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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 the movement in July 1999. Despite a massive government campaign against them and harsh punishments meted out to many followers, Falun Gong adherents continued to stage demonstrations for over two years. In 2002, Falun Gong practitioners interrupted television programming in several cities and broadcast their own videos. On July 24, 2002, the House of Representatives unanimously agreed to H.Con.Res.188, which calls upon the PRC government to cease persecution of Falun Gong practitioners. Issues for Congress include human rights conditions in China, detained U.S. residents and U.S. citizens in China, and alleged harassment of Falun Gong practitioners 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 tenets. 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

¹ 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).

² Examples of moral degeneration include rock music, drugs, and sexual lust.

achieve physical well-being, emotional tranquility, moral virtue, and an understanding of the cosmos.³

Some observers argue that Falun Gong resembles a cult and refer to the unquestioning support of its founder, Li Hongzhi, unscientific foundations, and apocalyptic visions. The PRC government charges that Falun Dafa has contributed to the deaths of nearly 2,000 persons by discouraging medical treatment and causing or exacerbating mental disorders. Followers counter that the practice is voluntary and compatible with mainstream science and culture, and helps produce 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.

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 guidance from Master Li.⁴ However, according to some analysts, the movement was well organized before the crackdown. 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 of varying levels of involvement, with estimates ranging from 3 to 70 million persons, including several thousand practitioners in the United States.⁶ In China, Falun Gong 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 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 See [<http://www.falundafa.org>] and [<http://www.faluninfo.net>] See also Li Hongzhi, *Falun 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 was separated from it by 1996.⁸ Li reportedly left China around the time of the split. Since 1999, Li, who lives with his family outside New York City, has made few public appearances. Some reports suggest that Li Hongzhi has directed the movement from behind the scenes and that his public statements have profound moral influence upon his followers.

The Demonstrations and PRC Government Responses. On April 25, 1999, an estimated 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. Concerned 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. Though peaceful, the demonstration was considered by some to be an unprecedented affront to the Communist Party.

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 apparent challenge 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. State television and newspapers portrayed the following as a dangerous religious cult. 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 crackdown began on July 21, 1999, when Falun Gong was officially 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

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).

organizers. The state also attempted to block Falun Gong Internet sites and close the e-mail accounts of Falun Gong practitioners.

PRC 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. 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 over 500 adherents have died in custody, mostly from torture. 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 and quell large public demonstrations, although many followers are believed to be still practicing in their homes or meeting secretly. Between July 1999 and October 2000, Falun Gong adherents continued to travel to Beijing and staged several large demonstrations (several hundred to over a thousand persons) – many 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.¹³ However, the central government soon began to penalize provincial governments for not preventing Falun Gong demonstrators from their jurisdictions from making public appeals in Beijing. The provincial governments in turn shifted the responsibility of containing the movement to local authorities, often leading to brutal methods of suppression.¹⁴ Those who have refused to renounce Falun Gong have received the harshest treatment.

Other Developments

Since January 2002, Falun Gong members have interrupted television programming in several large Chinese cities, mostly in the northeast, as well as in remote areas. These efforts include momentarily replacing regular cable broadcasts with their own Falun Gong programs in Chongqing in January and June 2002, in Changchun in March and June 2002, in Anshan and Harbin in June 2002, and in Baoding in August 2002. In addition, in June and September 2002, satellite signals beaming World Cup finals and other regular programs were jammed and replaced by Falun Gong images, possibly with the aid of

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

¹⁴ 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.

sources outside China.¹⁵ In September and December of 2002, Chinese courts sentenced 27 practitioners to prison terms of 4 to 20 years for carrying out broadcast disruptions.

On behalf of plaintiffs in China, Falun Gong adherents in the United States have filed numerous civil complaints in U.S. federal courts against PRC leaders for violations of the Torture Victim Protection Act, the Alien Tort Claims Act, and other “crimes against humanity.”¹⁶ They have also filed several lawsuits in U.S. District 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.¹⁷ In November 2002, the Circuit Court of Cook County charged a PRC immigrant with battery for physically assaulting a Falun Gong hunger striker in front of the Chinese Consulate in Chicago in September 2001. In this and other cases, Falun Gong adherents have claimed numerous links between the incidents of harassment and PRC offices or affiliated organizations in the United States.

Implications for Chinese Politics

Social Stability. The Chinese government has reportedly referred to Falun Gong as “the most serious threat to stability in 50 years of [Chinese] communist history.” The movement’s size, organizational effectiveness, high level of commitment, moral uprightness, and attraction to segments of the PRC government and military have posed uniquely difficult political challenges to the CCP, both real and imagined. Although the following had grown increasingly diverse by the late 1990s, the most fervent adherents of Falun Gong have been found in regions of the country, such as the northeast, where adaptation to central government economic policies has been the most difficult.¹⁸ In these areas in particular, Falun Gong has tapped into and exacerbated existing social and political tensions.

Public Opinion. For the vast majority of non-practitioners, however, Falun Gong has not aroused a significant degree of political passion. On the one hand, the crackdown and suppression of Falun Gong has 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 Falun Gong. Some Chinese have blamed Li Hongzhi, arguing that he exploited vulnerable people and caused their suffering by suggesting that medical treatment was unnecessary or by encouraging them to resist the government as a means toward “higher levels of existence” or

¹⁵ The satellite interference may have originated overseas. The Taiwanese government has denied any involvement.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ PRC consular officials deny these accusations and claim that they are entitled to diplomatic immunity.

¹⁸ Nearly two-thirds of Falun Gong adherents reported to have died in prison came from China’s “rust belt” – the northeastern provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, Hebei, and Shandong.

“consummation.”¹⁹ The January-February 2001 self-immolations of six persons widely believed to Falun Gong members further alienated many PRC citizens. In 2002, some local residents reportedly expressed being offended by the sight of foreign Falun Gong adherents demonstrating in Beijing against the PRC government.²⁰

U.S. Government Responses

China’s crackdown on Falun Gong has presented the United States government with several policy challenges. One, the repression of Falun Gong has violated international human rights standards which the United States promotes. Two, practitioners from the United States and their family members who practice Falun Gong have been detained in China. In December 2000, Teng Chunyan, a Falun Gong adherent and U.S. resident, was tried in a Beijing court and sentenced to three years in prison on charges of espionage.²¹ In January 2003, PRC authorities detained Charles Li, a Falun Gong adherent and U.S. citizen from Menlo Park, California. He was held for allegedly sabotaging television broadcast systems in Yangzhou, China. Three, China’s crackdown has allegedly expanded to include incidents abroad. Some U.S. practitioners charge that they have been harassed by anti-Falun Gong agents backed by PRC missions in the United States. Furthermore, PRC consular officials sent letters to 300 U.S. mayors exhorting them not to give public recognition to Falun Gong.²²

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, and referred it to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. In January 2003, ten Members of Congress wrote a letter to Secretary of State Colin Powell asking the U.S. State Department to appeal to the PRC government for the release of 37 detained Falun Gong practitioners in China who have family members in the United States. The U.S. Department of State has designated China as a “country of particular concern” for “particularly severe violations of religious freedom,” including its persecution of Falun Gong, for three consecutive years (1999-2001) and is expected to re-designate China for 2002.²³ A 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 “forebearance.” 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.

²⁰ Erik Eckholm, “China Expels 53 Foreign Falun Gong Followers,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2002.

²¹ Ms. Teng had allegedly brought foreign journalists to a Chinese psychiatric hospital where Falun Gong adherents were being kept. See also H.Res. 160 (passed on June 25, 2001), which calls upon the PRC to release detained U.S. citizens and U.S. residents of Chinese ancestry.

²² Steve Park, “Officials Ask U.S. Cities to Snub Sect,” *Washington Times*, April 8, 2002.

²³ See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “International Religious Freedom Report 2002 – China.”