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China and “Falun Gong”

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Summary

The “Falun Gong” movement led to the largest and most protracted public demonstrations in China since the democracy movement of 1989. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) government, fearful of a political challenge and the spread of social unrest, outlawed Falun Gong in July 1999. Despite a massive government campaign against them and harsh punishments meted out to many followers, Falun Gong members continued to stage demonstrations for over two years. In 2002 and 2003, Falun Gong adherents reportedly interrupted television programming in several PRC cities and broadcast their own images. On October 16, 2003, H.Con.Res. 304 was introduced, calling upon the PRC government to cease human rights violations against Falun Gong practitioners in China and stop its harassment of Falun Gong members in the United States.

Background and Major Events

What Is “Falun Gong”? “Falun Gong,” also known as “Falun Dafa,”¹ combines an exercise regimen with meditation and moral guidelines. The practice and beliefs are derived from *qigong*, a set of movements that stimulate the flow of *qi* — vital energies or “life forces” — throughout the body, and Buddhist and Daoist concepts. Falun Gong upholds three main virtues — truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance (*zhen-shan-ren*) — and warns against materialism and “moral degeneration.”² Practitioners claim that by controlling the “wheel of dharma,” which revolves in the body, one can cure a wide range of medical ailments and diseases. They believe that by practicing Falun Gong, they may achieve physical well-being, emotional tranquility, moral virtue, and an understanding of the cosmos.³

¹ The literal meanings of “Falun Gong” and “Falun Dafa,” respectively, are “law wheel exercise” and “great way of the wheel of dharma.”

² According to Falun Dafa, examples of moral degeneration include rock music, drug addiction, and homosexuality.

³ See [<http://www.falundafa.org>] and [<http://www.faluninfo.net>] See also Li Hongzhi, *Falun* (continued...)

Some observers argue that Falun Gong resembles a cult and refer to the unquestioning support of its founder, Master Li Hongzhi, belief in supernatural powers, and apocalyptic visions. The PRC government charges that Falun Dafa has disrupted social order and contributed to the deaths of 1,900 persons by discouraging medical treatment and causing or exacerbating mental disorders leading to violent acts. Followers counter that the practice is voluntary and that levels of faith and involvement vary with the individual practitioner. 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.

Organization. Adherents of Falun Gong often characterize their objectives as personal and limited in scope, claiming that they have no political agenda beyond protecting the constitutional rights of practitioners and that they receive little direction from Master Li.⁴ According to some analysts, however, the movement was well organized before the crackdown in 1999. After the government banned Falun Gong, a more fluid, underground network, aided by the Internet, pagers, and pay phones, carried on for over two years.⁵

Membership. During the mid-1990s, Falun Gong acquired a large and diverse following, with estimates ranging from 3 to 70 million members, including several thousand practitioners in the United States.⁶ In China, Falun Gong attracted many retired persons as well as factory workers, farmers, state enterprise managers, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and students. The practice's healing powers became especially attractive as economic reforms caused many citizens to lose medical benefits and services. In addition, Falun Gong was embraced by many retired and active Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government cadres and military officials and personnel. Then Vice-President Hu Jintao stated that of 2.1 million known members of the Falun Gong group, one-third belonged to the CCP.⁷

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 ideas in a book, *Zhuan Falun*. Falun Gong was incorporated into an official organization, the Chinese Qigong Association, in 1993

³ (...continued)

Gong (Revised Edition) (Gloucester, MA: Fair Winds Press, 2001).

⁴ Li was reportedly en route from Hong Kong to Australia when the April 1999 demonstrations broke out and denies that he instigated them.

⁵ Ian Johnson, "Brother Li Love: In China, the Survival of Falun Dafa Rests on Beepers and Faith," *Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2000.

⁶ One estimate put the number of adherents in China 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.

⁷ The practice reportedly enjoyed a strong following among soldiers and officers in some northeastern cities while the PRC Navy published copies of *Zhuan Falun*. According to one source, there were 4,000-5,000 Falun Gong "sympathizers" in the PLA air force. See David Murphy, "Losing Battle," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 15, 2001. See also John Pomfret, "China Takes Measured Steps Against Sect," *Washington Post*, August 6, 1999.

but separated from it by 1996.⁸ Around this time, Li reportedly left China. Since 1999, Li, who lives with his family outside New York City, has remained in seclusion. He has reportedly made occasional, unannounced appearances at Falun Gong gatherings, such as the ones in Anaheim, California, in February 2003 and Washington, D.C., in July 2003. On January 20, 2004, Master Li was interviewed on a local Chinese television station in New York City. Some reports suggest that Li Hongzhi has directed his followers from behind the scenes and that his public statements are interpreted by Falun Gong practitioners as instructions.

The 1999 Demonstrations and PRC Government Responses. On April 25, 1999, an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 Falun Gong practitioners from around China gathered in Beijing to protest the PRC government's growing restrictions on their activities. Some adherents presented an open letter to the Party leadership at its residential compound, *Zhongnanhai*, demanding official recognition and their constitutional rights to free speech, press, and assembly. Between May and June 1999, Party leaders were reportedly split on whether to ban Falun Gong and conveyed contradictory messages.⁹ Premier Zhu Rongji met with a delegation of practitioners and told them that they would not be punished. By contrast, President Jiang Zemin was said to be shocked by the affront to Party authority and 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 government produced circulars forbidding Party members from practicing Falun Gong. 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 the city of Nanchang and demonstrating in front of China Central Television Station in Beijing.

The official crackdown began on July 21, 1999, when Falun Gong was outlawed and an arrest warrant was issued for Li Hongzhi.¹⁰ In Beijing alone, public security officers closed 67 teaching stations and 1,627 practice sites.¹¹ 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 the vast majority of them after they promised to quit or identified group organizers.

⁸ Reports differ on which group, Falun Gong or the Qigong Association, initiated the split.

⁹ 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, 2001.

¹⁰ However, 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.

¹¹ 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).

PRC prosecutors 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. Between 150 and 450 group leaders and other members have been tried and sentenced to prison terms of up to 18-20 years. Estimates of those who have spent time in detention or “labor reeducation” range from 10,000 to 100,000 persons.¹² Human rights organizations claim that several hundred adherents have died in custody, mostly from torture. The PRC government states that it does not condone torture and that some Falun Gong adherents have died in custody from suicide or refusing food or medical care. Many other followers have been suspended or expelled from school or demoted or dismissed from their jobs.

It took the PRC government over two years to subdue the Falun Gong organization, although many followers are believed to be still practicing in their homes or meeting secretly. The U.S. State Department reported that 1 million adherents continued to practice in 2003.¹³ Between July 1999 and October 2000, Falun Gong adherents continued to journey to Beijing and staged several large demonstrations (several hundred to over a thousand persons) — many protesters were sent home repeatedly or evaded the police. At first, the enforcement of government decrees, such as those requiring universities, employers, and neighborhood committees to extract signed repudiations of Falun Gong, was often lax. Many local public security bureaus lacked the capacity or will to detain, let alone reform, adherents.¹⁴ However, the central government soon began to penalize provincial governments for not preventing Falun Gong followers from traveling to the capital. The provincial governments in turn shifted the responsibility of containing the movement to local authorities, some of whom employed brutal methods of suppression, especially toward those who refused to renounce Falun Gong. The largest memberships and severest human rights abuses have been reported in China’s northeastern provinces, which are also experiencing high levels of unemployment.¹⁵

¹² “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. See also Craig S. Smith, “Sect Clings to the Web in the Face of Beijing’s Ban,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2001 and Mary Beth Sheridan, “Falun Gong Protests on the Mall,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2001.

¹³ Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2003 — China* (December 2003).

¹⁴ See John Pomfret, “China’s Steadfast Sect,” *Washington Post*, August 23, 2000.

¹⁵ Ian Johnson, “Death Trap: How One Chinese City Resorted to Atrocities to Control Falun Dafa,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 26, 2000; Charles Hutzler, “Falun Gong Feels Effect of China’s Tighter Grip,” *Asian Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2001; John Pomfret and Philip Pan, “Torture is Breaking Falun Gong,” *Washington Post*, August 5, 2001; “China’s Heilongjiang Records Highest Falun Gong Death Toll,” *BBC*, December 6, 2003.

Other Developments

PRC Television Broadcasts. In 2002, Falun Gong members interrupted television programming in several large Chinese cities and broadcast their own images, possibly with the aid of sources outside China in some cases.¹⁶ In September and December of 2002, Chinese courts sentenced 27 practitioners to prison terms of 4 to 20 years for carrying out broadcast disruptions. In August and October 2003, Falun Gong backers reportedly disrupted Sino-Satellite television signals, including China Central Television's report on the launch of the first Chinese manned space flight.

Falun Gong in Hong Kong. On July 1, 2003, an estimated 500,000 people demonstrated in the Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region (SAR) against the Hong Kong government's proposed "anti-subversion" law (as required by Article 23 of the Basic Law or SAR constitution). After the massive protest and others that followed, the Hong Kong government postponed indefinitely submitting the bill to the Legislative Council. Although practicing Falun Gong, forming independent labor unions, openly engaging in political debate, and other freedoms are permitted in Hong Kong (but denied on the mainland) and protected by the Basic Law, many Hong Kong residents feared that such a law against subversion could be used by Beijing to stifle civil liberties in Hong Kong as well as curtail human rights activities in China that are based in Hong Kong.

Falun Gong in the United States. On behalf of plaintiffs in China, Falun Gong adherents in the United States have filed several class action lawsuits in federal courts against PRC leaders and agencies for violations of the Torture Victim Protection and Alien Tort Claims acts and other "crimes against humanity."¹⁷ In September 2003, a U.S. District Court judge in Chicago dismissed a lawsuit filed against former PRC President Jiang Zemin, on the basis of lack of jurisdiction and Jiang's sovereign immunity. Falun Gong plaintiffs have also filed several lawsuits in federal courts claiming that the PRC Embassy and consulates have been responsible for dozens of isolated incidents of physical and verbal harassment, eavesdropping, and destruction of property of Falun Gong adherents and supporters in the United States.

Charles Li. On May 19, 2003, U.S. citizen Charles Li was sentenced to 3 years in prison for "intending to sabotage" Chinese television broadcasts. He had been detained by PRC authorities since January 2003. On March 19, 2003, the PRC government announced the release of Ms. Teng Chunyan, a U.S. resident and Falun Gong supporter, who was jailed in 2000 on charges of espionage.¹⁸ On January 13, 2004, Ms. Zhou Xuefei, wife of Atlanta resident Lu Zhaohui (both are Falun Gong adherents), was released after three years in a labor reeducation camp.

¹⁶ The satellite interference may have originated overseas. The Taiwanese government has denied any involvement.

¹⁷ Under U.S. law, foreigners accused of crimes against humanity or violations of international law can be sued in federal court by U.S. citizens or aliens in the United States. The accused individual must be served a civil complaint in the United States.

¹⁸ Ms. Teng had allegedly brought foreign journalists to a Chinese psychiatric hospital where Falun Gong adherents were being kept.

Implications for Chinese Politics

The Chinese government reportedly referred to Falun Gong as “the most serious threat to stability in 50 years of [Chinese] communist history.” The practice’s popularity in China’s northeast and other economically depressed areas was especially worrisome to the Party because of the fear that “religious fever” combined with economic unrest could spark widespread political protests. However, there has been little indication that the state’s persecution of Falun Gong has become a rallying cry for other disaffected social groups. On the one hand, the crackdown and suppression of Falun Gong deepened anti-government sentiment among not only adherents but also non-adherents, including many intellectuals. On the other hand, many Chinese have remained indifferent or even critical toward the movement and its leader, Li Hongzhi, arguing that they exploited vulnerable people and caused their suffering by exaggerating the healing powers Falun Gong or by encouraging followers to resist the government as a means toward “higher levels of existence.”¹⁹ The January-February 2001 self-immolations of six persons widely believed to Falun Gong members and exploited by the official media further alienated many PRC citizens.

U.S. Government Actions

On July 24, 2002, the House of Representatives of the 107th Congress unanimously passed H.Con.Res. 188, which called upon the PRC to cease persecution of Falun Gong practitioners. On March 12, 2003, 83 Members of Congress signed a letter sponsored by Representative Anna Eshoo, which called upon the PRC government to “do everything possible to ensure Charles Li’s safety and effect his immediate release.” According to the State Department, U.S. consular officials have visited or spoken to Mr. Li almost weekly since his arrest and have monitored his condition and treatment. On October 16, 2003, H.Con.Res. 304 was introduced, calling upon the PRC government to cease human rights violations against Falun Gong practitioners in China and stop its harassment of Falun Gong members in the United States.

For five consecutive years (1999-2003), the U.S. Department of State has designated China a “country of particular concern” for “particularly severe violations of religious freedom,” including its persecution of Falun Gong. An ongoing ban on the export of crime control and detection instruments and equipment to China satisfies the requirements of P.L. 105-292, the *Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1998*, which authorizes the President to impose sanctions upon countries that violate religious freedom.

¹⁹ Li has reportedly lowered his emphasis on “forbearance.” See “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.