



CHINA'S EFFORTS TO BLOCK CIVIL SOCIETY ACCESS TO THE UNITED NATIONS

APRIL 2025

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*'A healthy society should have
more than one voice'*

Dr. Li Wenliang, late Covid-19 whistleblower
and ophthalmologist (1985-2020)

An analysis of the UN Committee on NGOs, the presence of
Government-Organised NGOs (GONGOs), and patterns of intimidation
and reprisals by the Government of the People's Republic of China

April 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Human rights defenders and civil society organisations are essential contributors to global human rights, sustainable development, and democratic accountability. Their participation in United Nations (UN) mechanisms provides critical expertise, strengthens international responses to rights violations, and gives voice to victims and affected communities. However, civil society access to these mechanisms is increasingly under threat, particularly from authoritarian-leaning States seeking to control narratives and suppress dissent.

This report focuses on the People's Republic of China (China) and documents its sustained efforts to restrict the space for independent civil society within the UN human rights system, including the Human Rights Council (HRC), the Special Procedures, the Treaty Bodies and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). It highlights the Chinese government's repressive strategies and provides recommendations to safeguard civil society engagement at the UN.

Under President Xi Jinping, the Chinese Party-State has severely restricted civil society space domestically, silencing dissenting voices and strengthening authoritarian control. In this context, the UN, in particular its Geneva-based human rights bodies, is one of the last remaining avenues for Chinese human rights defenders to advocate, document, testify and raise concerns.

At the same time, the government has expanded its influence over international human rights forums, seeking to reshape global discourse and suppress criticism of its own record.

China has led efforts to obstruct the participation of independent NGOs at the UN, particularly those focused on human rights abuses in China, in particular through questions to NGO applicants for consultative status, automatically triggering the deferral of the application. China is the most frequent user of deferrals in the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Committee on NGOs (NGO Committee), systematically blocking applications from NGOs that use politically 'incorrect' terminology regarding Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, or Tibet, or raise 'sensitive' human rights concerns. Many of the questions posed by China are unnecessarily inquisitive – including in relation with the applicant's engagement with UN bodies, past and planned activities, and links with specific funders – and in some cases have contributed to deferrals for more than six years. This tactic affects NGOs globally, regardless of origin or thematic focus, and exploits the fact that the NGO Committee is largely composed of States hostile to independent civil society, often members of the Like-Minded Group (LMG) or the Group of Friends of the UN Charter.

China has also adopted an adversarial position in negotiations to strengthen UN mechanisms that address cases of reprisals for cooperation with the UN. It regularly employs procedural tactics such as points of order to interrupt NGO speakers at the Human Rights Council, and exerts pressure on other Member States not to meet with certain civil society groups, in particular Uyghur activists.

In addition, a major aspect of China's strategy to occupy civil society space involves the proliferation of 'Government-Organised NGOs' (GONGOs), groups under the effective control of the State but posing as independent NGOs. The participation of GONGOs has grown exponentially since 2018 at the Human Rights Council and other UN human rights bodies, accompanying China's increasing presence in these spaces following the US' withdrawal from the Council in 2018. GONGOs occupy an already limited space for civil society, displacing genuine independent voices. They amplify State narratives, both to deny and deflect criticism on grave human rights violations by the Chinese government, and to

advance its diplomatic agenda. GONGOs have also been involved in acts of intimidation and reprisals, seeking to shield the State from direct responsibility.

This growing trend poses complex challenges, as policy responses must differentiate between legitimate NGOs and State proxies without inadvertently restricting authentic civil society engagement.

Even for NGOs that succeed in gaining ECOSOC status, engagement with the UN does not guarantee safety. China ranks among the most frequent perpetrators of reprisals against individuals cooperating or seeking to cooperate with the UN, as documented in the UN Secretary-General's annual report on reprisals. Targets of these acts are often Uyghur and Tibetan activists, Hong Kong democracy advocates, or others promoting accountability for gross human rights violations. Often justified on national security grounds, acts of reprisals include surveillance and harassment inside UN premises, smearing of activists in UN debates and events, travel restrictions, and the targeting of family members. The intention is not only to punish individuals but also to send a chilling message to others considering similar engagement. This has resulted in increasing self-censorship by activists who, fearing retaliation, reduce or stop their engagement with UN bodies, in particular since new overly broad national security laws in Hong Kong risk criminalising UN engagement.

A consistent and robust UN and diplomatic response to these acts is paramount to protect human rights defenders and uphold the credibility of UN human rights bodies. Various UN mechanisms and States have publicly and privately raised cases of reprisals committed by China, increasing the public cost of committing reprisals. Yet, sustained and long-term follow-up on cases by UN bodies needs to be further strengthened.

China's behaviour stands in direct contradiction to its self-portrayal as a reliable multilateral leader. At the core of its strategy lies a desire to shield itself from criticism, control narratives, influence human rights normative development, and weaken the independence of UN bodies. These actions undermine the integrity and effectiveness of UN human rights mechanisms, set harmful precedents for other authoritarian-leaning States, and threaten to marginalise independent civil society voices globally, particularly in a shifting geopolitical environment where more States, including long-standing democracies, align with China's practices.

Based on this report's findings, the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) puts forward a set of targeted recommendations to UN bodies and Member States, aimed at protecting civil society space from interference and restrictions. While China is the focus of this report, the issues addressed are systemic. The recommendations are designed to strengthen UN processes and prevent any State from manipulating international mechanisms to suppress independent voices. These include:

- reforming the NGO Committee to increase transparency, limit abuse of deferrals, and ensure fair access to UN bodies for independent NGOs
- strengthening protection mechanisms against reprisals, including rapid response to incidents inside UN premises, public accountability for perpetrators, and consistent long-term follow-up on unresolved cases
- curbing the influence of GONGOs by distinguishing clearly between independent and State-organised NGOs, and better documenting their presence and impact
- strengthening measures at the Human Rights Council and other UN bodies to make civil society participation safer, more inclusive, and less vulnerable to obstruction.

INTRODUCTION

Civil society actors, including human rights defenders and civil society organisations (CSOs), play a pivotal role in promoting human rights, sustainable development, and democratic governance. They provide essential information and expertise, promote accountability, mobilise international responses to human rights violations, and represent activists, victims, their relatives and communities at the international level, particularly within the United Nations (UN). However, the growing influence of authoritarian governments has contributed to an erosion of the space for human rights defenders and civil society groups at the UN, and hinders their engagement with UN human rights bodies.

The role of independent civil society is particularly crucial in highly authoritarian contexts such as in the People's Republic of China (China). The Chinese Party-State continues to tighten its grip over civil society and diverse and dissenting voices under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, underscoring the paramount importance of defending spaces – in particular the UN Human Rights Council and other international human rights bodies – where uncensored information can be shared, the alarm can be sounded regarding ongoing or anticipated human rights abuses, and advocacy can be carried out on behalf of victims and those silenced.

As the Chinese government seeks to aggressively advance its political agenda and deflect criticism to 'tell China's story well' on the global stage, many inside China seek to provide a counter-narrative. In doing so, many continue to be inspired by the courageous legacy of human rights defenders and whistleblowers such as late Chinese activist Cao Shunli or Covid-19 whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang, who put their lives at risk to speak truth to power. Dr. Li, who warned about early Covid-19 infections despite government censorship, died on 6 February 2024 leaving behind an enduring message: 'a healthy society should have more than one voice.'



Bust of the late Chinese human rights defender Cao Shunli created by Marie Seborova, commissioned by ISHR.

In a May 2023 session of the UN Committee on NGOs, China reiterated that as a 'staunch supporter of the UN and an active practitioner of multilateralism' it had 'always supported the participation of NGOs in UN affairs in compliance with relevant rules.' The Chinese government's demonstrated intent to be perceived as a constructive, reliable multilateral leader is in stark contrast to its consistently adversarial relationship with civil society, especially in UN human rights bodies. It is significant that this is taking place now in a context where the new United States (US) administration is threatening to defund and weaken UN bodies.

This report seeks to document actions by China's government, individually or jointly with other States, aimed at restricting space for, and access of independent civil society to, UN human rights bodies. This includes independent civil society organisations working on the human rights situation in China and in support of Uyghur, Tibetan, Hong Kong and mainland Chinese human rights defenders and victims, inside or outside the Chinese territory.

This report analyses the tactics used to both prevent and block access to the UN, and also deter those accessing UN processes or premises from further engaging with UN human rights bodies, including the Human Rights Council, the Universal Periodic Review, the Special Procedures and the Treaty Bodies. It examines China's tactics to defer NGO applications for ECOSOC consultative status at the NGO Committee and to disrupt and reduce existing civil society space. It further examines the impact of the growing presence of Chinese 'Government-Organised NGOs' (GONGOs) and patterns of intimidation and reprisals committed by the State (or its agents or proxies) with a view to dissuade individuals and groups from cooperation with UN bodies.

Through the recommendations made in this report, ISHR aims to better safeguard civil society's role on the UN stage. While the report focuses on China, the policy responses provided to UN bodies and UN Member States aim to strengthen processes and procedures to prevent future attempts by China, the US, Russia or any other influential actor to restrict space for independent civil society.

METHODOLOGY

This report was written by ISHR staff, with the valuable support of ISHR interns and fellows.

This report is based on research conducted between August 2023 and March 2025. It draws from quantitative and qualitative information independently collected by ISHR including:

- in-person and online monitoring of relevant sessions of UN bodies, including the NGO Committee and the Human Rights Council
- available records of relevant sessions of the NGO Committee and the Human Rights Council, as well as oral statements and other relevant documents uploaded to the Extranet of the Human Rights Council
- informal interviews with diplomats at Permanent Missions of UN Member States in Geneva and New York, NGO members, human rights defenders, and scholars
- public reports and articles published on ISHR's website and its #EndReprisals database
- other relevant UN resources that are publicly available online, including the Esango database, the database of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for Special Procedures communications, relevant documents by Treaty Bodies, and the Secretary-General's reprisals reports
- media reports and academic articles.

The names of some individuals with whom ISHR spoke have been withheld for confidentiality.



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PART I – PREVENTING ACCESS TO THE UN

Deferring applications for consultative status at the NGO Committee

The Human Rights Council (HRC) is a paramount space for NGOs seeking to expose human rights violations, foreground the testimony of victims and the expertise of affected communities, and brief States on recommendations for human rights change. To do so, NGOs deliver oral statements during formal HRC sessions and organise side events on thematic issues or pressing country situations. Yet, unlike engagement with UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, engaging with the HRC requires NGOs to be accredited with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) – the main UN organ coordinating economic and social work. Commonly known as ‘ECOSOC status’, consultative status with the ECOSOC provides for a more permanent relationship with the UN, including the ability to participate in various UN bodies and processes. It is a prerequisite to obtain a badge granting physical access to UN premises, and to join HRC sessions. While any NGO may submit a report for a country’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR), ECOSOC status is also required to deliver a statement during the adoption of a country’s UPR outcome as it takes place under Item 6 of the HRC’s formal session agenda.

Obtaining consultative status does not mean that an NGO enjoys a formal negotiating role or the chance to vote in UN intergovernmental processes. However, it does provide important opportunities to directly engage with the main decision-makers in UN fora: member States.

Consultative status offers NGOs key practical benefits, such as UN grounds passes for their representatives, and the ability to physically enter conference rooms, and interact with diplomats and UN staff. Moreover, consultative status allows organisations to participate formally in UN meetings, including in regular sessions of the HRC: an accredited NGO may be able to make oral and written statements, organise and host 'side events', accredit representatives to attend the HRC, and network with key international actors inside UN premises.

The possibility for non-governmental contributions to the UN was established through Article 71 of the *UN Charter*. ECOSOC *Resolution 1996/31* further outlines the rules and procedures defining the consultative relationship between civil society and the UN, including eligibility requirements that the NGO applicant:

- is concerned with matters within the competence of ECOSOC, including human rights
- has objectives in conformity with the *UN Charter* and supports the UN
- has a democratically adopted constitution, a representative structure, and appropriate mechanisms for accountability
- discloses the sources of its financial support, including contributions from governments.

The Committee on NGOs¹ ('NGO Committee') is the subsidiary body to the ECOSOC that considers all applications for consultative status, and monitors the consultative relationship, including by reviewing quadrennial reports submitted by accredited NGOs. The Committee has 19 State members, elected to serve four-year terms on the basis of equitable geographical representation. Its composition for the 2023-2026 period is as follows: Algeria, Cameroon, Eritrea, Liberia, and Zimbabwe for African States; Bahrain, China, India and Pakistan for Asian States; Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba and Nicaragua for Latin American and Caribbean States; Armenia and Georgia for Eastern European States; and Israel, Türkiye, the United Kingdom (UK) and the US for Western European and other States.

The Committee meets twice per year at the UN headquarters in New York, in a regular session (usually in January/February) and in a resumed session (usually in May/June), both considering new and pending applications. The Committee makes recommendations to ECOSOC on applications in the form of decisions which may be accepted or overturned by ECOSOC. The Committee is supported by the NGO Branch of the UN's Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UNDESA), which is responsible, amongst other things, for initial screening of applications.

The NGO Committee can take three actions if it chooses not to grant consultative status: deny consultative status (unusual, likely the result of a vote); close the application (if an NGO is repeatedly unresponsive); or defer consideration of the application. Deferral is the most common tool used by Committee members to obstruct applications, given that members only need to ask a question to the NGO during a Committee session to trigger the deferral of an application.²

¹ <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/updated-a-practical-guide-to-the-un-committee-on-ngos/>

² For more information on the application process, consult ISHR's *Practical Guide to the UN Committee on NGOs*: <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/updated-a-practical-guide-to-the-un-committee-on-ngos/>

A key obstructionist

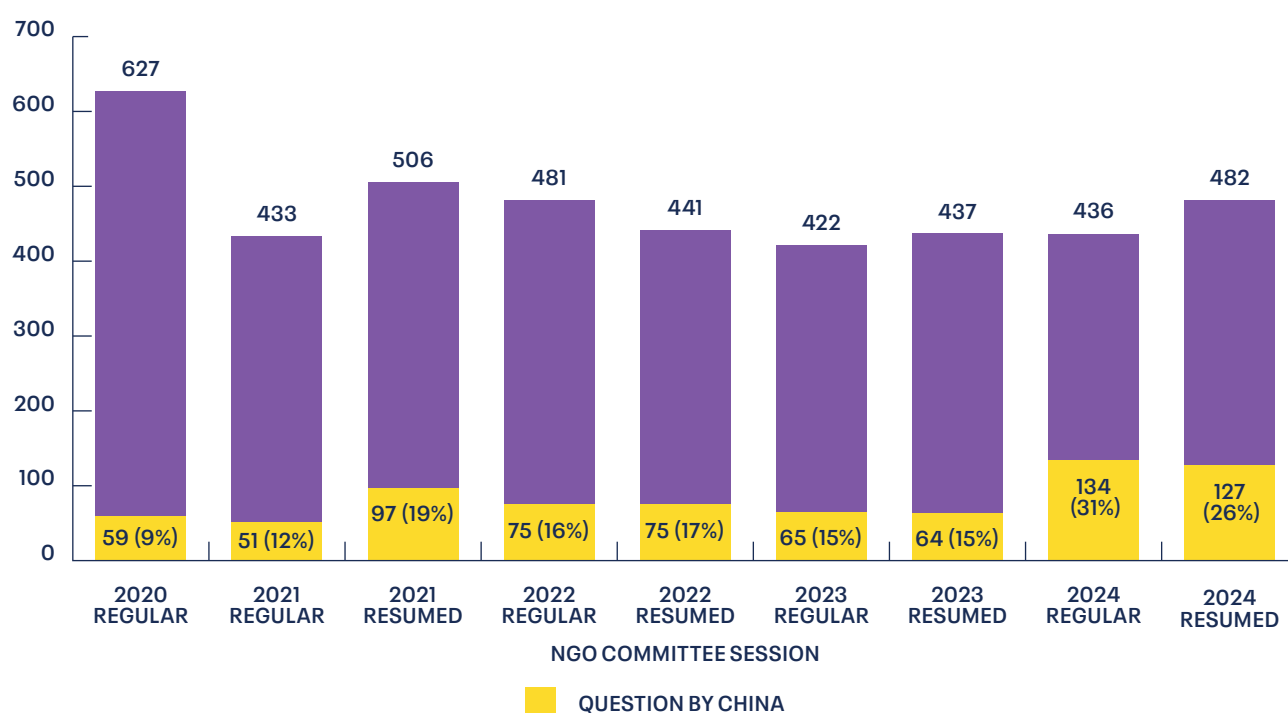
China remains the top obstructionist State at the NGO Committee since 2016. It is one of the longest-serving members of the NGO Committee (1946-1960, 1995-2003, 2006-today) after Russia/USSR (1946-2022) and the US (1946-1991, 1995-today), and before Cuba (1975-1983, 1989-today) and the UK (1946-1979, 1995-2001, 2007-2010, 2023-today).

According to data collected by ISHR for the five-year period of 2020-2024,³ China remains the main obstructionist, although other States have also had an active role in the Committee:

- China posed, on average, 18% of all questions posed to NGO applicants, with a surge of 28% of questions posed in 2024. While the average number of questions posed during Committee sessions diminished by 15% over the data period, the average number of questions posed by China increased by 40%.
- China is, on average, responsible for 19% of all deferred NGO applicants,⁴ with a surge of 27% in 2024. This means China is responsible for blocking, on average, 11% of all NGO applicants considered by the NGO Committee, with a surge of 18% in 2024.

Over this five-year period, China asked 747 questions to NGO applicants, an average of 149 questions per year. In comparison, according to scholar Rana Siu Inboden, China had 'queried NGOs 340 times' over the four-year period 2016-2019,⁵ an average of 85 questions per year. This constitutes an increase of 75% in the yearly average of questions posed by China between the 2016-2019 and the 2020-2024 periods.

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF QUESTIONS TO NGO APPLICANTS IN TOTAL AND BY CHINA (2020-2024)



³ This five-year period corresponds to nine sessions, as the 2020 resumed session did not take place amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

⁴ This includes deferred NGO applicants who have been considered at more than one NGO Committee session.

⁵ Siu Inboden, 'China at the UN: Choking Civil Society', (2021) Journal of Democracy Vol.32 Issue 3 Pages 124-135.
<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/china-at-the-un-choking-civil-society/>

TABLE 1: NGO DEFERRALS IN NGO COMMITTEE SESSIONS (2020-2024)

NGO COMMITTEE SESSION	NUMBER OF NGOS CONSIDERED	NUMBER OF NGOS DEFERRED	NUMBER OF NGOS DEFERRED BY CHINA	CHINA'S SHARE OF DEFERRALS
2020 Regular	632	339	59	17%
2021 Regular	855	386	49	13%
2021 Resumed	651	320	61	19%
2022 Regular	586	354	61	17%
2022 Resumed	564	321	59	18%
2023 Regular	560	296	51	17%
2023 Resumed	500	294	47	16%
2024 Regular	508	344	90	26%
2024 Resumed	476	323	89	28%
Total	5,332	2,977	566	19%

China's deferrals impact NGO applicants from all regions of the world working across all issues. At least 15%⁶ of the NGOs whose application was deferred operated primarily in the field of human rights, while the main other fields affected include education, youth, gender equality, and international law.

Inquisitive questions

On average over the period 2020-2024, 57% of China's questions sought details on past or future activities of the NGO applicant, 20% inquired about sources of funding and financial matters, 7% requested information on cooperation with other civil society organisations or governments, and 5% sought information on the applicant NGO's membership.

While these categories may appear ordinary, a closer look at the detailed questions posed indicate they appear to be politically driven or are overly inquisitive, in a manner that is unnecessary for and disproportionate to the eligibility requirements under ECOSOC *Resolution 1996/31*. In January 2023, China asked the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) to 'provide progress on its research and statistics related to a project with North Korean refugees'. In August 2022, China asked the Andrey Kylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice to provide detailed information, including expenditure reports, about its support for projects that help drug users during the Covid-19 pandemic.

On average over 2020-2024, 10% of China's questions related to the applicant NGO's engagement with UN bodies, sometimes in an overly inquisitive manner. In January 2020, China asked the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights to indicate which UN meetings the organisation participated in and what contribution it provided. In the same session, China asked World Without Genocide how it planned to contribute to the work of the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide. In May 2022, China requested the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) to provide 'information regarding an event in Beirut related to UNESCO'. In August 2021, China asked the

⁶ Based on ISHR research, at least 15% of NGO applicants clearly worked in the field of human rights. The real percentage is likely higher, and other NGO applicants may also work to different degrees to promote and protect human rights but not indicate it expressly.

Geneva-based Global Detention Project to ‘provide more information on information it has submitted to UN Treaty Bodies.’

China has also deferred the application of two NGOs whose work has links with the human rights situation in the Uyghur region (Xinjiang). The Better Cotton Initiative, which suspended its activities in Xinjiang in 2020 out of forced labour concerns, has had its application deferred since the Committee’s May 2023 resumed session, during which China noted that the organisation’s financial statement indicated large amounts of government funding, and requested a breakdown by source of funding. Perhaps more worryingly, the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) has had its application deferred since the Committee’s May 2022 regular session by China, who has inquired on a range of topics including its financial statements, ‘information collection model,’ and relationship with funders.

It is difficult for us to witness how widely accepted GONGOs are in UN spaces in New York and Geneva, while we struggle for the most basic access. It’s even more difficult to watch how these groups repeat, often word for word, what their government is already saying. They add absolutely no value to the system, and yet they are welcomed. The goal of NGOs like ours is transparency into government conduct in order to improve human rights conditions on the ground. I see no evidence that GONGOs share that view.

Peter Irwin, Uyghur Human Rights Project, in comments to ISHR

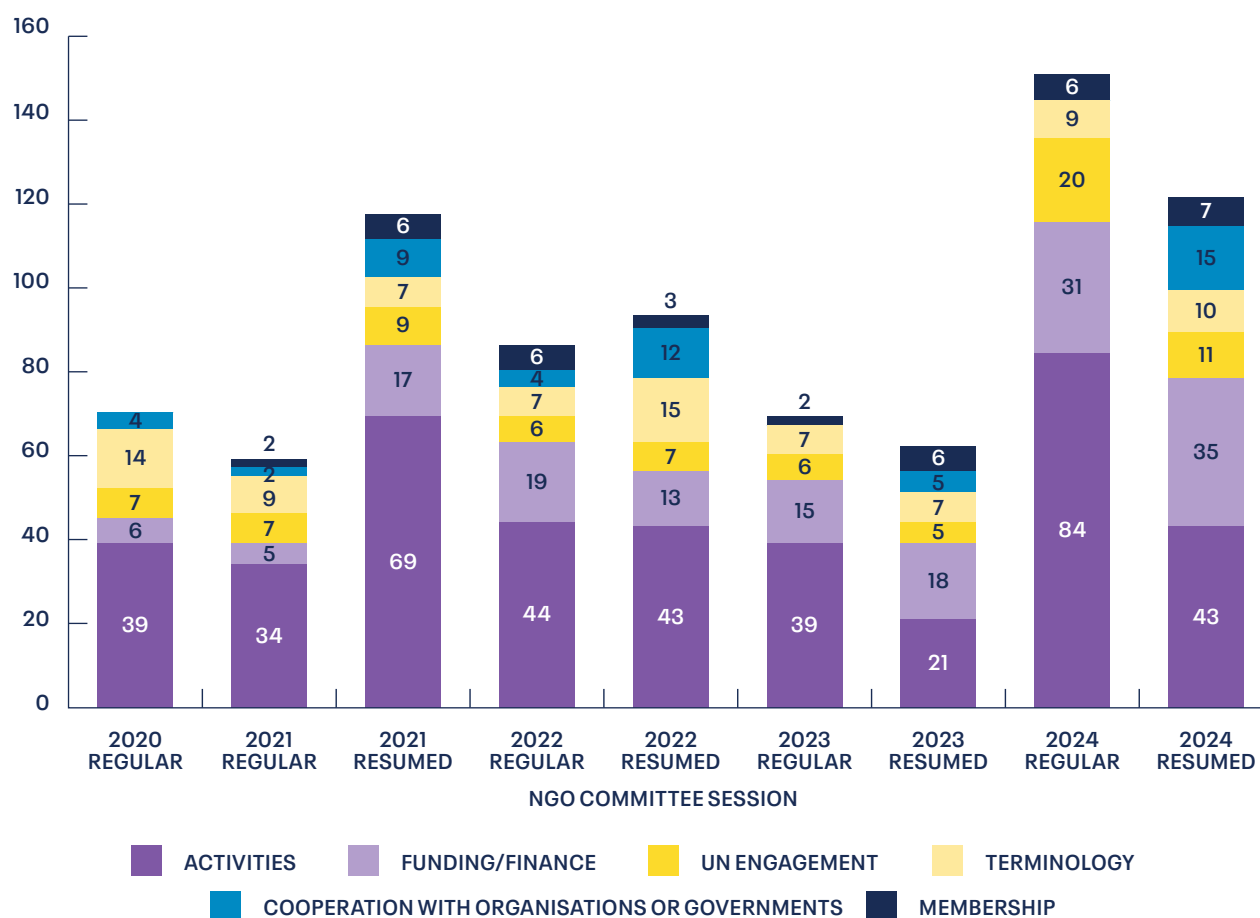
To this date, there is no organisation dedicated to the promotion of the human rights of Uyghurs that has been granted ECOSOC status. In 2019, the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) submitted an application for consultative status with ECOSOC, but the application was not even considered by the NGO Committee. In a private letter to the WUC, the UNDESA NGO Branch alleged that ‘upon consideration of the answers provided to the application form and the documentation presented, we understand that your organisation promotes the establishment of an independent state within the sovereign territory of the People’s Republic of China’ which is ‘inconsistent with the purposes and principles enshrined in the UN Charter.’



Chinese human rights defender Sophie Luo delivers an oral statement at the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council.

© Photo: UN Web TV

FIGURE 2: BREAKDOWN OF QUESTIONS ASKED BY CHINA BY TOPIC (2020-2024)



A tool to advance 'correct terminology'

China has dedicated much effort in using the NGO Committee to promote so-called 'correct terminology' when referring to Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, by asking direct questions about the applicant's 'position' on such matters.

The Chinese government appears to place particular importance on terminology involving Taiwan. In some cases, China requests NGO applicants – particularly when they are federations – to clarify their position on the 'Taiwan issue', referring to any implication that Taiwan would not be a province of China. In August 2021, China asked the Swiss-based World Bicycle Industry Association about its 'relationship with Taiwan Bicycle Association and its position on the Taiwan issue.' Three other NGO applicants faced similar questions during the same Committee session, including the American Sociological Association.

Over the period 2020-2024, on average, 83% of terminology questions by China related specifically to Taiwan, corresponding to 70 deferrals.

FIGURE 3: GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS OF TERMINOLOGY-RELATED QUESTIONS BY CHINA (2020–2024)



This has affected NGOs headquartered in developed and developing countries, despite Beijing's stated aim of supporting Global South civil society participation:⁷ just in 2024, China deferred 12 applications from NGOs headquartered in Global South countries⁸ – addressing issues as varied as poverty-alleviation, gender equality, and agriculture –, pointing to 'wrongful references to Taiwan' and requesting that they 'use correct terms' or 'adhere to UN terminology.'

China may conduct thorough research of the website of applicant NGOs to verify if Taiwan, Hong Kong or Macao are not included in computer-generated lists of countries, or are explicitly referred to as 'Taiwan, Province of China', 'Hong Kong, Special Administrative Region of China' and 'Macao, Special Administrative Region of China.' In May 2022, China requested a Serbian pro-democracy organisation to 'use the term Taiwan, province of China' pointing to one report that 'wrongly refers to Taiwan.' In the same Committee session, China deferred the application of the Pakistan-based poverty-alleviation organisation Institute of Rural Management on the grounds that 'after a previous request to change the term to Taiwan, Province of China, the website still contains several references to Taiwan.' In May 2023, the application of a Peruvian organisation promoting the rights of Indigenous women was deferred by China on grounds that 'an article posted by this organisation mentioned Taiwan as a country.'

This equally affects organisations outside the human rights field working on issues considered less sensitive: 'incorrect terminology' on Taiwan in articles posted online were used to defer the application of the Colombian Association of Psychologists and the Madrid Psychoanalysis Association in January 2023.

⁷ Para. 57, Report of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations on its 2023 resumed session, E/2023/32 (Part III): [https://docs.un.org/en/E/2023/32%20\(Part%20III\)](https://docs.un.org/en/E/2023/32%20(Part%20III))

⁸ Including Malaysia, Senegal, Niger, Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and the Dominican Republic.

While terminology questions overwhelmingly target Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao as territories distinct of what is commonly known as 'mainland China', a handful of questions have addressed other regions, including Tibet. In January 2020, China asked the International Funder for Indigenous Peoples Inc. about the use of 'incorrect terminology for Tibet and Taiwan' on articles posted, and alleged that the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights – which frequently provides a platform for Tibetan human rights defenders at the HRC – released 'propaganda reports on the Tibet Autonomous Region.'

To avoid providing a direct response, some applicants have simply noted that such political concerns fall beyond their organisation's mandate. There is considerable concern amongst NGOs that China will continue to pressure both applicant and accredited NGOs if they consider this line of questioning on terminology proves advantageous.

Widespread reach of deferrals

NGOs whose application has been consistently or occasionally deferred by questions posed by China include⁹:

- prominent organisations in the field of **women's rights and gender equality**, such as the Global Fund for Women's Rights, the Malala Fund, and the International Action Network for Gender Equity and Law, as well as local women's rights groups such as Guinea's Women Alliance for Equality and Gender
- key **global, regional and local human rights organisations** such as Protection International, Human Rights House Foundation, Diakonia, Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Tom Lantos Foundation, the United Kingdom's Bar Human Rights Committee, the Global Detention Project, and the Asian Federation against Involuntary Disappearances
- organisations working on **freedom of religion or belief**, such as the US Council of Muslim Organisations and the European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom (EIFRF)
- organisations working on **genocide prevention**, such as World Without Genocide and the Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation
- other prominent organisations such as Wikimedia Foundation (deferred since 2020), and academic institutions such as New York University (NYU) and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

'A war of attrition'

Since 2020, **China has largely contributed to long-term deferrals of at least 15 long-standing NGO applicants, whose applications have been protracted by the NGO Committee for at least eight years.** This includes NGOs advancing human rights in countries with varying degrees of alignment with China, such as North Korea, Indonesia, Egypt, Laos, Russia, Bahrain and a range of Middle Eastern countries.

⁹ Some of these organisations have since been granted ECOSOC status.

TABLE 2: QUESTIONS BY CHINA TO NGOS WITH APPLICATIONS DEFERRED FOR AT LEAST SEVEN YEARS

FOCUS OF THE ORGANISATION*	DEFERRED SINCE	QUESTIONS BY CHINA DURING NGO COMMITTEE SESSIONS								
		2020 REGULAR	2021 REGULAR	2021 RESUMED	2022 REGULAR	2022 RESUMED	2023 REGULAR	2023 RESUMED	2024 REGULAR	2024 RESUMED
Human rights in the Middle East	Jan'16			internal functioning	specific activity with UN					
Human rights in the Middle East	May'16			membership						
Human rights in North Korea	May'16	specific activity			funding sources	activity plan	specific activity			
Human rights in North Korea	May'16	UN engagement			funding sources					
Peace, disarmament, and reunification of Korea	Jan'17		specific activity							
Child rights in South Korea & North Korea	May'16	specific activity	UN engagement							
Right to self-determination of West Papuans in Indonesia	May'16			funding sources	specific activity	finance	government cooperation	funding sources	UN engagement	government cooperation
Religious freedom and democracy in Egypt	Jan'16		specific activity	government cooperation	internal functioning	membership				
Drug policies in Russia	May'16	funding sources	activity list	specific activity		specific activity				
Genocide prevention	May'15	UN engagement		activity list	specific activity	specific activity				
Laos	May'16	local partners	activity list	specific activity	local partners					
Gender equality and racism in the Caribbean and Latin America	May'17				funding sources					
Tamils residing in the US	Jan'17			budget, membership						past activities
Human rights in Bahrain	May'17								UN engagement	
Human rights in the Middle East	May'17							UN engagement	activity list	specific activity

*The names of the organisations have been omitted for safety reasons.

Transactional diplomacy and coordination with allied governments

Analysis of deferrals by China over 2020-2024 points to the transactional character of States' engagement during NGO Committee sessions. Indeed, **China has deferred the application of organisations which monitor and promote accountability for human rights violations in countries whose governments are perceived as close to Beijing**, including:

- Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Press Institute, Lanka Fundamental Rights Organisation, among others
- Cambodia: Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation
- North Korea: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, Solidarity for Peace and Reunification of Korea, PeaceCorea, and International Child Rights Center
- Laos: Vang Pao Peace Institute, Allianz für Demokratie in Laos
- Venezuela: International Parliament for Human Rights (PIDH)
- Middle East and North Africa at large: Gulf Centre for Human Rights, Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, Arabian Rights Watch Association, Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, Arab-European Center of Human Rights and International Law (AECHRIL)
- Yemen: Mwatana Organization for Human Rights, Feekr Organisation for Dialogue and Human Rights Defense, among others
- Belarus: National Human Rights Civic Association Belarusian Helsinki Committee
- Syria: Syrian Legal Development Programme, Action League for Palestinians of Syria
- Russia: Interregional Non-Governmental Human Rights Organization Man and Law, The Andrey Rylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice, EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, among others
- as well as Indonesia, Morocco, Türkiye, Egypt, India, Burundi, and Singapore.

As independent NGOs working on the human rights situation in China may feel deterred from seeking ECOSOC status given the track record of obstructionist States allied to China, only a handful of such NGOs have submitted their applications, none of which have been positively considered. In the NGO Committee sessions of January 2020, January 2021 and May 2021, Cuba deferred the application of Justice Centre, a leading human rights organisation from Hong Kong, inquiring about the organisation's goals, future activities, and internal selection process for board members.

This list of countries above bears close resemblance with the membership of UN political groups China is part of, that have long sought to limit space for civil society organisations. This includes the **Like-Minded Group (LMG)**¹⁰ and the 2021-created **Group of Friends of the UN Charter** ('Charter GOF')¹¹. While many scholars and UN-watchers argue that the LMG's relevance and presence has fluctuated in the recent period, the core of its political agenda appears to be more consistently carried out by the Charter GOF. Posing as a 'guardian' of the *UN Charter*, the GOF coordinates positions and tactics among its members to advance a State-centric vision for UN bodies where national sovereignty trumps human rights protection, centering its efforts on denouncing unilateral sanctions and defending fellow members under human rights scrutiny in the name of 'non-interference in internal affairs.'

¹⁰ The LMG is a long-standing cross-regional group of States, composed of 52 States as of 2015, although its membership has continued to fluctuate over time. Russia, China and Egypt are traditional coordinators of the LMG.

¹¹ As of March 2025, the Group of Friends included 18 States: Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Iran, Laos, Mali, Nicaragua, Palestine, Russia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Syria, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. Angola and Cambodia were founding members but later withdrew from the group.

Over 2023-2025, the overwhelming majority of questions at the NGO Committee have been posed by China, the US, Pakistan, India, Türkiye, Cuba, Israel, Nicaragua and Algeria. A small proportion of questions are also posed by Armenia, Bahrain and Eritrea. Five of them are part of the Charter GOF (China, Cuba, Nicaragua, Algeria and Eritrea), as well as the LMG, together with Pakistan and India.

In February 2024, 12 members of the Charter GOF circulated a working paper on the 'challenges to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter arising from initiatives promoting enhanced NGO participation in the work of the UN' in response to recommendations for enhanced civil society participation in the Secretary-General's 'Our Common Agenda.' Despite alluding to the legitimate challenge of unequal access to resources for NGOs based outside developed countries, the working paper instead wrongly asserts that 'NGOs deepen global inequalities' portraying NGOs as either under resourced and unable to access the UN or wealthy and able to access UN spaces but inevitably driven by their donors' geopolitical interests. The paper further asserts that local presences of international NGOs 'serve as proxies for transnational corporations and foreign governments' and questions 'whose interests' are NGOs from non-Western countries serving if they receive funds from rich countries overseas.' The signatories call for addressing the absence of 'appropriate mechanisms to hold NGOs accountable for their abuse of the UN system and the misuse of their ECOSOC status.'¹²

Pro-civil society initiatives and attempts at reform

Obstructionism at the NGO Committee and concerns over its membership are long-standing issues. In response, a number of States have attempted measures to address protracted deferrals, reform NGO Committee procedures, and advocate for greater space for civil society.

In response to the Charter GOF's working paper, for example, the Dominican Republic delivered a strongly worded statement on behalf of 58 Member States from all regions, and the European Union, conveying strong support for the role and participation of independent civil society. The signatories 'collectively object to the [Charter GOF] proposal' and 'reject the narrative that portrays NGOs as instruments or tools of rich countries and large corporations.' Instead, the statement urges efforts to focus on overcoming barriers to NGO participation.¹³

We firmly believe that the participation of civil society in the United Nations is not only essential but critical in advancing our collective goals and aspirations. Civil society actors bring invaluable perspectives, lived experiences, and expertise to the table, enriching our discussions and improving the relevance and outcomes of our work, which serve the global community.

Joint statement delivered by the Dominican Republic on behalf of 58 countries and the European Union (EU), on 20 February 2024, during the 308th and 309th meetings of the Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations

A number of States have tried to partially overcome obstructionism at the NGO Committee by calling for votes on specific NGO applications. While in most cases ECOSOC endorses the NGO Committee's decision on applicant NGOs to be positively considered or deferred, it is not always the case, as some States have called for a vote on one or several cases. The United States has called for a vote on a number of occasions to force the NGO Committee to take a position on long-deferred NGO applicants. Most of these initiatives are defeated, despite votes in favour by Western and like-minded

¹² A/AC.182/L.164: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/AC.182/L.164>

¹³ https://legal.un.org/committees/charter/docs/english/2024/dominican_rep_wg.pdf

States, jointly with progressive Latin American countries (with rare exceptions). Since 2020, this took place during three Committee sessions:

- During the Committee's May 2024 resumed session, the US called for votes to grant consultative status to the Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights – a leading women's rights group – and the Association of Wives and Mothers of Soldiers participating in Ato, after the latter's application was again deferred following a question posed by China. The US argued the organisation had 'cooperated with the request for replies' and that 'consideration had faced successive delays over the [last] six years.' The US motion was defeated by 10 votes against, 4 in favour and 1 abstention.¹⁴
- During the Committee's May 2023 resumed session, the US and the UK called for votes to grant consultative status to seven NGOs whose applications had been deferred at least six years:
 - the Center for Justice and Accountability: the vote called by the US following a deferral by China was defeated by 10 votes against, 5 in favour, and 3 abstentions.¹⁵
 - the New Woman Foundation and the American Center for International Labor Solidarity: the votes called by the US were defeated by 10 votes against, 7 in favour, and 1 abstention.¹⁶
 - Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB): the vote called by the US was defeated by 10 votes against, 4 in favour, and 4 abstentions.¹⁷
 - the Bar Human Rights Committee: the vote called by the UK was defeated by 12 votes against, 5 in favour, and 1 abstention.¹⁸
 - Christian Solidarity International and the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime: the votes called by the US were both defeated by 11 votes against, 6 against, and 1 abstention.¹⁹
- During the Committee's January 2020 regular session, the US called for votes to grant consultative status to nine NGOs whose applications had been deferred at least six years:
 - The International Dalit Solidarity Network, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, Coptic Solidarity, the Arab-European Center of Human Rights and International Law, the Andrey Rylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice, the Union of Non-Governmental Associations 'The World Union of Cossack Atamans', the Interregional Non-Governmental Human Rights Organization 'Man and Law': all motions were defeated by 10 votes against, 5 in favour, and 2 abstentions.²⁰
 - World without Genocide: the motion was defeated by 11 votes against, 5 in favour, and 1 abstention, as Türkiye shifted from abstaining to opposing.²¹

¹⁴ In favour: Chile, Israel, UK, US. Against: Algeria, Bahrain, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Eritrea, India, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Türkiye. Abstention: Armenia. Absent: Costa Rica, Georgia, Liberia, Zimbabwe.

¹⁵ In favour: Chile, Costa Rica, Israel, UK, US. Against: Algeria, Bahrain, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Eritrea, India, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Zimbabwe. Abstention: Armenia, Georgia, Türkiye. Absent: Liberia.

¹⁶ In favour: Armenia, Chile, Costa Rica, Georgia, Israel, UK, US. Against: Algeria, Bahrain, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Eritrea, India, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Zimbabwe. Abstention: Türkiye. Absent: Liberia.

¹⁷ In favour: Georgia, Israel, UK, US. Against: Algeria, Bahrain, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Eritrea, India, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Zimbabwe. Abstention: Armenia, Chile, Costa Rica, Türkiye. Absent: Liberia.

¹⁸ In favour: Costa Rica, Georgia, Israel, UK, US. Against: Algeria, Bahrain, Cameroon, Chile, China, Cuba, Eritrea, India, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Türkiye, Zimbabwe. Abstention: Armenia. Absent: Liberia.

¹⁹ In favour: Armenia, Chile, Costa Rica, Israel, UK, US. Against: Algeria, Bahrain, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Eritrea, India, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Türkiye, Zimbabwe. Abstention: Georgia. Absent: Liberia.

²⁰ In favour: Brazil, Estonia, Israel, Mexico, US. Against: Bahrain, Burundi, China, Cuba, India, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Sudan. Abstention: Türkiye, Greece. Absent: Eswatini, Libya.

²¹ In favour: Brazil, Estonia, Israel, Mexico, US. Against: Bahrain, Burundi, China, Cuba, India, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Türkiye, Sudan. Abstention: Greece. Absent: Eswatini, Libya.

Initiatives to overcome persistent and obstructive deferrals by forcing the issue to a vote are consistently defeated at the NGO Committee. This is because many of the Committee's members, including China, Cuba, Eritrea, Bahrain and others, frequently refuse to address the merits of the cases and instead justify their opposition to vote as a principled position to 'uphold existing rules of procedure and decisions by consensus.' During the May 2024 session, China regretted the US was 'neglecting established practice and common sense and was forcing for a vote,' while pointing that China-based applicants faced 'even more questions from the US.'

Yet, the US has called for subsequent votes at the ECOSOC – the NGO Committee's parent body and where membership is considered to be more supportive of civil society participation – to overturn the NGO Committee's defeated vote.

- In July 2023, the ECOSOC overturned the NGO Committee's decision to deny consultative status to the seven long-standing NGO applicants which the US had unsuccessfully called for a vote on. The motion, also put forward by the US, was supported by 24 States, with 11 against and 12 abstentions. China, alongside India, Syria and other Members stated the motion allowed the ECOSOC to 'interfere with the judgement of its specialising standing Committee.'²²
- In December 2023, the ECOSOC overturned the NGO Committee's decision to deny consultative status to the nine long-standing NGO applicants which the US had unsuccessfully called for a vote on, including the International Dalit Solidarity Network whose application had been deferred for over 15 years. The motion, also put forward by the US, was supported by 24 States, with 17 against and 11 abstentions.²³

In Committee debates, China regularly states that 'a large number of NGOs from China and the Global South also face questioning.' Indeed, China and the US accounted for 45% of questions leading to deferrals at the NGO Committee's January 2025 regular session.²⁴

In relation to China-based applicants, **the US and the UK have regularly deferred those deemed as not independent**, commonly known as government-organised NGOs or 'GONGOS' (see relevant section of the report). The US has blocked applications from organisations such as the Beijing People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce, and the Shenzhen Foundation for International Exchange and Cooperation. The UK has targeted its questions to organisations with explicit links to government ministries, such as the China Council for the Promotion of National Trade (affiliated with the Ministry of Commerce) and the China Oceanic Development Foundation (linked to the Ministry of Natural Resources). The UK asked the applicants 'how they can remain non-governmental' given these affiliations.



ECOSOC room. © UN Photo / Paulo Filgueiras

²² <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/ecosoc-votes-to-grant-7-long-deferred-ngos-consultative-status/>

²³ <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/un-finally-grants-access-to-dalit-rights-organisation-blocked-for-a-record-15-years/>

²⁴ <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/ngo-committee-concludes-its-2025-regular-session-amid-continued-calls-for-reform/>

TABLE 3: COUNTRIES THAT POSED QUESTIONS TO CHINA-HEADQUARTERED NGO APPLICANTS AT NGO COMMITTEE (2020-2024)

SESSION	US	UK	CUBA	NICARAGUA	PAKISTAN	BAHRAIN	RUSSIA	ESTONIA
2020 Regular	6		1				1	
2021 Regular	7		1				1	
2021 Resumed	15		1				1	2
2022 Regular	5						2	
2022 Resumed	6							
2023 Regular	5		2	1				
2023 Resumed	10	2		4	2	1		
2024 Regular	6	1	3	2	2			
2024 Resumed	18	1	2	3	2	2		
Total	78	4	10	10	6	3	5	2

Beyond immediate steps to address its most pressing issues, **there is growing consensus that the NGO Committee is paralysed and needs structural reform**, including to improve its membership, working methods, and address protracted deferrals through questions.

In response to the long-standing failure of the Committee to reach consensus on reform, the UK and Costa Rica submitted in February 2024 a draft decision to the ECOSOC to reform the Committee's working methods. The motion proposed reforms relating to timely processing of applications, virtual participation of NGOs in the interactive segments of the Committee to ensure the participation of NGOs from developing countries, and conducting consultations with civil society as mandated by ECOSOC *Resolution 1996/31*.²⁵ China and Cuba, alongside Algeria, India and Türkiye, strongly opposed such initiative for bringing the issue of Committee reform to the attention of its parent body. India similarly negotiated the deletion of language enabling virtual participation of NGOs in consultative status. The decision, however, constitutes a working group tasked with looking into improving methods of work, including procedures for the review of applications, the interactive dialogue and questionnaires. The impact of this working group remains to be seen.

China and like-minded States regularly oppose efforts to reform the NGO Committee to make it more effective, efficient, transparent, fair and credible. In the Committee's January 2024 regular session, China's delegate stressed that 'attempts to promote reform were not constructive' and that any reform process should be 'steadily pushed on the basis of maintaining the existing working methods.'

²⁵ <https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2024341.pdf>



© Photo: Jean Marc Ferré / UN Photo

Disrupting and negotiating civil society space

Interrupting NGOs at the Human Rights Council

Barring NGOs from obtaining ECOSOC status is a very effective tactic for China and like-minded States to restrict independent civil society access to the UN.

Yet, once they obtain ECOSOC status, NGOs still face a range of restrictions when seeking to engage with UN human rights bodies. **At the Human Rights Council, the Chinese delegation regularly interrupts statements by NGOs on the human rights situation in China by raising a 'point of order'** whereby a delegation can interrupt a statement by another State or NGO to raise a point of procedure. Only a handful of States raise points of orders to interrupt NGO statements.

Over 2021-2024, ISHR has documented at least **22 points of order** by China against NGO speakers. Points of order appear to be systematically raised when NGOs use sensitive terms such as 'genocide' or directly criticise the human rights policies or practices of Chinese President Xi Jinping or the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese delegation accuses speakers of being part of 'anti-China organisations' and of 'abusing the HRC platform to attack China's leadership,' requesting the Council's President to stop the statement. Generally, such requests are dismissed by the President or Vice-President, who give the floor back to the NGO speaker, at times accompanied by a standard reminder for speakers to 'pay attention to the terms used' and uphold 'dignity and respect.'

Points of order have particularly targeted those speaking on Uyghur and Tibetan rights. Over 2021–2024, the Chinese delegation attempted interruptions on at least six occasions – 27% of documented points of order over the period of analysis – against former World Uyghur Congress president Dolkun Isa, describing him as a ‘terrorist’ and ‘separatist.’

ISHR alone has faced two points of order by China since 2023. In the June 2023 session of the HRC, China interrupted a statement by ISHR in a dialogue with the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, stating that: ‘Genocide is strictly and clearly defined internationally, which cannot be pinned to China at all. At present, China’s Xinjiang is in the best period of development. The so-called genocide concocted by anti-China separatists is extremely vicious and absurd.’ ISHR’s statement did not use the word ‘genocide’ to refer to the acts committed by the Chinese government against Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim populations.²⁶

In March 2024, China also sought to interrupt a statement by ISHR paying tribute to the late Chinese activist Cao Shunli, on the ten-year anniversary of her death in custody as a result of reprisals for seeking to reach the UN in Geneva. The delegations of Canada, the UK, the US and Belgium on behalf of the 27 EU Member States spoke in favour of the right to NGOs to address the HRC, stressing the importance of promoting open dialogue and protecting freedom of expression. Despite additional support for China’s interruption by Cuba, Venezuela, Russia and North Korea, the Council’s President allowed ISHR to resume its statement.²⁷

This incident echoed a similar move by the Chinese delegation ten years prior, when it disrupted the HRC for over an hour and a half to prevent ISHR from marking a minute of silence in honour of Cao Shunli a week after her death on 14 March 2014.²⁸ At that occasion, a vote had been called during which 13 HRC Members supported a proposal by the President to defer the decision and allow ISHR to resume its minute of silence. The motion was defeated by 20 votes against, with 12 abstentions.²⁹

Limiting space for civil society

The Permanent Mission of China also resorts to other tactics to restrict the ability of NGOs to engage with the Human Rights Council, in particular when denouncing human rights violations by the Chinese government.

ISHR has documented a number of **private diplomatic notes** – known in diplomatic jargon as *notes verbales* – circulated to Permanent Missions in Geneva where the Chinese delegation urged diplomats not to meet with Uyghur activists or attend side events on the situation in Uyghur and Tibetan regions and in Hong Kong, at times through half-veiled threats to the bilateral relationship. Diplomatic sources have confirmed this practice is systematically employed by China; while Western and other States supportive of civil society often dismiss them, it is likely that a number of Global South delegations refrain from attending to avoid any friction with Beijing.

²⁶ <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/states-discuss-un-committees-responsibility-to-protect-referral-on-uyghurs/>

²⁷ <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/china-fails-in-disrupting-tribute-at-un-to-cao-shunli-ten-years-after-her-death-in-custody/>

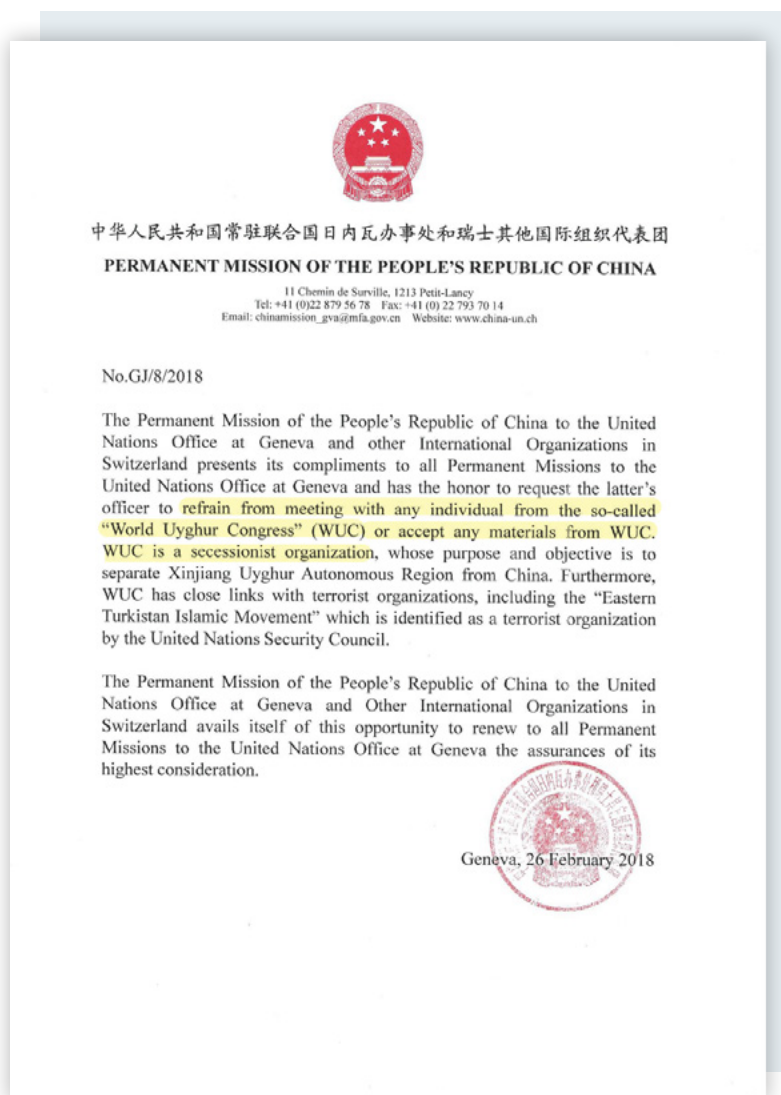
²⁸ Min 35:58 : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezLp10Mgzz8&t=2158s>

²⁹ In favour: Austria, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Romania, UK, US. Against: Algeria, Benin, China, Congo, Cuba, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Maldives, Morocco, Namibia, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, UAE, Viet Nam. Abstention: Argentina, Botswana, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Chile, Costa Rica, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Montenegro, Peru, Philippines, Sierra Leone. Absent: Macedonia, Kenya.

In a *note verbale* dated 17 September 2020, the Permanent Mission of China 'strongly urge[d]' States to refrain from participating in a side event on Hong Kong, saying it would 'distort facts and tarnish China's image.'³⁰ In an earlier *note* dated 7 March 2019 obtained by Human Rights Watch, China urged States not to co-sponsor or be present at an event on Xinjiang 'in the interest of our bilateral relations.'³¹ On 26 February 2018, the Chinese delegation circulated a *note* requesting all Permanent Missions to 'refrain from meeting with any individual from the so-called World Uyghur Congress or accept any materials from WUC [as] a secessionist organisation.'³²

More recently, China sought, unsuccessfully, to exert private pressure on the UN Office in Geneva (UNOG) to block access for certain activists ahead of China's fourth Universal Periodic Review in January 2024, a critical moment of global attention to the human rights situation in the country. According to media reports, the Permanent Mission of China requested in a *note verbale* to UNOG that 'anti-China separatists' be denied access to the review session, and that 'harassment activities inside [the Human Rights Council room] are advised to be handled in a quiet, safe and swift manner so as to avoid disruptions of the review.' The note included a list of over twenty Uyghur, Tibetan and Hong Kong activists described as individuals 'of concern' whose requests to organise side events should be rejected.³³

The Chinese government has shifted its position over time on reprisals at the HRC, both in the yearly dialogue on the Secretary-General's annual reprisals report and the Council's biennial resolution on reprisals. **From initial silence in the early years of the Council, China eventually sought to challenge the HRC resolution in 2013 that sought to establish the mandate of the UN senior official on reprisals** (referred to as the focal point at the time) and to undermine the systems put in place throughout the UN mechanisms to improve monitoring, documentation and prevention of reprisals.



Note verbale by the Permanent Mission of China, dated 26 February 2018, obtained by ISHR.

30 https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/202009_NV_HK-event-Copy.pdf

31 https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/hrcletterchina20190329.pdf

32 https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/201802_NV_WUC-Copy1.pdf

33 <https://www.thegenewaobserver.com/exclusive-china-seeks-to-quash-dissent-ahead-un-review-of-its-rights-record/>

In May 2022, ISHR released a detailed analysis of the evolution of China's official positions on reprisals in dialogues and negotiations at the UN.³⁴

During the interactive dialogues on the Secretary-General's reprisals reports at the Human Rights Council's September sessions from 2019 to 2024, China consistently criticised the reports. China denounced what it perceives as the misapplication of existing mechanisms to address reprisals, arguing that they should not categorise individuals who China labels as 'criminals' as 'UN cooperators' or 'label legitimate law enforcement as reprisals.' In the latest Council dialogue on reprisals in September 2024, China reiterated it 'firmly rejects the attempt by certain countries to abuse the UN mechanisms, by portraying criminals as persons cooperating with the UN or by vilifying legitimate law enforcement as retaliation.' China urged the UN Secretariat to 'abide by the purposes and principles of the *UN Charter*, respect the sovereignty and judicial independence of States.'

China's position contrasts with the spirit of the *UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders*, which was adopted by consensus and agreed to by all States. In China's official narrative, any human rights advocacy that involves or references the UN is often labelled as 'criminal.' The Chinese government does not see facilitating engagement of their citizens with the UN as its responsibility, nor does it acknowledge the duty of China and other States to investigate any reprisals.

In the negotiation of the HRC's biennial resolution titled *Cooperation with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights* (also known as the reprisals resolution) during the 54th session of HRC in 2023, China, along with Russia and Egypt, supported the removal of the paragraph that welcomed 'the commitments of the Secretary-General' and encouraged 'all United Nations entities to strengthen efforts to prevent and address intimidation and reprisals.'

By eliminating language that calls for increased efforts to prevent and address reprisals, China and like-minded States seek to promote a vision for international human rights governance that is rid of external scrutiny and of safe and meaningful civil society engagement, further increasing the risks for human rights defenders engaging with the UN.

While the absence of a vote on the 2021 iteration of the reprisals resolution had represented a positive change from the three previous sessions where the resolution was considered, it should not be construed as signalling a change in China's position on the issue. To the contrary, China's decision – alongside Russia and Venezuela – to dissociate from the resolution demonstrates the extent to which China does not see this as a worthy concern of the international community. Although the Chinese representative at the Council's September 2021 session stated explicitly, during the voting process, that his country 'opposes all acts of intimidation and retaliation against those who cooperate with the UN', he added a significant caveat: 'Crimes committed under the guise of human rights must be punished by law; we oppose abusing UN mechanisms to cover up criminal behaviour. [The resolution's] content still lacks balance and does not duly respect the legitimacy of States punishing criminal acts according to law.'

³⁴ ISHR, 'China's official positions on reprisals: when cooperation with the UN is a 'criminal act'', 19 May 2022: <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/chinas-official-positions-on-reprisals-when-cooperation-with-the-un-is-a-criminal-act/>



© Photo: ISHR

PART II – DETERRING COOPERATION WITH THE UN

The growing presence of ‘Government-Organised NGOs’ (GONGOs)

GONGOs have long been used by authoritarian governments to divert scrutiny of their human rights records. GONGOs occupy civil society space and seek to portray themselves as ‘NGOs’ or ‘independent civil society groups’ with the aim of advancing State positions and propaganda, whitewashing criticism from independent NGOs, and, often, intimidating or retaliating against them.

The presence of GONGOs in the UN Human Rights Council is not new, nor is it unique to China.

GONGOs from countries such as India, Pakistan, Cuba, Sri Lanka, Iran³⁵ and Israel are notoriously present at the HRC. GONGOs are also active at the domestic level. According to the Uzbekistan Independent Institute for Formation of Civil Society, 66% of civil society organisations operating in the

35 <https://civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/3706-iran-a-new-generation-of-civic-minded-courageous-activists-is-rising>

country are GONGOs 'with almost half of them established by government decree.'³⁶ In Kyrgyzstan, the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society reported that the government established an umbrella organisation whose members are GONGOs 'with the sole purpose of discrediting active citizens and independent civil society leaders and organisations.'³⁷

As early as 2015, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said he was 'well aware of, and disturbed by, the presence of NGOs that are not truly independent – again, from quite a few countries, but the Human Rights Council cannot do anything to prevent them from attending sessions when they enjoy official status.'³⁸

Providing a blanket definition of GONGOs is not exempt of risk, as it would require defining and therefore circumscribing what constitutes a 'non-governmental organisation', leaving room for authoritarian States to restrict such a definition. Instead, ISHR considers that **a set of criteria can guide a case-by-case assessment of NGOs to determine whether they are 'government-organised' or affiliated:**

- The organisation is under the *effective* control of a State. This control can be financial, administrative, legislative, legal or political.
- The organisation consistently advances the positions of authorities of that State, in particular where those positions are adverse to universal human rights and to independent civil society, and refrains from taking positions critical of that State.

Establishing affiliation with the Chinese Party-State

In China, the existence of GONGOs reflects the Party-State's authoritarian and State-centric approach to civil society whereby civil society organisations should only supplement government action – be it in reaching local populations, delivering socio-economic policies or channelling demands back to the authorities in politically-acceptable terms – instead of counter-balancing its excesses. The Chinese government keeps a firm grip over civil society, imposing heavy regulation and oversight on organisations legally registered under the 1998 Regulation on the Registration Administration of Social Organisations, 2016 Charity Law and the 2017 Foreign NGO Law, while cracking down on independent groups working on 'sensitive' issues, including human rights. GONGOs are closely linked to CCP and State organs, including those in charge of propaganda, and advance their interests nationally and internationally. Some act as umbrella organisations, while others specialise in one field. If GONGOs may, at the national level, occasionally fulfil a similar role to NGOs in other countries when delivering public goods and engaging with local populations, their engagement at the UN HRC is uniquely aligned with, and pursuant to, the government's political agenda.

Over the past decade, there has been a sharp increase in the number of China-based organisations who obtained ECOSOC status. As of April 2025, 106 organisations headquartered in China have consultative status with ECOSOC,³⁹ of which 50% obtained it since 2018, and 25% alone between 2022 and 2023. In comparison, Reuters had documented 47 accredited NGOs from mainland China, Hong Kong or Macao operating in UN spaces in 2015, including 'at least 34 GONGOs' that are 'either overseen by government ministries or Communist Party bodies, or have a current or retired party or government official as their head.'

³⁶ <https://civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/reports-publications/6149-new-research-brief-on-uzbekistan-documents-ongoing-violations-to-civic-freedoms>

³⁷ <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/interviews/6509-kyrgyzstan-true-freedom-cannot-be-granted-by-external-forces-it-needs-to-be-claimed-by-people>

³⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-softpower-rights/>

³⁹ <https://esango.un.org/civilsociety/displayConsultativeStatusSearch.do?method=search>

Out of 106 China-headquartered organisations, ISHR considers that nearly all appear to be GONGOs,⁴⁰ based on indicators including but not limited to: former or current CCP officials in leadership positions; legal or administrative affiliation to a State or CCP organ; statutory participation of CCP officials in decision-making processes; or explicit adherence to CCP leadership and establishment of internal CCP branches enshrined in the organisation’s statutes.



ISHR and civil society partners sought to pay tribute to Cao Shunli and all human rights defenders that have been the subject of State reprisals by commissioning a bronze bust in her likeness and initiating a formal petition for its placement as a public monument in Geneva. © Photo: ISHR

⁴⁰ For the purpose of this report, the groups that we refer to as appearing to be Chinese GONGOs are those for which there is *prima facie* evidence of effective State control.

Case study

China Society for Human Rights Studies (CSHRS)

The most visible and long-standing Chinese GONGO active at the HRC and in other UN human rights spaces is the China Society for Human Rights Studies (CSHRS). Established in 1983, CSHRS' mission includes 'fostering the innovative development of China's human rights theory and discourse systems, encouraging a broad understanding of human rights principles, and unwaveringly following China's path of human rights development.' Several elements point to CSHRS's affiliation to the Chinese Party-State, including:

- Current president, Baima Chilin, is a renowned politician of Tibetan ethnicity who served as the 8th chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region (2010-2013). Current vice-president, Jiang Jianguo, served as Director of the State Council's Information Office and Deputy Director of the CCP's Publicity Department from 2015 to 2018.
- CSHRS receives financial backing from the China Foundation for Human Rights Development, a GONGO under the direction of the CCP's Publicity Department (see below).
- The copyright of the CSHRS's website logo is owned by the China Intercontinental Communication Co. Ltd, or CICC, known in Chinese as 五洲传播出版社 (lit. 'Wuzhou Communications Publishing House'). This organisation is headquartered at the same address in Beijing (225 Chaoyangmennei Street) as the State Council's Information Office, the external name of the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP. This company also has the copyright on other websites run by the CSHRS that advance government positions on key human rights issues, including the Uyghur region (Xinjiang) and Tibet.

CSHRS states that it 'utilises meetings, symposiums, speeches, media interviews and other methods' to 'disseminate information on China's human rights accomplishments and perspectives while forging robust connections with foreign governments, parliaments, think tanks, universities and media outlets.' This includes publishing the bilingual journal 'Human Rights' since 2002, and organising the Beijing Forum on Human Rights, the China-Europe Seminar on Human Rights, the *International Seminar on the CCP and the Progress on Human Rights in China* and the *International Seminar on Counterterrorism, De-radicalization and Human Rights Protection* – in an effort to legitimise Beijing's crackdown in the Uyghur region (Xinjiang) in the name of 'fighting terrorism and extremism'.

As per CSHRS' website, it convenes events on topics at the heart of the CCP's political jargon, including 'building a global community of shared future.' The CSHRS states it 'actively engages in UN human rights affairs' by organising meetings and photo exhibitions at the Human Rights Council to 'advocate and communicate China's human rights principles and ethnic and religious policies.'

At the HRC's 43rd session in March 2020, the Permanent Mission of China mounted an extensive exhibition entitled *Home: Glimpses of Life of People from Various Ethnic Groups in Xinjiang*, co-sponsored by the CSHRS and the China Media Group, a 'news broadcasting platform' comprising State-run television and radio conglomerates.⁴¹ The exhibition included video footage on continuous loop. In one segment, available online under the title *Western Propaganda on Xinjiang Rebutted*, China Global Television Network (CGTN) reporter Wang Guan states:

41 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/03/c_138839165.htm

‘Many Western sources say China has detained anywhere between one and three million Uyghurs, a figure repeated so many times that it is almost considered a “fact”. These claims are largely based on two highly questionable “studies”. The first is the US-backed Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders. It formed its estimate by interviewing a grand total of just 8 people.’

The image accompanying the voiceover is a screenshot from a report prepared by the Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) on the occasion of the August 2018 review of China by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). CHRD is a leading independent civil society organisation focused on human rights in China.

This exhibition constituted a State-supported effort to smear and discredit independent civil society working to protect and promote human rights in China. Its inclusion in the space of the Palais des Nations was an overt attempt to discourage human rights reporting by independent media and civil society to UN mechanisms, and to intimidate non-governmental actors from criticising China’s human rights record at the Human Rights Council.

The CSHRS has organised other photo exhibitions inside UN premises in Geneva during Human Rights Council sessions, often jointly with the Permanent Mission of China, such as in March 2019.⁴² During such exhibitions, the CSHRS and other GONGOs typically distribute written materials, including copies of *The Governance of China* (a collection of Xi Jinping’s speeches and writings), as well as USB drives and other electronic materials.



Box containing USB drive distributed by CSHRS during the 41st session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva in June 2019. The box indicates ‘The Fights Against Terrorism and Extremism in Xinjiang’. © Photo: ISHR

While the CSHRS stands out as the most active GONGO in HRC statements, ISHR has identified six other GONGOs significantly present in UN HRC speakers lists:

- **China Foundation for Human Rights Development (CFHRD)** – Obtained ECOSOC status in 2020. CFHRD’s Constitution stipulates that its ‘competent authority is the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee’, that it will ‘uphold leadership of the CCP,’ ‘establish CCP organisations’ and ‘conduct CCP activities.’ According to an October 2023 article by CCP mouthpiece Global Times, CFHRD will ‘further innovate international exchanges to enhance understanding between Chinese and foreign civil society in the field of human rights, actively participating in global human rights government and *better sharing the stories of how China has improved its human rights conditions*’ (emphasis added). CFHRD’s president, Xie Fuzhan was Governor (2013-2016) and Party Secretary (2016-2018) of Henan Province.⁴³

⁴² http://english.scio.gov.cn/international/exchanges/2019-03/11/content_74557104.htm

⁴³ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202310/1300548.shtml>

- **Beijing NGO Association for International Exchanges (BAIE)** – Obtained ECOSOC status in 2016. BAIE's Executive Director, Zhao Hongsheng, previously served as Deputy Head of the United Front Work Department of the CCP's Beijing Municipal Committee. The newly elected chairman of BAIE's Fourth Council, Cui Shuqiang, previously served as Deputy Secretary of the CCP's Beijing Municipal Committee. In a BAIE general assembly held in January 2025, a municipal CCP official stated BAIE had 'entered a new stage of development' and should implement the CCP's 'new requirements and expectations' including to 'serve the overall foreign affairs work of the Party' being a 'backbone of non-governmental diplomacy.'⁴⁴
- **Chinese Association for International Understanding (CAFIU)** – Obtained ECOSOC status in 2003. CAFIU was established in 1981 by the CCP's International Liaison Department, the Party's organ responsible for forging relations with and gathering intelligence on foreign political parties and organisations. CAFIU's president, Ji Bingxuan, was until 2023 vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, and previously vice-director of the CCP's Central Propaganda Department.
- **Shaanxi Patriotic Volunteer Association (SPVA)** – Obtained ECOSOC status in 2021. SPVA's Constitution stipulates that it 'organises and carries out patriotic ideological and cultural activities and the promotion of socialist core values in China, with the idea that "loving the country requires loving the party, and loving the party is the same as loving the country"'. It further states that SPVA 'organises volunteers to study CCP history, CCP constitution, policies and guidelines, as well as other decisions of the central government, and publicises and promotes them.' SPVA's flag and logo make direct reference to the CCP.
- **United Nations Association of China (UNA-China)** – Obtained ECOSOC status in 2000. UNA-China's president, Wang Chao, is the former Vice Minister of Commerce, former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, and is also the current president of the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA). UNA-China is headquartered in the same building as CPIFA, which answers to the United Front Work Department, the CCP's main organ for influence activities abroad, especially the overseas Chinese diaspora.
- **China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE)** – Obtained ECOSOC status in 2008. Article 4 of CNIE's Constitution stipulates that 'This Association shall adhere to the overall leadership of the Community Party of China (CPC), establish CPC branch within the Association in accordance with the provisions of the CPC Constitution, carry out party activities, and provide necessary conditions for the activities organised by the CPC branch.'

At the NGO Committee, the US and the UK have deferred applications of a range of China-headquartered NGO applicants by inquiring about their independence from State organs they were affiliated with.



Statement delivered by CNIE at HRC56 during the adoption of China's fourth UPR outcome report. © UN WebTV

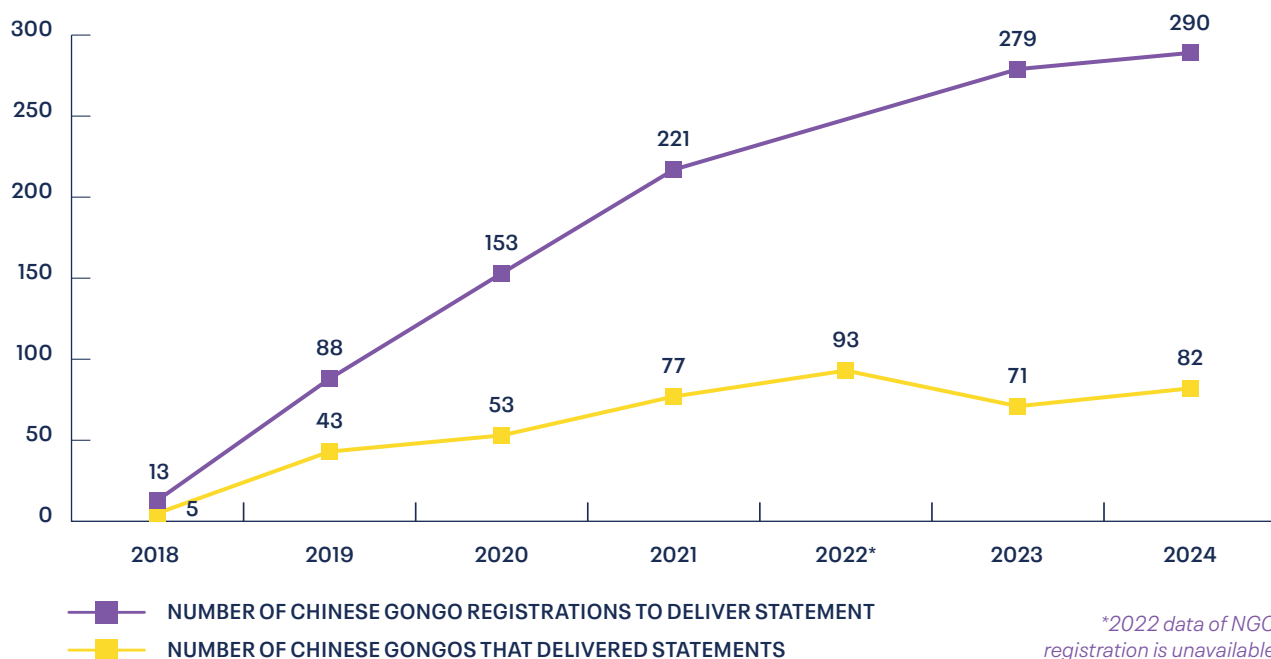
44 https://www.beijing.gov.cn/gongkai/ldhd/202501/t20250110_3985076.html

Occupying civil society space

The presence of GONGOs in UN human rights spaces such as the Human Rights Council poses a range of challenges for independent civil society. In the context of restrictions and limits to civil society space at the Human Rights Council, the presence of GONGOs deprives independent NGOs of space in lists of speakers and requests for side events. Since 2020 and the adoption of virtual participation modalities for NGOs during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Human Rights Council has imposed limits on the number of registered NGOs able to speak during the Council's 'general debates',⁴⁵ by granting civil society the average number of slots based on the NGOs who participated in the three previous sessions. According to HRCNet,⁴⁶ this practice has led to a 'gradual decrease in speaking slots, resulting in over 50% fewer slots available in some cases' between 2020 and 2023.⁴⁷

According to ISHR's extensive analysis of oral statements by Chinese GONGOs at the Human Rights Council over 2018-2024, registrations to deliver oral statements increased 22-fold over the years – from just 13 in 2018 to 289 in 2024. Actual interventions⁴⁸ also increased 16 times, from only five in 2018 to 82 in 2024. This exponential surge in the presence of Chinese GONGOs accompanied an increased assertiveness, influence and presence of China at the HRC since the US' first withdrawal from the Council in 2018.

FIGURE 4: NUMBER OF CHINESE GONGO REGISTRATIONS AND ORAL STATEMENTS DELIVERED AT HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL (2018-2024)



⁴⁵ The Human Rights Council structures its sessions around ten agenda items, under which are convened 'interactive dialogues' (IDs) with UN Special Rapporteurs, OHCHR or other UN or UN-appointed experts, 'panel discussions' with international experts on a dedicated topic and 'general debates' (GDs) accommodating general statements by States and NGOs broadly related to the agenda item. While the participation of NGOs and States during IDs and panel discussions has always been limited due to their two-hour duration, GDs used to be open-ended and able to accommodate all States and NGO speakers who would register.

⁴⁶ HRCNet is a network of 16 national, regional and international NGOs, including ISHR, working to support human rights defenders in their engagement at the UN Human Rights Council and to ensure that it is accessible, safe and responsive to their demands and needs. <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/hrcnet/>

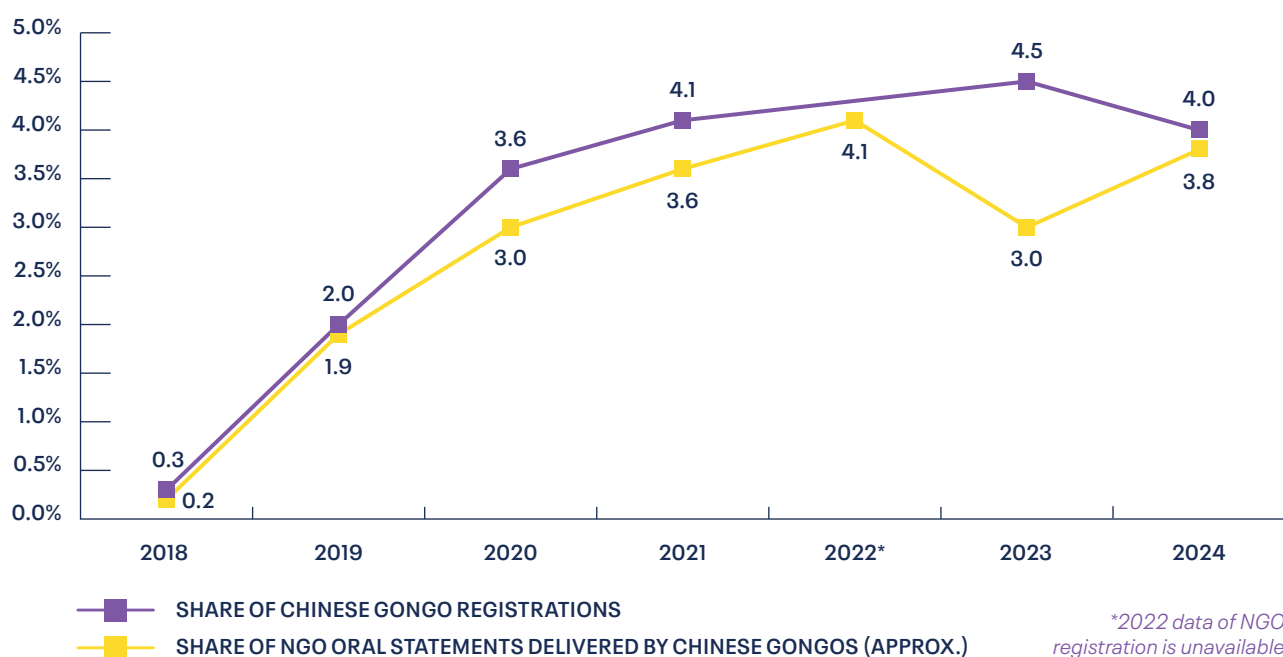
⁴⁷ <https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/HRCNET1.pdf>

⁴⁸ Not all NGOs with ECOSOC status registered on the list of speakers are able to deliver an oral statement. The participation is limited depending on the type of HRC meeting: for IDs, an average of 10 NGOs; for GDs, no limit prior to 2021, a limit depending on the agenda item since 2021; for panels, the limit has varied over time from two to eight. In calculating the proportion of GONGOs speaking, ISHR has used these official figures, unless the number of registered NGOs is lower; however, there occasionally may be a slight variation from the official figure due to a no-show or a shorter HRC meeting, leading to a very slight statistical difference.

Several factors explain the spikes. First, the sharp increases in 2019 and 2024 coincided with China's UPR cycles – moments of heightened international scrutiny. During these periods, the Chinese government actively mobilised GONGOs, who were present *en masse* in Geneva, to reinforce its narratives at the HRC, including in meetings not dedicated to the adoption of China's UPR. For example, during the HRC's 40th session in March 2019, following China's third UPR, 38 Chinese GONGOs registered to speak, compared to virtually none a year earlier. A similar mobilisation took place in 2024, when 26 Chinese GONGOs registered to speak during the meeting adopting the outcome of China's fourth UPR.

Another factor was the shift to remote participation introduced in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability to deliver statements via video made participation significantly easier without the need to travel to Geneva. This logistical convenience enabled a greater number of Chinese GONGOs to engage with the HRC. This increased virtual and physical presence similarly coincided with a peak in China's influence at the HRC at the height of its 'vaccine diplomacy' during the Covid-19 pandemic.

FIGURE 5: SHARE OF CHINESE GONGOS AGAINST TOTAL NUMBER OF NGOS REGISTRATIONS AND ORAL STATEMENTS DELIVERED (2018-2024)



The share of Chinese GONGOs among NGOs at the HRC has grown significantly. In 2018, they made up less than 0.5% of registered NGOs and oral statements delivered. By 2020, their presence increased to around 3-4% – a level maintained through 2024.

In practical terms, this means that by 2024, roughly one in every 25 NGO statements heard at the Human Rights Council came from a Chinese GONGO, compared to about one in 500 in 2018.

This reflects a marked increase in presence, at least in quantitative terms. While the number of total NGO speaking slots remained relatively static in recent years – between 2,100-2,400 per year – the total number of NGOs registered to speak has been increasing by approximately 1,000 annually. This intensifies competition and means that the HRC's limited space for independent civil society voices is increasingly crowded, a situation further compounded by the growing presence of GONGOs.

Additionally, ISHR's analysis of written submissions by GONGOs for China's reviews by Treaty Bodies and under the UPR since 2018 indicate a significant surge in GONGO presence in 2023-2024.

Looking at China's reviews by five Treaty Bodies since 2018,⁴⁹ including the first stage of review with the adoption of List of Issues (LOI) where relevant, ISHR found that Chinese GONGOs or groups that appear to be Chinese GONGOs accounted for 34% of submissions on average, with three noteworthy aspects:

- The proportion of GONGOs or organisations appearing to be GONGOs relative to overall civil society submissions remains stable, at around 20-30% between 2018 and 2023.
- GONGO participation then peaked in 2023 with *en masse* participation in China's reviews by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), with 50% of submissions submitted by GONGOs or organisations appearing to be GONGOs.
- Except for Hong Kong's review by the Human Rights Committee, GONGOs or organisations appearing to be GONGOs do not frequently engage during the adoption of LOIs (no submissions for CEDAW, CESCR, and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)).

TABLE 4: NUMBER AND SHARE OF CHINESE GONGO SUBMISSIONS IN TREATY BODY REVIEWS OF CHINA INCLUDING HONG KONG AND MACAO (2018-2023)

TREATY BODY REVIEW	CHINESE GONGO SUBMISSIONS	TOTAL SUBMISSIONS	SHARE OF CHINESE GONGO SUBMISSIONS
CERD (2018)	4	21	19%
CRPD LOI (2020)	0	7	0%
CRPD (2022)	2	7	29%
CCPR LOI (2020)*	4	19	21%
CCPR (2022)*	5	25	20%
CESCR LOI (2021)	0	30	0%
CESCR (2023)	44	89	49%
CEDAW LOI (2021)	0	13	0%
CEDAW (2023)	41	82	50%

* This review only applies to Hong Kong and Macao. China (PRC) has not ratified the ICCPR, but the ICCPR has been previously extended to Hong Kong by the UK and to Macao by Portugal, with both extensions maintained during their respective handovers.

There is a trend of increased Hong Kong GONGO presence during Treaty Body reviews, formed by pro-Beijing politicians and groups. This further deters Hong Kong activists from attending in-person meetings and hearings, as GONGOs can identify them, exert pressure through media, and even send the details to authorities. Many activists feel exposed and vulnerable, which significantly reduces their willingness to engage openly.

Hong Kong activist, in comments to ISHR

⁴⁹ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and Human Rights Committee (CCPR).

When it comes to the UPR, the proportion of written submissions, either individual or joint, from GONGOs or organisations appearing to be GONGOs against the total number of submissions surged from 25% (125 submissions) during China's third UPR in 2018 to 36% (162 submissions) during its fourth UPR in 2024.

The average proportion of Chinese GONGOs or organisations appearing to be GONGOs relative to all NGOs who submitted reports since China's first UPR in 2008 was approximately 28%. While the proportion remained relatively stable and below 28% for the first three UPRs, it surged to 36% during the fourth UPR in 2024.

The two greatest challenges posed by GONGOs to Hong Kong activists are that they manipulate human rights discourse and narratives on the government's rights violations, and they demoralise Hong Kong activists, who may grow increasingly cynical towards the UN system. In 2023, a Hong Kong-based group, the International Probono Legal Services Association (IPLSA), was granted ECOSOC status. However, the founder and head of IPLSA, Julius Ho, is a pro-government legislator who has repeatedly dismissed Hong Kong's human rights and anti-authoritarian movement as mere riots and violent protests. Both IPLSA and Ho have been active participants on UN platforms, attempting to reframe the Hong Kong government's human rights violations as legitimate and justifiable actions. The UN's decision to grant ECOSOC status to IPLSA has disheartened many human rights defenders focused on Hong Kong and raised concerns about the credibility of the UN system.

Eric Yan-ho Lai, Georgetown Center for Asian Law, in comments to ISHR

Advancing Beijing's narrative

Chinese GONGOs have used statements and events at the HRC to advance the government's narrative on China's human rights situation and its position on a range of thematic issues.

Over 2018-2024, none of the GONGOs identified delivered statements critical of the Chinese State's human rights practices, while the majority of them praised the government's policies.

On occasion, GONGOs seem to speak explicitly on behalf of the government: in a September 2022 oral statement under Council agenda item 5, the CSHRS stated that 'China will continue to actively participate in global human rights governance and promote its development in a more fair, just, reasonable and inclusive direction.'⁵⁰

⁵⁰ <https://hrcmeetings.ohchr.org/HRCSessions/RegularSessions/51/Pages/Statements.aspx?SessionId=61&MeetingDate=29/09/2022%2000:00:00>

Key areas of proportionately higher engagement by Chinese GONGOs during HRC dialogues and debates include:

- All discussions related to the **right to development**⁵¹ – Interventions mostly focus on praising the government’s development policies in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong and promoting China’s approach to the right to development. Chinese GONGOs accounted for 30% of NGO statements during the September 2024 biennial panel on the right to development. This occasionally also happens during the dialogue with the International Expert on democratic and equitable international order, where contributions often praise what China sees as its contribution to development in Global South countries.
- Discussions on **economic, social and cultural rights** – Same dynamic as the discussions on the right to development, with a slightly lesser presence, unless the discussion is mandated by a resolution brought forward by China.
- Unilateral Coercive Measures (UCMs), commonly known as ‘**sanctions**’ – A key priority of the government’s HRC agenda: Chinese GONGOs are heavily present in dialogues with the International Expert on UCMs, and other spaces to denounce the US’ imposition of sanctions on China on ‘fabricated accusations’ and with a view to ‘contain China’s development.’
- Rights of **persons with disabilities** and **children** – Chinese GONGOs are increasingly present in debates addressing issues often perceived as less ‘sensitive’ from the government’s perspective. Their statements seek to outline the policy and regulatory landscape in China and the government’s achievements in this regard.

Chinese GONGOs generally appear to not engage on country situations considered under Items 2 or 4 of the Council’s agenda,⁵² even when they target a member of the Group of Friends of the UN Charter (see first section of this report). Some GONGOs engaged in discussions on countries considered under Item 10 to promote the Chinese government’s development or cooperation projects in that country.

Yet, GONGOs will use different HRC spaces to echo and amplify the government’s accusations against Western and like-minded countries – in particular the US, the UK, Australia and Canada –, in an effort to dilute attention to China’s rights issues, which they allege suffer from ‘selectivity’ and ‘double standards.’ In a September 2023 dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the management of toxic substances, 30% of NGO speakers were Chinese GONGOs who delivered statements condemning Japan’s decision to discharge Fukushima nuclear waste in the sea.

Whereas GONGOs have diversified the thematic areas on which they engage during Council discussions, they are reliably heavily present during the rare opportunities the UN has convened to address the human rights situation in China. One striking example was the occupation of speakers lists by GONGOs during the Council’s interactive dialogue for the adoption of the outcome of China’s UPR review. At China’s third⁵³ and fourth⁵⁴ UPR adoptions, in March 2019 and June 2024,

⁵¹ Including the Expert Mechanism on the right to development, the Special Rapporteur on the right to development, and the Biennial Panel on the right to development.

⁵² Some country situations are discussed in dedicated interactive dialogues mandated by HRC resolutions: these dialogues take place either under Items 2 and 4, which are focused on investigations and promoting accountability for human rights violations, or under Item 10, which is focused on technical assistance and cooperation with the State. Resolutions under Items 2 and 4 are adopted without the consent of the country concerned – who typically seeks to avoid international scrutiny – while those under Item 10 are adopted with the consent on the country concerned.

⁵³ UN WebTV: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k16/k16wx7gak8>

⁵⁴ UN WebTV: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1t/k1tt6njldu>

16 and 26 Chinese GONGOs registered to speak respectively. They eventually secured six of the 10 speaking slots during the third cycle, and five during the fourth.

GONGOs' engagement peaked during the HRC's 51st session in September 2022, a few weeks after former High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet released the 'Xinjiang report' concluding that possible commission of crimes against humanity targeting Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim populations took place. In a Council debate with the High Commissioner, Chinese GONGO CNIE delivered a statement attacking the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for 'disregard[ing] the facts and releas[ing] a report with no credibility based on false information, maliciously smearing the human rights situation in China's Xinjiang region, seriously violating the objective truth.'

Over the period of sustained global attention to the mass protests in Hong Kong, GONGOs provided a platform to a number of pro-China individuals to 'speak the truth' seeking to delegitimise the protests and smear activists and protesters. In September 2020, a representative of the United Nations Association of China delivered an aggressive statement to defend the adoption of the National Security Law against the 'miserable life [of the people of Hong Kong] during the months of terrorist attacks.'⁵⁵ Similarly, GONGOs provided a platform to individuals of Uyghur and Tibetan ethnicity in events and statements at the Human Rights Council to deny human rights violations in both regions.

Chinese GONGOs have also sought to speak in defence of the government's policies in thematic dialogues – which do not themselves have a particular focus on China – with Special Rapporteurs who have spearheaded documentation efforts on China, such as the mandates on counter-terrorism and on minorities.

Over six HRC sessions between 2023 and 2024, ISHR also documented nine side events organised by Chinese GONGOs, a third of which addressed the human rights situation in China.

Two of these events were jointly organised by the Permanent Mission of China and the China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE).

While Chinese diplomats would typically take the floor during events organised by other countries on the human rights situation in China to deny the allegations, the government has dispatched GONGOs to do this in NGO-organised events, to oppose independent civil society voices.

Yet, it is difficult to evaluate the real impact of GONGOs' advocacy and outreach among experienced diplomats and UN staff in Geneva who may easily distinguish State-affiliated organisations. For one diplomat from a Global South country who spoke to ISHR on condition of anonymity, 'it is very easy to identify the Chinese GONGOs: civil society is generally critical, so if a group refutes allegations calling them lies, and instead tells us everything is perfect, it raises flags.'

Obviously, they are not good for the UN system as they take space from those who actually have something legitimate to say. But I would not overstate their impact given the evident State control by China. China tries to safeguard its international image but instead provides evidence of how far it is willing to go to make us think that its human rights allegations are a lie.

Diplomat from a Global South country, in comments to ISHR

55 <https://hrcmeetings.ohchr.org/HRCSessions/RegularSessions/45session/Pages/Statements.aspx?SessionId=37&MeetingDate=21/09/2020%2000:00:00>

For a Western diplomat contacted by ISHR, ‘Chinese GONGOs have clearly become more present over the past five years, taking speaking time out from legitimate NGOs.’

Their statements are clearly pro-government without any meaningful contribution to the discussion. They most often focus on supporting the authorities, saying that everything is perfectly fine, and citing remarks from Xi [Jinping]. It’s not discreet, therefore not convincing. I struggle to think that anyone could genuinely believe them.

Diplomat from a Western country, in comments to ISHR

Intimidating and committing reprisals

The space for independent civil society occupied by GONGOs is not only procedural, but also physical. **ISHR has documented instances where access to Room XX of the Palais des Nations in Geneva, where the Human Rights Council convenes, has been restricted due to GONGOs’ overwhelming occupation of the limited seats available for NGOs** – and at times seats left available by State delegations not present in the room. On 23 January 2024, the majority of activists working on China present in Geneva to attend China’s fourth UPR were unable to enter Room XX despite queuing for over an hour, as NGO seats were mostly occupied by GONGO representatives.

Aside from occupying space and parroting government narratives, the presence of Chinese GONGOs has posed a growing security risk for human rights defenders seeking to engage with the UN without fear of intimidation or reprisals. **Chinese GONGOs serve as additional eyes and ears of the government, rendering UN spaces – particularly the Palais des Nations – an even more hostile environment for activists and victims, especially those with a high-risk profile.** They contribute to creating a smokescreen between the act of intimidation or reprisal and the actor ultimately responsible for it, the Chinese State.

During China’s fourth UPR in January 2024, several NGO representatives reported reprisals in the form of intimidation and surveillance by GONGOs inside UN premises. The incidents ranged from attempts to photograph them without consent to more overt harassment, such as being followed within UN hallways. At least two Tibetan activists reported being photographed by GONGO representatives while queuing, and one of them had to repeatedly call on UN police to intervene and request the picture to be deleted.⁵⁶ Sophie Richardson, former China director at Human Rights Watch, reported two similar incidents, including an unknown NGO representative who took pictures of her and her laptop screen while the review was ongoing.⁵⁷

This practice can be traced back a long time: human rights defender Ti-Anna Wang reported being ‘aggressively photographed by a Chinese individual affiliated with the China Association for Preservation and Development of Tibetan Culture [who] took pictures of Wang as well as the screen of her laptop computer and her belongings’ during the adoption of China’s second UPR by the Human Rights Council in March 2014.⁵⁸

ISHR has further documented intimidatory or smearing remarks by GONGO representatives against Uyghur, Tibetan and Hong Kong activists during side events to the HRC organised by ISHR or other NGOs.

⁵⁶ ISHR, Submission to the UN Secretary-General on recent developments, cases and recommendations, April 2024: <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/reprisals-report-2024/>

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/09/05/costs-international-advocacy/chinas-interference-united-nations-human-rights>

Case study

GONGOs seek to intimidate activists ahead of confidential meeting with UN officials at ISHR office (March 2024)

In March 2024, ISHR convened a closed-door meeting between a UN official and a diverse group of activists working on the human rights situation in Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and mainland China. Despite logistical arrangements having been kept confidential, a group of four Chinese individuals approached ISHR's office, where the activists were gathered, twenty minutes before the meeting. After noticing their presence, one ISHR staff stepped out and inquired about the purpose of their visit. The individuals said they were there to 'attend a human rights meeting' using the pretext of the ongoing 55th session of the Human Rights Council. The individuals indicated being from the 'Guangdong Human Rights Association.' After ISHR staff stated that no such meeting was taking place, the individuals bluntly asked: 'can we get more information about your meeting here, we would like to take part in it.' As ISHR staff did not disclose any further information, the individuals left. Evidently, the individuals had prior information that the meeting was taking place, and their presence at ISHR's office was taken as a signal that the Chinese government is aware and watching.

Soon after, two Uyghur activists who had briefly stepped out of the office building reported being photographed by an individual inside a black van with tinted windows in front of the building. A few minutes later, the four Chinese individuals who had attempted to enter ISHR's office entered the van and left.

ISHR was able to identify two of the four individuals: Zhou Lulu, deputy director and Party secretary of the Guangzhou University Institute for Human Rights, and Wang Shuqi, assistant researcher at the Human Rights Research Centre of China's Northwest University of Political Science and Law. Both were present in Geneva to speak at a series of three events organised by the Chinese GONGO CSHRS on Tibetan and Uyghur human rights and legal protection for human rights.⁵⁹ Zhou delivered an oral statement during the same Council session on behalf of the CSHRS.⁶⁰ The day after the incident, ISHR staff also witnessed Zhou taking unauthorised photographs of Tibetan activists speaking at a side event on Tibet convened by Canada despite a clear no-photograph rule and immediately requested her to permanently delete the pictures.



Statement delivered at HRC55 by Ms. Zhou Lulu on behalf of the China Society for Human Rights Studies. © UN WebTV

ISHR reported the incident to the Swiss authorities and to the UN reprisals unit. The case was regrettably not included in the Secretary-General's annual reprisals report presented in September 2024 at the Human Rights Council.

59 <https://www.humanrights.cn/2024/03/19/6055ac5b8f87412ea5e73e78822377cc.html>

60 <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k11/k11ues66vj?kalturaStartTime=10311>



Portrait of Cao Shunli. © Photo: Pablo M. Díez / ABC Spanish Daily

Intimidation and reprisals against those seeking to cooperate with UN human rights bodies

International law provides for a right to unhindered access to and communication with international bodies on issues relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms. This right is derived from the human rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly and movement contained in international human rights instruments and in customary international law.

The right to unhindered access to and communication with international bodies is also explicitly recognised in the *UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders* and is codified in other international instruments. Enjoyment of this right implies that those accessing or attempting to access or communicate with these bodies should not face any form of intimidation or reprisal for doing so.

Since 1991, the UN Secretary-General started reporting annually on cases of alleged reprisals against individuals or groups cooperating, or seeking to cooperate with the UN.

Between 2010-2024, China ranked among the top five perpetrators of reprisals with 41 cases and situations, after only Venezuela (69), Bahrain (53), Viet Nam (50), and ahead of Nicaragua (40), Egypt (37), Guatemala (36), Uzbekistan (33), Iran (32) and Israel (32).⁶¹

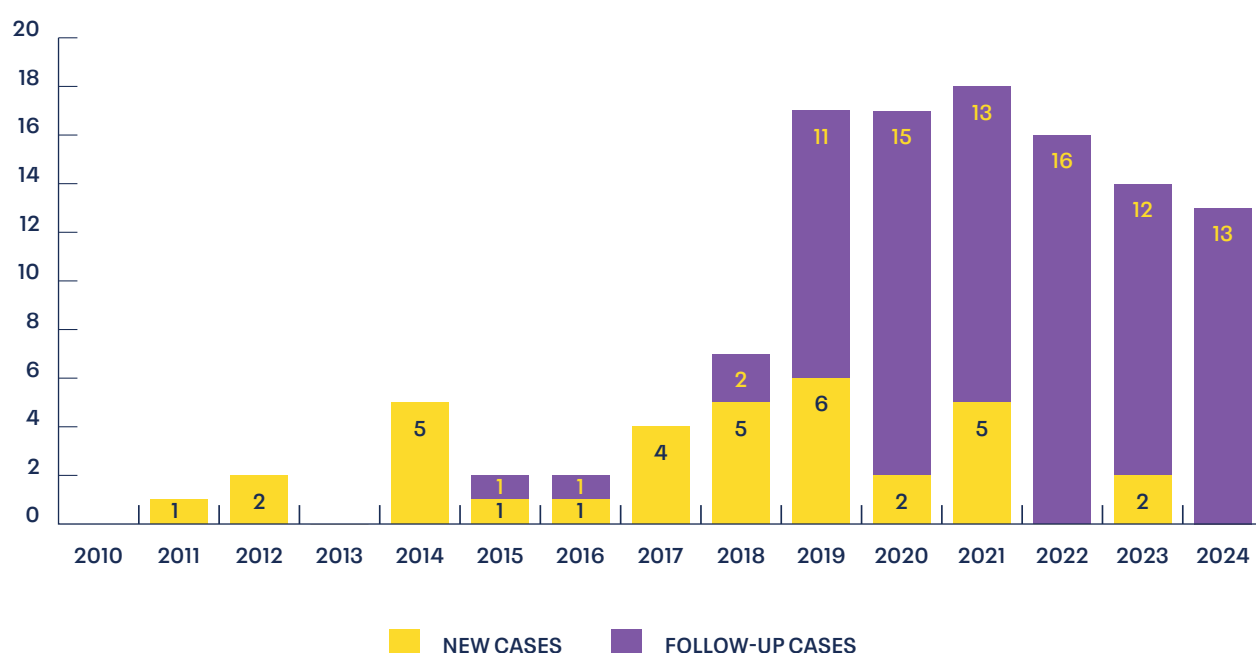
Of the cases documented in the Secretary-General annual reprisals reports, **27% of cases remain anonymised due to fear of subsequent reprisals**. Of the known individuals, over two thirds are women. 15 cases involve activists working on civil and political rights, while six were linked to economic, social and cultural rights, and five involved women's rights advocacy. Other cases remain unreported

⁶¹ Data from the UN Secretary-General's report on reprisals collected by ISHR in the #EndReprisals database: <https://endreprisals.ishr.ch/>

entirely. Some victims request not to be included for fear that they could still be identifiable, even if their allegations were reported anonymously, and due also to the severity of the reprisals they feared. Others do not report at all out of fear and/or lack knowledge of the report.

The chart below illustrates the evolution of reprisals cases involving China reported in the UN Secretary-General's reports from 2010 to 2024. It includes both new and follow-up cases: several individuals or organisations are mentioned more than once.

FIGURE 6: NEW AND FOLLOW-UP CASES ON CHINA IN SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REPRISALS REPORTS (2010-2024)



There has been a notable increase in the number of reported cases since 2019, doubling from 2018, and remaining high throughout the period 2020-2024. Yet, engagement fluctuates according to the UN calendar and intensifies in the context of reviews of China by the UPR or UN Treaty Bodies.

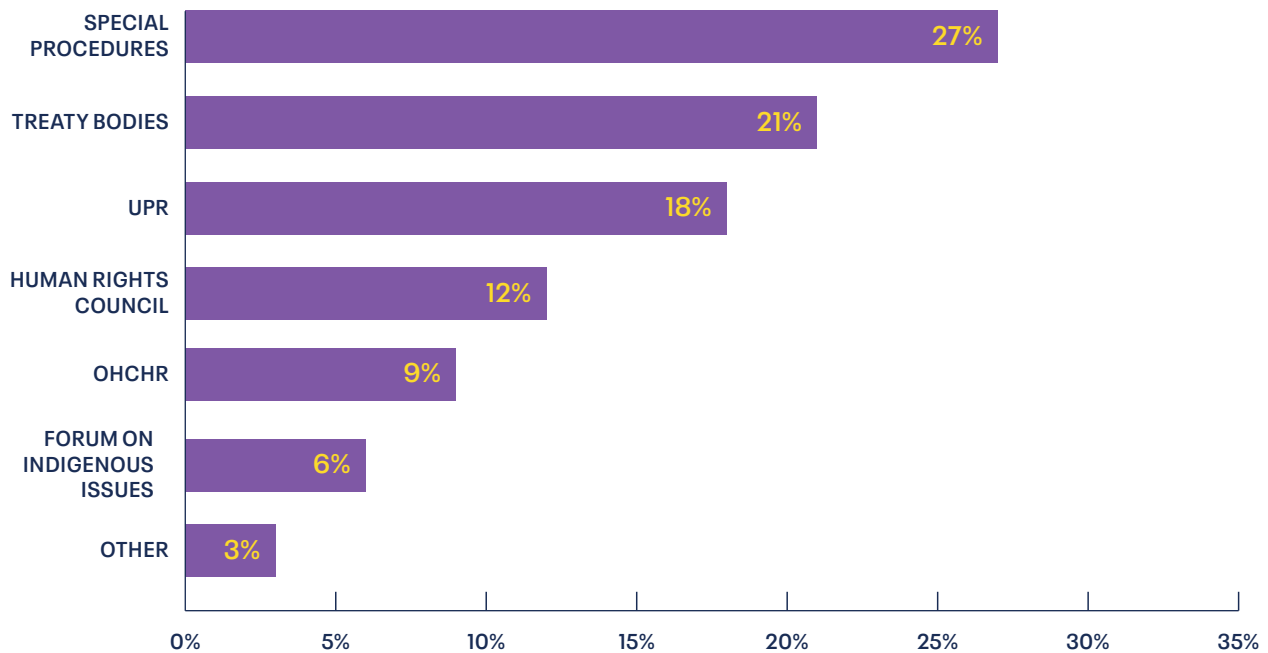
The majority of cases are follow-up cases, 19 of which are reported three or more times, underscoring the persistent atmosphere of impunity and absence of any remedial action taken by the Chinese government to resolve these cases.

According to data compiled by ISHR, all cases remain unresolved, meaning that the Chinese government has not been held accountable for or remedied alleged grave violations of international law despite its stated commitment to multilateral cooperation.

The majority of cases involved engagement with the Special Procedures (27%), Treaty Bodies (21%), and the UPR (18%). Cases were linked to all Treaty Bodies to which China is bound for periodic review,⁶² with a higher number of cases linked to reviews by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR).

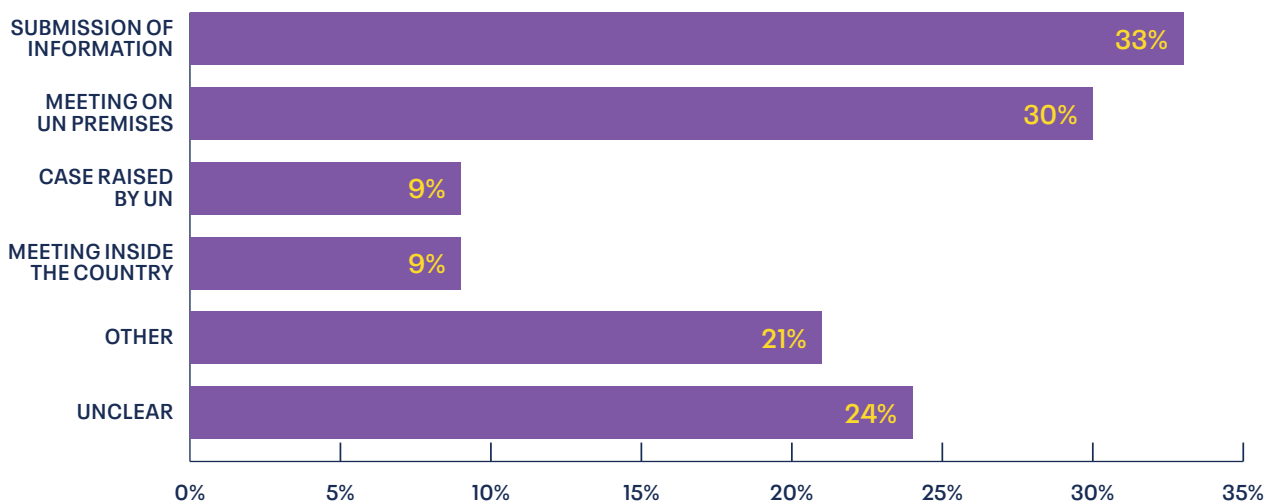
⁶² Ranked by number of cases reported: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (2), Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) (2), Committee against Torture (CAT) (1), Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) (1), and one case mentioned engagement with UN Treaty Bodies in general terms.

FIGURE 7: UN BODY LINKED TO REPORTED CHINA REPRISALS CASES IN THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REPRISALS REPORTS (2010–2024)



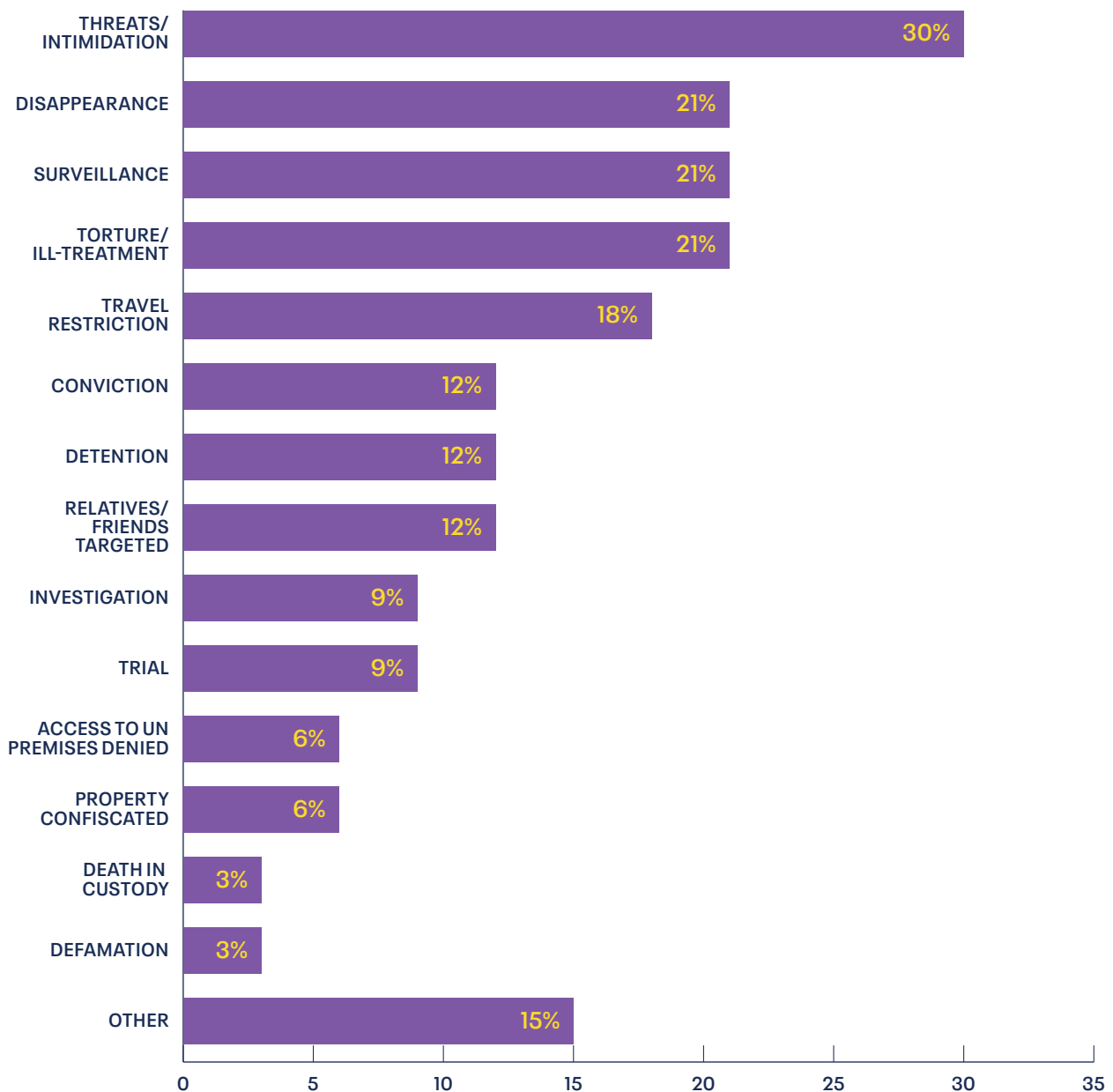
The majority of reprisals cases were linked to submissions to UN bodies (33%) and participation in meetings on UN premises (30%).

FIGURE 8: TYPE OF UN ENGAGEMENT LINKED TO CHINA REPRISALS CASES IN THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REPRISALS REPORTS (2010–2024)



Threats and intimidation constituted the most common form of reprisals (30%), followed by disappearances, torture or ill-treatment, surveillance and travel restrictions. Other forms of reprisals include detention, investigation, conviction and trial, as well as targeting of relatives or friends, denial of access to UN premises, confiscation of assets, and defamation.

FIGURE 9: ACT OF REPRISAL IN CASES ON CHINA REPORTED IN THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REPRISALS REPORTS (2010-2024)



One exceptionally egregious case was the enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and eventual death in custody of Cao Shunli on 14 March 2014 following her attempt to travel to Geneva ([see case study on page 50](#)).

Reprisals on national security grounds

In 2020, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights and Senior Official on Reprisals Ilze Brands Kehris listed China among ten countries with possible ‘patterns’ of reprisals on the basis of repeated or similar allegations.⁶³ Brands Kehris further indicated in the case of China and four other countries ‘serious issues with the detention of victims of reprisals’ and stressed the conclusion by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that allegations ‘indicat[e] [that] arbitrary detention is a systemic problem’ in China, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.⁶⁴

ISHR has documented a range of patterns among reprisals documented by the Secretary-General and additionally by ISHR.

Firstly, **the Chinese authorities systematically invoke national security as a justification for acts constituting reprisals.** The vast range of human rights violations which human rights defenders are exposed to are characterised as legitimate law enforcement against ‘criminals.’ Charging individuals with national security crimes under China’s Criminal Law allows the authorities under China’s Criminal Procedure Law to bypass basic due process, allowing for denials of access to legal counsel and enforced disappearance under ‘Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location,’⁶⁵ fuelling a cycle of human rights violations.

The introduction of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region – known as the **Hong Kong National Security Law** (NSL) – on 30 June 2020 has further extended these repressive measures, highlighting the **use of legislation as a legal basis for the commission of acts constituting reprisals.** At least five cases included in the Secretary-General’s report are linked to new legislation, while the 2022 and 2023 reprisals reports recognise the impact of reprisals on civil society space in Hong Kong following the entry into force of the NSL.

The NSL criminalises acts of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces, with penalties ranging up to life imprisonment. It has been widely criticised for its vague definitions and broad scope, which allow for its application against a wide array of activities and individuals perceived as threats to national security. In responding to inquiries from various UN Treaty Bodies during public reviews in Geneva since 2022 seeking clarification on whether interactions with UN bodies fall under the scope of the NSL, Hong Kong authorities have not explicitly excluded such a possibility.

⁶³ China, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Viet Nam, India, Israel, Myanmar, Philippines, Venezuela.

⁶⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2020/09/oral-presentation-assistant-secretary-general-human-rights-ilze?LangID=E&NewsID=26321>

⁶⁵ <https://ishr.ch/campaign/23654/>

I believe Hong Kong activists and victims – particularly those based in Hong Kong – are increasingly reluctant to engage with the UN system due to fears of reprisal under the national security laws. The Hong Kong government has not clarified whether engagement with the UN constitutes ‘collusion with foreign forces,’ leaving a grey area that many interpret as a potential legal risk. Most prefer to err on the side of caution and avoid any involvement that could be perceived as politically sensitive. There is also growing concern due to an increasing number of cases in which Hong Kong activists have faced intimidation and harassment overseas, such as stalking and online threats. Such incidents have made many activists more conscious of their physical safety, even in Geneva. Many are more and more reluctant to enter UN premises due to a lack of trust in the security of the UN registration system, and fears of being identified by Chinese agents operating within the buildings.

Hong Kong activist, in comments to ISHR

The 2023 reprisals report extensively documented the use of NSL in the commission of acts of reprisals against individuals advocating at the UN. In March 2023, the international legal team representing **Jimmy Lai** and his son Sebastien Lai addressed the HRC to call for accountability regarding the use of NSL on Lai and other journalists. Following that, the Hong Kong government condemned the legal team’s actions as an abuse of UN mechanisms and an interference in judicial proceedings and suggested that the team’s actions might constitute NSL offences.⁶⁶

The Hong Kong government’s ambiguity, coupled with the vague and arbitrary nature of the National Security Law, has created a chilling effect on Hong Kong civil society organisations. As a result, most have opted to cease submitting information to UN Treaty Bodies and the Human Rights Council in order to reduce their legal exposure. Meanwhile, since 2023, the Hong Kong government and courts have issued arrest warrants with bounties against at least 19 human rights defenders, many of whom have been actively involved in UN human rights mechanisms for years. These threats of collective punishment have introduced further risks for both in-territory and diasporic Hong Kong groups.

Eric Yan-ho Lai, Georgetown Center for Asian Law, in comments to ISHR

The introduction of the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance under Article 23 of the Hong Kong Basic Law (also known as **Article 23 Law**) in March 2024 further heightened fears of criminalising engagement with the UN. The law introduced new and overbroadly defined national security crimes, such as external interference. On 19 March 2024, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk expressed concerns that the overbroad interpretation of ‘external force’ under this ordinance could deter engagement with human rights organisations and the UN, contravening the established right to communicate and cooperate with international human rights bodies.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202303/15/P2023031500686.htm?fontSize=1>

⁶⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/rushed-adoption-national-security-bill-regressive-step-human-rights-hong>

On 31 May 2024, Türk further highlighted charges against seven individuals under Article 23 Law, recalling his concerns that ‘broad and vague provisions could be arbitrarily applied to curb freedom of expression and target dissenting voices, civil society actors and human rights defenders.’ He reiterated his call for the repeal of the NSL, and the release of all those arbitrarily detained under both national security laws.⁶⁸

Similarly, in a communication sent to China in March 2024, UN Special Procedures experts raised alarms that the legislation potentially criminalises ‘colluding with external forces’ and ‘external interference’, with ‘external forces’ ambiguously defined to potentially include international organisations such as the UN.⁶⁹

In her September 2022 address to the HRC, Brands Kehris made broad reference to ‘national security laws establishing criminal liability for sharing of information with international actors’ as they ‘may trigger, or be interpreted as triggering, criminal liability for those who share human rights-related information with the UN’ resulting in civil society groups ‘discontinuing cooperation, or declining to engage with OHCHR.’⁷⁰

Increasingly, it appears that national security and other laws are being enacted and applied by Chinese authorities to criminalise independent civil society cooperation with the UN.

Targeting of Uyghur activists and victims

In addition to human rights defenders from Hong Kong, the Chinese government has heavily retaliated against Uyghur human rights defenders and victims. This has prominently targeted the **World Uyghur Congress**, and its former president **Dolkun Isa**, who have repeatedly been the subject of unauthorised photographs and surveillance by Chinese diplomats and GONGO representatives in UN hallways – including during China’s CESC review in February 2023,⁷¹ interruptions through points of order in HRC meetings (see relevant section above), and obstacles or restrictions in entering UN premises.

Most recently, in March 2025, Uyghur camp survivor **Yerbakyt Otarbay** faced retaliation immediately upon testifying about his experience in a mass detention and forced labour camp in Xinjiang during an NGO side event attended by ISHR during the 58th session of the Human Rights Council. Following his presentation, Otarbay was informed that his family inside China had been visited by police as he was speaking, accusing him of terrorism and pressuring family members to dissuade him from engaging further with the UN.

Reprisals have also targeted individuals outside traditional UN human rights spaces. In February 2025, Uyghur linguist and rights advocate **Abduweli Ayup** reported having his invitation to speak at a conference under the umbrella of UNESCO rescinded one day after questioning a Chinese speaker about repression against Uyghur linguistic rights. He was confronted by Chinese individuals, who dismissed his account and labelled his detained siblings as ‘terrorists.’ The organisers of the ‘Language Technologies for All’ conference reportedly provided no legitimate reason for rescinding the invitation, indicating they were ‘informed at the last minute, and this decision is beyond our control.’⁷²

⁶⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/05/hong-kong-sar-turk-deplores-use-national-security-laws>

⁶⁹ <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28893>

⁷⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2022/09/oral-presentation-assistant-secretary-general-human-rights-report>

⁷¹ ‘During the CESC review on China 15 and 16 of February [2023], Dolkun Isa and Zumretay Arkin were followed by a representative of the Chinese delegation. Dolkun was followed until the bathroom on day 1, and we were both followed in the hallway during break time on day 2.’ <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/reprisals-report-2023/>

⁷² <https://www.rfa.org/english/uyghur/2025/02/25/uyghur-unesco-speech-cancelled/>

Case study

World Uyghur Congress

In July 2018, six Special Rapporteurs wrote to China regarding alleged reprisals against then World Uyghur Congress president Dolkun Isa, and the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP), of which he is a member, for his engagement with UN human rights bodies.⁷³ In April 2017, Dolkun Isa was expelled by UN security guards from the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues held at the UN headquarters in New York, despite being an accredited NGO participant. Isa was provided with no explanation for his expulsion. The following April, a similar attempt was made to block Isa's attendance at the Forum by denying him a pass, being eventually granted one following a reported intervention by Germany and the US. The following month, China used its membership on the NGO Committee to seek the withdrawal of ECOSOC accreditation from the STP on the basis that it had enabled Isa – who they accused of terrorism – to participate in the Forum. States, including Germany and the US, made strong statements rejecting China's accusations, but Isa himself was not given an opportunity to respond. With the Committee session webcast live, the accusations made against him were widely disseminated. They were never retracted. The Special Rapporteurs pointed out that these actions may constitute reprisals. China replied that the UN should not 'facilitate the participation of Dolkun Isa, an individual designated as a terrorist in China.'

Of particular concern is that Wu Hongbo, former UN Under-Secretary-General and Head of the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)⁷⁴ – who oversaw the NGO Branch assisting the work of the NGO Committee – admitted in an interview on *The Voice*, a TV programme on China Central Television (CCTV) one year later, that he was the one who gave the order to expel Isa because he was a 'separatist' and a 'criminal.' He spoke openly of disregarding letters of concern from the Assistant-Secretary-General and Senior Official on Reprisals who he described in a demeaning tone as a 'lower-ranking official.' He also noted that 'when it comes to Chinese national sovereignty and security, [Chinese UN officials] will undoubtedly defend our country's interests.'⁷⁵ This statement would seem to violate terms of the *UN Charter*,⁷⁶ as well as the *Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service*,⁷⁷ which seek to insulate UN staff from the influence of Member States. In November 2019, Wu Hongbo was appointed China's first Envoy for European Affairs. There is still no information available about repercussions of Wu's statements.



Former Head of UNDESA speaking on a CCTV television programme in 2019. © Source: CCTV Channel, Youtube⁷⁵

⁷³ <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=23926>

⁷⁴ The leadership of UNDESA has been held by a high-ranking Chinese official since 2007: Sha Zukang (2007-2012), Wu Hongbo (2012-2017), Liu Zhenmin (2017-2022), Li Junhua (2022-today).

⁷⁵ Min 03:14: https://youtu.be/TB1XLfUkBk?si=U_JjP_62g_yO9Y2z&t=194

⁷⁶ United Nations Charter, Article 100: 'Each member of the United Nations undertakes to respect the exclusively international character of the responsibilities of the Secretary-General and the staff and not to seek to influence them in the discharge of their responsibilities.'

⁷⁷ Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service (reviewed in 2013, approved by UNGA Resolution 67/257), Paragraph 8: If the impartiality of the international civil service is to be maintained, international civil servants must remain independent of any authority outside their organisation; their conduct must reflect that independence. In keeping with their oath of office, they should not seek nor should they accept instructions from any Government, person or entity external to the organisation. It cannot be too strongly stressed that international civil servants are not, in any sense, representatives of Governments or other entities, nor are they proponents of their policies. This applies equally to those on secondment from Governments and to those whose services have been made available from elsewhere. International civil servants should be constantly aware that, through their allegiance to the UN Charter and the corresponding instruments of each organisation, member States and their representatives are committed to respect their independent status. <https://icsc.un.org/Resources/General/Publications/standardsE.pdf>

Restrictions upon release from arbitrary detention

Activists and relatives who faced detention have consistently faced restrictions subsequent to their release in the form of house arrest, exit bans, and surveillance, often without legal basis. Such restrictions have the purpose or effect of suppressing human rights advocacy and preventing any form of cooperation with the UN. Here are some examples:

- Chen Jianfang, released from prison in October 2023, remains under effective house arrest as of October 2024. Her phone has been confiscated, and she is prohibited from receiving visitors.
- Xu Yan, released in January 2025 after completing her sentence, is under surveillance at her residence.
- Jiang Tianyong, released in February 2019, continues to be barred from leaving China and is under constant surveillance, particularly when he attempts to leave his home province.
- Li Wenzu, despite never having been formally charged, remains unable to obtain a passport. In August 2023, her application was again denied by the Public Security Bureau in Hubei, following a previous refusal in Beijing.

Self-censorship and other patterns of reprisals

In her latest update to the Human Rights Council in September 2024, Brands Kehris highlighted that self-censorship remains overall ‘prevalent, with a higher number of anonymised new cases than in previous [reprisals] reports’ – 75% of cases in Annex I were anonymised out of ‘protection concerns for those concerned.’ She clarifies that self-censorship also refers to ‘instances where those cooperating with the UN opt for no public or visible engagement with the UN to reduce their exposure’ including ‘requests for changes in the way that UN entities and human rights bodies interact with them, as well as different degrees of anonymity when publicly reporting on their situations.’⁷⁸

27% of cases involving China listed in Secretary-General reprisals reports since 2011 remain unnamed, while six out of 41 cases or situations in the report mention ‘self-censorship’ as an issue.

Self-censorship often results from the chilling effect of overly broad legislation and continued impunity on civil society space. In 11 cases, the reprisals report makes general reference to the country’s restrictive environment in relation to engagement with the UN.

ISHR has documented instances where activists and victims decide to disengage publicly or engage less visibly with the UN upon assessing the risk of reprisals, in particular following the entry into force of the NSL in Hong Kong. This has included decisions by victims of reprisals to restrict – and often fully anonymise – the amount of information shared with UN bodies upon reporting an act of intimidation or reprisal, to avoid further reprisals against them or their relatives or acquaintances.

Other patterns of reprisals documented in previous sections of this report include:

- **the use of GONGOs to commit intimidation and reprisals**, including surveillance and unauthorised photographs, as a way to blur direct chain of responsibility back to the State perpetrator
- intimidatory and smearing remarks, and attempts to interrupt civil society speakers, in particular Uyghurs, in the form of **points of order**, *notes verbales* and **rights of reply** during Human Rights Council sessions.

⁷⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/09/reprisals-states-against-people-who-assist-un-human-rights-work-are>

In addition, the table below shows that at least 56 individuals (including named and unnamed) and at least two named organisations have been targeted by the Chinese government between 2011 – 2024: many reprisals reports also include references to individuals associated with the cases but not themselves targeted specifically.

TABLE 5: CASES ON CHINA REPORTED IN THE SECRETARY-GENERAL'S REPORTS FROM 2011 TO 2024 (NO CASE REPORTED IN 2010)

'N' indicates the first/new mention of a case and 'F' indicates inclusion of follow-up information

CASES	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
'15 individuals who engaged, or attempted to engage, with the UN human rights mechanisms, including through attending trainings'										N				
'7 HRDs engaging with CAT'						N								
'4 persons engaged in training with CHRD'		N												
'1 WHRD and others engaging with CEDAW'					N									
'1 civil society representative engaging with a treaty body'													N	
'2 members of the international legal team supporting Jimmy Lai and his son Sebastien Lai'													N	F
Cao Du	N													
Cao Shunli				N	F	F		F	F					F
Figo Chan / CHRF											N	F	F	
Chen Jianfang				N					F	F	F	F	F	F
Ge Zhihui				N										
Hong Kong civil society											N	F		
Dolkun Isa							N		F					
Jiang Tianyong							N	F	F	F	F	F		F
Li Heping										N	F	F	F	F

CASES	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Li Kezhen								N	F	F	F	F		
Li Qiaochu											N	F	F	F
Li Wenzu							N		F	F	F	F	F	F
Li Xiaoling									N	F				
Li Yuhan									N	F	F	F	F	F
Liu Zhenqing									N	F	F			
Mi Chongbiao								N	F	F	F	F		
Network of Chinese human rights defenders		N							N	F				
Peng Lanlan				N										
Qin Yongmin								N	F	F	F			
Shen Youlian											N	F	F	
Wang Qiaoling							N		F	F	F	F	F	F
Wang Quanzhang											N	F	F	F
Ti-Anna Wang				N										
Wang Yu								N	F	F	F	F	F	F
Xu Yan									N	F	F	F	F	F
Yu Wensheng												F	F	F
Zhao Suli								N	F	F	F			
Zhen Jianghua									N	F				

Mobilising diplomatic responses

Last September 2024, Assistant Secretary-General Brands Kehris underscored that 'zero tolerance, awareness and prevention continue to be the best response to intimidation and reprisals. The United Nations system is determined to continue addressing the issue firmly and swiftly.'⁷⁹

The establishment of the mandate of **Senior Official on Reprisals**, the gradual strengthening of the Secretary-General's annual reprisals report and its presentation in a dedicated Human Rights Council dialogue since 2011 constitute landmark achievements in increasing the public cost of committing reprisals.

A majority of cases relating to China have been addressed by a diversity of UN bodies beyond the Senior Official on Reprisals exclusively. Prior to inclusion in the Secretary-General's report, 14 cases were raised by Special Procedures, nine by the Treaty Bodies and five by OHCHR. ISHR research establishes that public statements and advocacy over a sustained period by a diversity of high-level actors is the form of intervention most likely to contribute to a positive outcome or change from the perspective of human rights defenders and victims of acts of intimidation and reprisal.

Following reported acts of reprisals during its May 2023 review of China, the **Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** included in its Concluding Observations a recommendation to 'ensure the protection of women human rights defenders from intimidation, harassment and reprisals for their work, including when they have engaged or sought to engage with the Committee, immediately stop any such reprisals and ensure the protection of the women human rights defenders concerned and investigate and prosecute those responsible, including police officers and other State agents'.⁸⁰

The case of Jiang Tianyong is an example of good practice in ensuring cases are raised publicly and consistently. Human rights lawyer Jiang Tianyong met with former **Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights** Philip Alston during his official visit to China from 15 to 23 August 2016. After the meeting, Jiang was arbitrarily detained and later charged with 'subversion of State power.' The Special Rapporteur made a specific reference to Jiang during the public presentation of his country mission report to the Human Rights Council in June 2017.⁸¹ He stated that the charges against Jiang were 'the equivalent of a legal sledgehammer and should have no place in such contexts.' The Special Rapporteur ensured sustained follow-up on Jiang's situation, issuing four press releases from the time of his disappearance in December 2016 to March 2018. He also sent a joint letter with three other UN Special Procedures mandate-holders to China regarding the alleged disappearance of Jiang.⁸² In China's replies, the authorities did not directly address the substance of the allegations, instead pointing to generic 'coercive measures by public security authorities.'⁸³ In China's official written response to Alston's report, China emphasised its achievement on eradicating poverty and ignored the allegations.

79 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/09/reprisals-states-against-people-who-assist-un-human-rights-work-are>

80 CEDAW/C/CHN/CO/9: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FCO%2FCHN%2FCO%2F9&Lang=en

81 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21772&LangID=E>

82 <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=22882>

83 <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=33354>

Case study

Cao Shunli

One of the most notorious cases of reprisals against human rights defenders seeking to engage with the UN, Cao Shunli was detained by Chinese authorities on 14 September 2013 as she was about to board a flight to attend a training and meetings in Geneva in the context of China's second Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Cao had consistently advocated – including through peaceful sit-ins in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – for the Chinese government to consult with civil society in drafting the State's report to the UPR. Cao was detained and then forcibly disappeared by the

Chinese authorities. When she resurfaced in custody in October 2013, Chinese authorities charged her with 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble,' and it was evident that she experienced serious medical issues in detention. Despite repeated international calls for her urgent release over months of being denied adequate medical treatment, Cao Shunli died on 14 March 2014 from multiple organ failure. She was granted bail for medical reasons just days before her death. Cao Shunli was one of the finalists of the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders in 2014.



Diplomats, NGOs, UN staff and journalists gather in a minute of silence to mark the ten-year anniversary of the death of Chinese activist Cao Shunli, in an event co-organised by ISHR on the Place des Nations, Geneva, on 14 March 2024. © Photo: ISHR

Following her death in custody, ISHR sought to use its speaking slot at the HRC's March 2014 session for a moment of silence in honour of Cao.⁸⁴ However, this attempt was blocked by several points of order requested by China,⁸⁵ who alleged a 'violation of rules of procedure'⁸⁶ which would set a 'dangerous precedent': this was supported by 12 like-minded governments,⁸⁷ and opposed by Canada, the European Union (EU), the UK, the US, Germany, Estonia, France, Austria and Ireland. China called a vote on the ruling suggested by the Council's President to refer the matter to the Human Rights Council Bureau at a later stage: 13 delegations voted in favour of the ruling, 20 opposed it, and 12 abstained.⁸⁸ The President therefore did not refer the matter, and ISHR's speaking time was terminated; yet the one hour and a half long disruption of the Council garnered Cao Shunli significant global media coverage. Following ISHR advocacy, the deadly reprisal against Cao Shunli was condemned by senior officials from the EU and the US, as well as UN experts and the then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

In March 2024, marking ten years after Cao Shunli's death, ISHR and NGO partners pledged to carry forward her legacy by amplifying the voices of Chinese, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Hong Kong human rights defenders who continue to be targeted by the Chinese government. ISHR's campaign⁸⁹ secured key statements on 14 March 2024 from:

- UN Special Procedures mandate holders, who renewed, for the third time, their public call on China to 'fully and fairly investigate the circumstances that led to Cao Shunli's death and hold those responsible to account'. The experts said that 'failing to properly investigate a potentially

⁸⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de-63tSwUI8>

⁸⁵ <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/un-human-rights-council-must-demand-accountability-death-cao-shunli/>

⁸⁶ Min 35:58: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezLp10Mgzz8&t=2158s

⁸⁷ Cuba, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Viet Nam, Morocco, South Africa, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Venezuela, Russia, Maldives.

⁸⁸ In favour: UK, US, Austria, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Republic of Korea and Romania. Against: South Africa, United Arab Emirates, Viet Nam, Algeria, Benin, China, Congo, Cuba, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Maldives, Morocco, Namibia, Pakistan, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. Abstention: Argentina, Botswana, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Chile, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Montenegro, Peru, the Philippines, and Sierra Leone. Absent: Macedonia and Kenya.

⁸⁹ <https://ishr.ch/campaign/but-we-must-try-cao-shunli-the-unsilenceable-legacy/>

unlawful death may amount to a violation of the right to life' and 'noted that the participation of human rights defenders and civil society from China in UN human rights mechanisms and bodies has dropped to a record low.'

- Nine European Human Rights Ambassadors, who released a joint statement honouring Cao Shunli's legacy and calling on all States to stop engaging in acts of reprisals.⁹⁰

That same day, ISHR and NGO partners held a day-long photo exhibition of persecuted human rights defenders in China, in particular women human rights defenders, and paid tribute to Cao Shunli through a minute of silence and the unveiling of a bust of the activist on the emblematic Place des Nations in front of the UN Office in Geneva. On 25 April 2024, the City of Geneva announced their intention to host a public monument in tribute to 'the memory of human rights activists and the universal causes they embody' as a result of ISHR's advocacy for the installation of Cao's bust in the city.

On 22 March 2024, an NGO joint statement led by ISHR was successfully delivered at the HRC paying tribute to Cao Shunli, under item 5 of the HRC's 55th session. Vain attempts by China, supported by Cuba, Venezuela, Russia and North Korea, to interrupt the statement as they had done 10 years ago were countered by Belgium on behalf of EU Member States, the US, Canada and the UK, and by the HRC President's decision to give the floor back to the ISHR speaker.

The consistent and joint calls since 2014 by UN experts, governments and NGOs for accountability for Cao Shunli's unlawful death significantly elevated the cost of committing reprisals for China and any other perpetrator.

Yet, challenges and shortcomings remain in the UN's strategy to prevent and address cases of reprisals:

- The Secretary-General's reprisals report does not consistently follow up on unresolved cases, as cases are only maintained in the report's Annex II if new information is presented annually, regardless of the continuity of detention or other act of reprisal or the continued lack of remedial action.
- The reprisals report has also failed to feature several cases reported by ISHR on some countries, including China – for example, the case of four GONGO representatives approaching ISHR's office prior to a confidential meeting in March 2024 (see relevant section above) reported ahead of the 2024 reprisals report, and the case of Hui-jung Chi, a well-known Taiwanese activist blocked from participation in a closed-door virtual meeting held by UN Women's Asia Pacific Regional Office in September 2020,⁹¹ reported by ISHR since 2021.
- The involvement of the Senior Official on Reprisals on individual cases continues to be exclusively behind closed doors, leaving open the question of whether public statements would be more effective and despite the evidence of the positive impact of such statements when made.
- The lack of communication and transparency with victims about if, when and with whom their case is being raised, as well as any outcomes.
- The absence of a clear protocol for immediate and systematic reaction by UN security to acts of intimidation, in particular physical surveillance and unauthorised photographs, and adequate accompaniment of victims inside UN premises.

⁹⁰ <https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/EHRA-Joint-Statement-on-Cao-Shunli-14.3.2024.pdf>

⁹¹ ISHR, Submission to the UN Secretary-General on recent developments, cases and recommendations, April 2023, page 29: https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ISHR_Reprisals_submission_2023-1.pdf

CONCLUSION

China remains a key obstructionist for independent NGOs and human rights defenders seeking to cooperate with the UN and sustains an adversarial position to any attempts to promote safer and more accessible spaces for independent civil society.

China accounts for the highest amount of deferrals of applications seeking consultative status in the NGO Committee over the research period. China repeatedly and protractedly defers NGO applicants who do not employ what China considers 'correct terminology' on Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, or who work on the human rights situation in China or other country situations, or 'sensitive' issues opposed by China's allies, in particular members of the Group of Friends of the UN Charter. China's deferral strategy affects NGOs from all regions of the world, working across virtually all areas.

Benefiting from the NGO Committee's long-standing and overwhelmingly rights-averse membership, China systematically opposes reform initiatives. It also opposes norm-setting on reprisals and safe and unhindered civil society participation in relevant Human Rights Council negotiations. China also weaponises other procedural tactics to disrupt civil society space, including through points of order in the HRC plenary.

For civil society groups able to obtain ECOSOC status and access UN premises, China still deploys a range of measures to intimidate and retaliate with a view to deter future engagement and send a chilling message to others seeking to engage with the UN. The growing presence of Chinese GONGOs at the Human Rights Council and other UN bodies has accompanied China's greater presence at the Council since the US' withdrawal from the body in 2018, and poses an increasing risk related to the occupation of limited space for civil society. Of even greater concern are the acts of reprisals committed by GONGOs, creating a smokescreen diluting State responsibility. The challenges posed by GONGOs require cautious, targeted policy responses that do not open the door to attempts to censure legitimate independent NGOs.

China remains one of the top perpetrators of reprisals against those cooperating or seeking to cooperate with the UN. Acts of intimidation and reprisals are frequently grounded in unlawful and disproportionate national security justifications, intentionally ambiguous legislation, and heavily target Uyghurs and Hong Kongers. The negative impact of reprisals, in particular prompting activists to self-censor and downscale UN engagement, is amplified by a climate of impunity. While UN human rights bodies have diversified their responses to acts of reprisals, steps still need to be taken to consistently follow-up on unresolved cases and provide rapid response to intimidatory acts inside UN premises.

These tactics strongly contrast with China's stated commitment to being a reliable multilateral leader. They stem from the Chinese Party-State's primary foreign policy objective of shielding itself from human rights criticism and enhancing its international image by restricting and deterring critical civil society voices, crowding out civil society space with GONGOs, and stalling and diverting reform initiatives. This poses a significant challenge to UN human rights bodies whereby China's actions have an adverse impact that is not circumscribed to discussions on the human rights situation in China. This risk is amplified by geopolitical shifts that grow the ranks of actors hostile to free, independent and diverse civil society voices.

On the basis of this report's findings, ISHR has identified a series of recommendations aimed at providing specific policy responses and advancing reforms to prevent attempts by China or any other influential actor to restrict space for independent civil society in UN human rights bodies.



Photo exhibition to pay tribute to Chinese human rights defenders in March 2024. © Photo: ISHR

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the NGO Committee

To UN Member States:

- Member States with strong positive records in ensuring a safe, enabling environment for civil society should present themselves as candidates in the next elections for the NGO Committee in 2026 for the term 2027-2030.
- Consult civil society to identify recommendations for meaningful reform of the NGO Committee, ensuring that accreditation processes become more fair, transparent, non-discriminatory, efficient and expeditious.

To Members of the NGO Committee:

- Approve the applications for consultative status of independent NGOs committed to universal human rights in a timely manner.
- Thoroughly scrutinise the applications of organisations that appear to be under the effective control – whether financial, administrative, legislative, legal or political control – of a government, in particular where that organisation has a track record of advancing State positions against civil society space or universal human rights.

- Where there are reasonable grounds to believe the applicant organisation is a GONGO following thorough scrutiny, deny their application.
- Conduct meaningful consultations with independent NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC to identify measures to improve engagement of ECOSOC accredited organisations at the United Nations as mandated by ECOSOC *Resolution 1996/31*.
- Institute hybrid Q&A sessions during Committee sessions for applicant NGOs to engage remotely.

To Members of the ECOSOC:

- Elect candidates that have a positive record in ensuring a safe, enabling environment for civil society and supporting civil society access and participation at the UN.
- Adopt decisions or resolutions to improve the functioning of the NGO Committee with a view to ensuring the fair and timely processing of applications for accreditation, including creating a time limit for consideration of applications after which a decision must be taken by the Committee.
- Vote to grant accreditation to independent NGOs that promote universal human rights and that have faced unreasonable, arbitrary and lengthy deferrals.
- Urge the NGO Committee, including through a letter, to conduct consultations with NGOs in ECOSOC status prior to each session as mandated by ECOSOC *Resolution 1996/31*.
- Adopt a decision or resolution enabling hybrid participation of NGOs seeking accreditation in Q&A sessions during Committee sessions in the event that the NGO Committee does not do so.

On the issue of GONGOs

To Members of the NGO Committee:

- Actively support the applications for consultative status of independent NGOs committed to universal human rights and thoroughly scrutinise the applications of those where there are reasonable grounds to believe them to be under the effective control – whether financial, administrative, legislative, legal or political control – of a government, in particular where that organisation has a track record of advancing State positions against civil society space and universal human rights.

To the Bureau of the Human Rights Council:

- Remove the limitation on the number of NGO speakers during General Debates at the HRC, ensuring that they are able to participate on the same basis as other observers, including States that are not members of the Council, in line with operative paragraph 11 (OP11) of UN General Assembly *Resolution 60/251*.
- Meaningfully address all cases of reprisals perpetrated by GONGOs through public advocacy and private engagement, as appropriate, with the affiliated State.

To OHCHR:

- Develop a methodology to identify GONGOs with ECOSOC status.

- Address responsible States where GONGOs affiliated with those States are found to be carrying out intimidation and reprisals against civil society engaging with the UN.
- Document and report publicly the increasing presence of GONGOs with ECOSOC status across UN human rights bodies, including disaggregated data by country and analysis of the challenges such presence poses for independent civil society access and risks of reprisals.
- Provide safe, dedicated spaces for independent NGOs to engage with UN Treaty Bodies during reviews without the presence of GONGOs.

On intimidation and reprisals

To the OHCHR Senior Focal Point on Reprisals:

- Identify States that commit patterns of intimidation and reprisals and document these patterns in the Secretary-General's annual report on reprisals, giving due attention to legislation and policy that restrict or hinder civil society's engagement with the UN, or sustain an atmosphere of fear and inhibition that deters such engagement.
- Inform victims of intimidation and reprisals on any action or lack thereof taken on their cases, in a timely fashion.
- Regularly follow up with States about the status of intimidation and reprisal cases and, where relevant, communicate publicly about responses received, taking into consideration consent and the principle of 'do no harm'.
- Subject to principles of consent and 'do no harm', ensure that all incidents of intimidation and reprisals that violate the right of everyone, individually and in association with others, to unhindered access to and communication with international bodies in particular the UN, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights, are included in the Secretary-General's reprisals report.
- Ensure sustained attention and systematic follow-up on cases until they are identified as resolved in consultation with the victim(s), including by continuing to include cases from the Annex of the Secretary-General's reprisals report and by reporting on the continuity of the violation and lack of remedial action.
- Improve and systematise the documentation of cases of intimidation and reprisals in order to improve follow up, and track, analyse and evaluate data in order to improve the UN's responses. Interventions across the system should also be documented internally and evaluated for their effectiveness.
- Maintain a publicly accessible database of reprisals cases documented in the Secretary-General's report, including State responses and follow-up action by UN bodies.
- Where private engagement with a State perpetrator has not led to timely and adequate remedial action, and where a State has continued to commit acts of reprisals, issue public statements on individual cases and patterns of reprisals.
- Systematically and periodically, at least annually, follow up with victims of acts of intimidation or reprisal to request details of any relevant developments, as well as to update them on the status of their case and any actions taken, until such time as the case is resolved.

To the Presidency of the Human Rights Council:

- Take a more proactive role in investigating and following up on cases of intimidation and reprisals, including by:
 - discussing cases of intimidation and reprisals during Bureau meetings and reporting on those discussions publicly
 - publicly denouncing individual acts of intimidation or reprisals in a timely manner and publishing allegation letters on the Extranet if victims give consent
 - providing brief oral updates on cases of alleged intimidation or reprisal, including actions taken, at the start of the Item 5 General Debate of each Human Rights Council session, providing States concerned with the opportunity to respond
 - maintaining a publicly accessible database of cases of alleged intimidation or reprisals on the Extranet
 - adopting a two-step approach to address cases received, drawing from UN Special Procedures communications, as a function of urgency: urgent appeals could be sent to States privately and published after 48 hours in a public database, and allegation letters could be sent to States privately and published after 60 days in a public database.
- Work with OHCHR to develop and implement a civil society impact assessment tool to identify, mitigate and remedy any adverse impacts of proposed policies or practices on independent civil society access and participation.

To UN Member States:

- Provide the Senior Official on reprisals in OHCHR with the resources necessary to implement the recommendations above.
- Step up support to human rights defenders and independent civil society organisations targeted by intimidation, harassment or other retaliatory acts by State authorities, including by:
 - opposing Points of Order by States at the HRC seeking to interrupt NGO speakers, and speaking in favour of the right of civil society representatives to freely engage at the HRC
 - speaking out against intimidatory statements by the State delegations against NGO speakers at the HRC
 - including in public statements at the HRC and in relevant bilateral dialogues with State authorities references to individual cases of reprisals and patterns of reprisals by State authorities as documented by the Secretary-General's annual report on reprisals, giving due attention to legislation and other policy whose enactment and implementation restrict or hinder civil society engagement with the UN, or else sustain an atmosphere of fear and inhibition that deters such engagement.

To UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) and security personnel:

- In consultation with civil society and victims of reprisals, build the capacity of UN security personnel and other relevant UN staff to prevent, mitigate and provide rapid response to cases of intimidation and reprisals taking place in UN premises, including threats and unauthorised photograph, and develop a protocol to assist victims.

To the Government of China:

- Immediately put an end to the practice of intimidation and reprisals against those who cooperate or seek to cooperate with the UN or regional human rights bodies and mechanisms.
- Ensure all allegations are subject to a full, independent and impartial investigation, and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable, and victims are provided with effective remedies.
- Fully, substantively and promptly cooperate with the UN's human rights mechanisms and bodies in cases of alleged intimidation or reprisals, including by providing good faith undertakings to prevent and investigate cases and to report back to the relevant body or mechanism — including the Human Rights Council, its Special Procedures, the General Assembly and the Assistant Secretary-General — as to investigative, protective, prosecutorial and remedial steps taken.
- Cease to interpret cooperation with UN bodies as a national security threat, and provide public, clear assurances that UN engagement does not fall under the scope of national security legislation, and that any UN body or representative is not considered as an 'external force' under Hong Kong's Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (Article 23 Law).

On other challenges to civil society access**To the NGO Branch of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), UNDSS and all UN Offices, including in Geneva (UNOG) and New York (UNHQ) and their Security Departments:**

- Guarantee safe and full access to UN premises for civil society representatives during relevant meetings and events, ensure that access to UN grounds and events is not denied arbitrarily, and that processes relating to access are fair and transparent.
- Identify and publicly report efforts by States to constrain or manipulate access.

To UN Member States:

- Oppose the abuse of points of order by States to interrupt NGO speakers at the Human Rights Council and speak in defence of freedom of expression and the right of NGOs to address the Council.
- Ensure that any State-led efforts to enhance efficiency, fairness, and transparency around access to UN grounds and events do not, inadvertently, have the impact of creating additional hurdles for marginalised groups to participate.
- Make non-cooperation more politically costly, for instance, by opposing the election of uncooperative States to the Human Rights Council or other human rights-related bodies, including the HRC's Bureau, and the Consultative Group for the appointment of Special Procedures mandate-holders.
- Follow up on HRC *Decision 55/116* to ensure the continuation of the use of hybrid modalities at the HRC to enhance civil society access and participation at the UN, including virtual access and participation by independent NGOs working at the national level, and to reduce the environmental impacts of unnecessary travel.



For more information about our work or any of the issues covered in this publication, please visit our website: www.ishr.ch or contact us: information@ishr.ch



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