun Gong website within China. Charged with subversion, it remains unknown whether he has been sentenced or where he is being held.

Just as those posting what are regarded as subversive political contributions to bulletin boards have on occasion been given long prison terms, those using the internet to post religious news the authorities do not like can be punished. Several Falun Gong practitioners who used the internet to distribute news about the plight of fellow-practitioners have been given long sentences.

In the first known crackdown on Christians who used the internet for similar purposes, in November 2003 the police arrested a computer technician who posted articles online supporting Protestant house churches. Zhang Shengqi was detained in the northeastern city of Jilin and charged with leaking state secrets. The police suspected Zhang of helping Protestant church historian Liu Fenggang post information about the crackdown on house churches in the eastern city of Hangzhou. Liu, a veteran pro-democracy campaigner, was also detained in Hangzhou on state secrets charges. The two – together with a third man who had printed Liu's reports – were originally charged with "inciting the gathering of state secrets" but this was changed to "providing intelligence to organisations outside China". They were tried in March 2004, though no sentence is yet known.

Despite the ever-present threats, internet users often contribute direct comment to political and even some religious bulletin boards. One viewed by Forum 18 contained discussions about religion, including Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama, which were quite supportive of these communities and critical of the government. Even more interestingly, most of the discussants were based in China. Another bulletin board on house church issues is billed as the only internet bulletin in China that serves "spiritually pure and upright brothers and sisters". Forum 18 found the discussions on this board to be particularly fierce, with several participants vehemently criticising the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the churches it sponsors. Other contributors took a more moderate line, but were instantly attacked as "unbelievers" (a common epithet among house church adherents for members of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement). Another Chinese-based religion site included discussions primarily on the metaphysical aspect of religion.

Why are sites blocked?

The findings of Forum 18's survey correspond with the general perception of a Chinese state that remains deeply concerned about maintaining internal stability and by extension, the continuation of Communist rule. Nearly all blocked websites have content critical of the government's policy on religion, while groups like the China Aid Association and the Committee for the Investigation of Persecution of Religion in China provide detailed accounts of state repression. From the state's perspective, these websites, by virtue of their content, publicly question the legitimacy of the Communist state and may thus serve as agents of agitation and "public disorder" within China.

Alongside persistent worries over internal stability, the Communist government remains highly sensitive to perceived threats to China's territorial integrity. This appears to be the primary factor behind the decision to block websites that support the Dalai Lama or the Uyghur Muslims, who advocate territorial independence, or "separatism" in official Chinese parlance. This "external" factor may also account for the surprisingly large number of Roman Catholic websites blocked, albeit with a slightly different twist.

The Roman Catholic Church has never been known to be a supporter of "separatism". However, in its ongoing dispute with the Chinese government, it has retained diplomatic ties with Taiwan (against the Chinese government's express wishes) and has insisted that the Vatican has the right to train and appoint Chinese Catholic clerics. The Chinese Communist state vehemently opposes this view, insisting that all religious communities in China be "self-supporting" and not subject to foreign influence, a perspective based on the historical view that Western religions were instrumental in creating China's semi-colonial status for the 100 years between the middle of the 19th century and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Today, this perception – that foreign states harbour little genuine goodwill toward China – has been applied to the state's crackdown against Falun Gong, which may provide another justification for the blocking of Falun Gong websites.

These factors certainly do not discount the significance of ideological "contradictions", to use Marxist parlance, in the state's decision to block certain religious websites. However, that many others are accessible in China provokes speculation about the state's attitude toward religion. While proclaiming that the Communist state has now embraced religions in general would be going too far, the decision to permit access to some religious websites may reflect a more utilitarian conception of religion. In other words, while Communism remains antithetical to religion, religion can still serve as an instrument to realise Communist objectives. This utilitarian view of religion can be seen in internal Communist Party and government documents.

Given the plethora of websites with religious content deemed to be "anti-China", it is surprising that the Chinese state has not encouraged the mass organisations representing the five "recognised" religions, as well as appropriate state agencies, to use the same medium for a "counter-offensive". Other than the Amity Foundation, which essentially serves as an Internet surrogate for the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, and the China Christian Council, neither the Daoist Association of China, the Catholic Patriotic Association nor the Islamic Association of China hosts or sponsors websites.

The Chinese Association of Buddhism sponsors a website (www.buddhism.com.cn) that functions somewhat like the Amity Foundation for the Protestant Christian groups. Other related groups operate websites too. A qigong site (www.chinaqigong.net) seems to be affiliated with the China Qigong Scientific Research Society. The China Anti-Cult Association also maintains a website (www.anticult.org), which mainly attacks Falun Gong. A Chinese government site gives its views on Tibet (www.tibetinfo.com.cn), which contrasts sharply with the blocked foreign site www.tibet.com. The government's State Administration for Religious Affairs does not appear to host any website of its own.

Just as the state seems to be under-utilising the power of the Internet, there is also little indication that repressed religious groups other than the Falun Gong movement have used it as a platform for information exchange, mobilisation and coordination. For example, none of the unregistered Protestant "house church networks" has an Internet portal. This does not mean that individuals are not using electronic mail to communicate with each other regularly. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, at least some Chinese religious adherents are prepared to engage openly online in fierce discussions about religious doctrines and state policies toward religious communities. However, these individuals are certainly concerned that a website, even as it may advance the cause of the group, can also bring publicity that might harm their existence and that of their groups.

Censorship is religious freedom violation

Censorship of websites by restrictive governments has been noted in a range of countries, from China to Saudi Arabia to Iran to

Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan. All of these to a greater or lesser extent bar access to religious websites the authorities do not like. Forum 18 has established that in Uzbekistan, sites deemed sympathetic to Muslims opposed to the regime of President Islam Karimov are routinely blocked (see F18News 19 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=86). Saudi Arabia bars Arabic-language and foreign-language Christian, Baha'i and numerous other religious sites.

But the censorship of religious websites in China is more extensive and more expensive than in any other country of the world. The sheer number of Chinese with access to the internet and number of religious websites with Chinese-language content, combined with the level of state control over free religious practice, makes the censorship of religious sites a severe restraint on the religious rights of all residents of China.

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For more information, see Forum 18's survey of the prospects for religious freedom at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=292

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