

# CRS Report for Congress

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## China and “Falun Gong”

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### Summary

The “Falun Gong” movement has led to the largest and most protracted public demonstrations in China since the democracy movement of 1989. On April 25, 1999, an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 adherents assembled in front of *Zhongnanhai*, the Chinese Communist Party leadership compound, and participated in a silent protest against state repression of their activities. On July 21, 1999, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) government, fearful of the spread of social unrest, outlawed the movement and began to arrest Falun Gong protesters. Despite the crackdown, Falun Gong adherents have continued to stage demonstrations and to defy authorities. The government has vowed to “crush” the movement before the 16<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress is held in 2002. On July 18, 2001, the House of Representatives introduced H.Con.Res. 188, which calls upon the government of the PRC to cease its persecution of Falun Gong practitioners.

### Background and Major Events

**What Is “Falun Gong”?** “Falun Gong,” also known as “Falun Dafa,”<sup>1</sup> combines an exercise regimen with meditation and moral tenets. The practice and beliefs are derived from *qigong*, a set of movements through which one channels vital energies, and Buddhist and Daoist principles. Falun Gong offers practitioners physical well-being, emotional tranquility, and a higher understanding of life’s purpose and one’s place in society. Followers claim that by controlling the wheel of dharma, which revolves in the body, one can cure such ailments as high blood pressure, back aches, and even cancer. Falun Gong upholds three main virtues — compassion, forbearance, and truthfulness — and warns against manifestations of contemporary “moral degeneration” such as rock music, drugs, and “sexual liberation.” Adherents believe that through practicing Falun Gong, individuals can reach higher levels of “cultivation,” problems of society can be solved, and the end of the world can be averted.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The literal meanings of “Falun Gong” and “Falun Dafa,” respectively, are “law wheel exercise” and “great way of the wheel of dharma.” See Danny Schechter, *Falun Gong’s Challenge to China* (New York: Akashic Books, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> See [<http://www.falundafa.org>] and [<http://www.faluninfo.net>].

Some observers argue that Falun Gong resembles a cult; they refer to the unquestioning support of its founder, Li Hongzhi, the interest in end-of-the-world prophecies, and the rejection of Western science. The PRC government charges that Falun Dafa has contributed to the deaths of 1,800 persons by discouraging medical treatment and causing mental disorders. Followers counter that the practice is voluntary, compatible with mainstream science and culture, and helps develop healthy, moral, and productive citizens. They also emphasize that Falun Gong is not a religion – there is no worship of a deity, all-inclusive system of beliefs, church or temple, or formal hierarchy.

**Falun Gong’s Spiritual Leader.** Li Hongzhi (“Master Li”), a former Grain Bureau clerk, developed Falun Gong in the late 1980s, when *qigong* began to gain popularity in China. In 1992, Li explained his “discoveries” in a book, *Zhuan Falun*. In 1993, the Falun Gong movement was incorporated into an official organization, the Chinese Qigong Association. However, the Falun Gong chapter was expelled in 1996 because of unorthodox practices. Li reportedly left China soon after. During the mid-1990s, Falun Gong acquired a large and diverse membership of varying levels of involvement, with estimates ranging from 3 to 70 million persons, including several thousand practitioners in the United States.<sup>3</sup> In China, the practice attracted many retired persons as well as factory workers, peasants, state enterprise managers, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and students. In addition, the spiritual discipline was embraced by many retired and active Party and government cadres and military officials and personnel.<sup>4</sup> Since 1998, Li and his family have lived in the New York City area. He has appeared at Falun Gong gatherings in the United States and Canada only four times since May 1999 and has not granted an interview since the crackdown in China began.

**The Demonstrations and Government Crackdown.** The Falun Gong demonstrations of April 1999 caught the Communist leadership by surprise. On April 25, 1999, 10,000 to 30,000 Falun Gong practitioners gathered in Beijing. Provincial representatives arrived in the capital before dawn and joined local followers in front of *Zhongnanhai*, the Chinese leadership compound. Clutching Master Li’s writings, the demonstrators sat silently or meditated. Sensing that the government was starting a campaign to discredit them, some adherents presented an open letter to the Party leadership demanding official recognition and their constitutional rights to free speech, press, and assembly.

Between May and June 1999, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders were reportedly split on whether to ban Falun Gong and conveyed contradictory messages.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A more recent estimate puts the figure at “several million” members. See Craig S. Smith, “Sect Clings to the Web in the Face of Beijing’s Ban,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> The practice reportedly enjoyed a strong following among soldiers and officers in some northeastern cities. The Chinese Navy published copies of *Zhuan Falun*. See Lorien Holland, “Breaking the Wheel,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 5, 1999 and Susan V. Lawrence, “Stressful Summer,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 19, 1999. According to another source, there were 4000-5000 Falun Gong “sympathizers” in the PLA air force. See David Murphy, “Losing Battle,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 15, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Chan, Vivien Pik-Kwan, “Sect Ban Rumour Not True — Beijing,” *South China Morning Post*, June 15, 1999; John Pomfret, “Jiang Caught in Middle on Standoff,” *Washington Post*, April 8, (continued...)

Premier Zhu Rongji met with a delegation of practitioners to consider its request for official approval. By contrast, President Jiang Zemin was shocked by the apparent loss of Party unity and authority and finally ordered the crackdown. Jiang was also angered by the apparent ease with which U.S. officials had granted Li Hongzhi a visa and feared U.S. involvement in the movement. The Party initially promised Falun Gong practitioners that their activities would not be outlawed. However, the government also produced circulars forbidding Party members from practicing Falun Gong. State television and newspapers portrayed the following as a religious cult that ruined people's lives and disrupted familial and social stability. Security forces collected the names of instructors, infiltrated exercise classes, and closed book stalls selling Falun Dafa literature. Tensions escalated as followers engaged in 18 major demonstrations, including occupying a government building in Nanchang and demonstrating in front of China Central Television Station in Beijing.<sup>6</sup>

The government crackdown began on July 21, 1999, when Falun Gong was officially outlawed and an arrest warrant was issued for Li Hongzhi.<sup>7</sup> In Beijing alone, public security officers closed 67 teaching stations and 1,627 practice sites.<sup>8</sup> CCP leaders ordered 1,200 Party and government officials who had practiced Falun Gong to sever their own ties to the movement. The state detained and questioned over 30,000 participants nation-wide, releasing most of them after they promised to quit or identified group organizers. Some followers were required to submit large sums of money as security deposits or bail. The state also blocked Falun Gong Internet sites and closed the e-mail accounts of many practitioners, although without complete success.<sup>9</sup>

Government prosecutors have charged Falun Gong leaders with various crimes, including "leaking state secrets to foreigners," "organizing superstitious sects," disrupting public order, obstructing justice, engaging in unlawful assembly and publication, tax evasion, and manslaughter. An estimated 150 to 450 group leaders and other members have been tried and sentenced to prison terms of up to 18 years.<sup>10</sup> In December 2000,

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<sup>5</sup> (...continued)  
2001.

<sup>6</sup> Xiao Jiang, "List of Major Demonstrations," *China Daily* (August 6, 1999): p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> In November 1999, Ye Xiaowen, director of the State Bureau of Religious Affairs, stated that police would not interfere with people who practiced alone in their own homes. Matt Forney, "Beijing Says Changes in Economy Helped Spur Falun Dafa's Growth," *Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Before the crackdown, there were approximately 39 "teaching centers," 1,900 "instruction centers" and 28,000 practice sites nationwide. See John Pomfret and Michael Laris, "China Expands Sect Crackdown," *Washington Post*, July 25, 1999; and John Wong and William T. Liu, *The Mystery of Falun Gong* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. and Singapore University Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Seth Faison, "Chinese Officials Held in Campaign Against Vast Sect," *New York Times*, July 27, 1999; Agence France-Presse, "'Mass Exodus' from Falun Gong," *South China Morning Post* (Internet Edition), August 9, 1999; Craig S. Smith, "Online: In a Chinese Battle, the Web is Mightier Than the State," *Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Pomfret, John, "China: Social Strains Fueled Banned Sect," *Washington Post*, November 5, 1999; The government ordered Chinese lawyers not to defend Falun Gong leaders without prior  
(continued...)

Teng Chunyan, a U.S. resident and Falun Gong practitioner, was tried in a Beijing court and sentenced to 3 years in prison on charges of espionage.<sup>11</sup> The number of remaining, “unrepentant” followers kept under various forms of detention, such as prison or “labor re-education,” is estimated to be 10,000.<sup>12</sup> Another 5,000 loyal followers are “under watch.” Human rights organizations claim that over 250 adherents have died in custody, mostly from torture. Many other followers who have not renounced Falun Gong or who have gone repeatedly to Beijing to demonstrate have been suspended or expelled from school or demoted or dismissed from their jobs.

However, the Chinese government has encountered difficulties in its efforts to “eliminate” Falun Gong. Some reports indicate that many demonstrators have been sent home repeatedly or have managed to evade the police. The enforcement of government decrees, such as those requiring schools, employers, and neighborhood committees to extract signed repudiations of Falun Gong, has often been lax. Many local public security bureaus have lacked the capacity or will to detain, let alone reform, adherents.<sup>13</sup>

Public gatherings of Falun Gong adherents reappeared as early as August 1999, one month after the crackdown. During the last week of October 1999, 1,000 to 3,000 followers converged in Beijing. Several smaller demonstrations took place in the capital between December 1999 and March 2000. In July 2000, over 1,000 practitioners went to Tiananmen Square in Beijing to commemorate the anniversary of the crackdown. Several hundred adherents demonstrated on October 1, 2000, China’s National Day. In January and February 2001, six persons identified by the government as Falun Gong practitioners immolated themselves at Tiananmen Square.<sup>14</sup> The government then began to intensify its crackdown, setting up a special “610” task force and pressuring local officials to carefully monitor all Falun Gong activities, even those done privately. On April 25, 2001, the second-year anniversary of the demonstrations at Zhongnanhai, about 30 adherents went to Tiananmen Square before being swiftly detained. On July 23, 2001, at least five followers were arrested on the square.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> (...continued)

approval from the Office of Legal Administration.

<sup>11</sup> Ms. Teng had allegedly brought foreign journalists to a Chinese psychiatric hospital where Falun Gong adherents were being kept. See also H.Res. 160, which calls upon the PRC to release detained U.S. citizens and U.S. residents of Chinese ancestry. (Agreed to by a vote of 379 - 0 on June 25, 2001.)

<sup>12</sup> “Labor re-education” is a form of “administrative punishment” for non-criminal acts (such as “disrupting public order”) that lasts between one and three years and does not require a trial. Falun Gong activists claim that the actual figure of those under detention is much higher. Craig S. Smith, “Sect Clings to the Web in the Face of Beijing’s Ban,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2001, p. 1; Mary Beth Sheridan, “Falun Gong Protests on the Mall,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> See John Pomfret, “China’s Steadfast Sect,” *Washington Post*, August 23, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Two of the self-immolators died. Four were known to have protested on behalf of Falun Gong before. Falun Gong spokespersons asserted that Falun Dafa does not teach nor approve of suicide and that the PRC government staged these incidents in order to discredit the group.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Hutzler, “Falun Gong Feels Effect of China’s Tighter Grip,” *Asian Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2001.

**Chinese Public Opinion Toward Falun Gong.** On the one hand, the suppression of Falun Gong has reportedly deepened anti-government sentiment among not only followers but also many non-followers, including liberal intellectuals. Some Chinese have commented that the reaction of the Party leadership has been irrational and excessive, unconstitutional, and reminiscent of earlier, more repressive periods of Communist rule. On the other hand, many Chinese have remained indifferent or unsympathetic towards Falun Gong adherents. Some Chinese blame Li Hongzhi, arguing that he has exploited vulnerable people and caused their suffering by encouraging them to forgo medical treatment and continue to oppose the government.<sup>16</sup>

**Falun Gong's Organizational Structure.** Adherents of Falun Gong often characterize their objectives as personal and limited in scope, claiming that they have no political agenda beyond protecting their constitutional rights and receive little guidance from Master Li.<sup>17</sup> However, many practitioners in China and abroad have become increasingly critical of the Communist Party, particularly General Secretary Jiang Zemin. Furthermore, according to some analysts, the organization was well organized before the crackdown. A more fluid, underground network, aided by the Internet, pagers, and pay phones, has carried on since the ban.<sup>18</sup> Some reports suggest that Li Hongzhi has directed the movement from behind the scenes. Furthermore, his public statements have had profound moral influence upon many of his followers. Li's exhortations have recently become more exacting, urging followers not to "hide themselves" or retreat but rather to "step forward" – even to endure torture in prison – as a means toward higher levels of existence or "consummation."<sup>19</sup>

## Implications for Chinese Politics

The PRC government has referred to Falun Gong as "the most serious threat to stability in 50 years of communist history." Party leaders perhaps feared that the influence of Falun Gong could undermine cohesion within the regime by introducing an alternative moral belief system. Before the crackdown, many members of the party, government, armed forces, and public security apparatus became involved in the movement. Vice-President Hu Jintao stated that of 2.1 million known members of the Falun Gong group, one-third belonged to the Communist Party.<sup>20</sup>

Falun Gong has posed a massive control problem for the government. In comparison with many other groups that have challenged the state, Falun Gong adherents are relatively

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Falun Gong practitioner, August 3, 1999, Washington, D.C.; See also Mei Lu, "The Report of 'Falun Gong Survey'," *The Voices of Chinese* [<http://www.voicesofchinese.org>].

<sup>17</sup> Li was reportedly en route from Hong Kong to Australia when the April 1999 demonstrations broke out and denies that he instigated them.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Johnson, "Brother Li Love: In China, the Survival of Falun Dafa Rests on Beepers and Faith," *Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2000, p. A1.

<sup>19</sup> "Master Li Hongzhi's Lecture at the Great Lakes Conference in North America," December 9, 2000. See also John Pomfret, "A Foe Rattles Beijing from Abroad," *Washington Post*, March 9, 2001 and Ian Johnson, "As Crackdown Grows, Falun Gong's Faithful Face a New Pressure," *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Pomfret, John, "China Takes Measured Steps Against Sect," *Washington Post*, August 6, 1999.

numerous, widespread, unified, and devoted. Since practitioners cross social classes and geographic boundaries, Chinese leaders cannot easily control the movement by focusing upon a few individuals, groups, institutions, or regions. Because adherents pursue Falun Gong for non-material reasons, monetary sanctions and even physical coercion are often ineffectual. Moreover, several thousand followers who practice Falun Gong overseas have lobbied foreign governments to apply diplomatic pressure upon China.

China's leaders may have also feared that Falun Gong's principles and actions, which they regard as subversive, could serve as examples for other Chinese. For example, Falun Gong excludes the roles of the Communist Party and nationalism in satisfying people's spiritual needs and rejects the government's emphasis on wealth. Most of its members have not benefitted greatly, if at all, from the economic boom of the past decade. Falun Dafa's core, traditional Chinese values of compassion, forbearance, and truthfulness could be adopted by other social groups as a basis for criticizing government corruption and oppression. The movement's reference to constitutional rights could be copied by other PRC citizens suffering from political, ethnic, or religious persecution.

## U.S. Government Responses

China's crackdown on Falun Gong has affected U.S. interests regarding international religious freedom, human rights, trade relations, and the treatment of U.S. permanent residents and citizens. P.L. 105-292, the *Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1998*, created a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and authorizes the President to impose sanctions upon countries that violate religious freedom. On the basis of the Commission's findings, the Department of State has identified China as a "country of particular concern."<sup>21</sup> P.L. 106-286 (H.R. 4444) extends permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) status to the PRC but criticizes China's denial of religious, spiritual, and other freedoms, including the government's persecution of Falun Gong adherents, and establishes a special commission to monitor human rights in China.

Members of the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress have introduced two concurrent resolutions that include references to Falun Gong: H.Con.Res. 121, supporting a policy review of U.S.-China relations, and H.Con.Res. 68, condemning China for its poor human rights record. On July 18, 2001, the House of Representatives introduced H.Con.Res. 188, which calls upon the PRC to cease its persecution of Falun Gong practitioners.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom: China."

<sup>22</sup> A similar bill, H.Con.Res. 218 (106<sup>th</sup> Congress), passed the House of Representatives on November 18, 1999, but was not taken up in the Senate.