

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

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. 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. However, Falun Gong adherents continued to stage demonstrations for over two years and many have remained defiant while in prison. 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,”¹ 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. Practitioners claim that they experience physical well-being, emotional tranquility, and a higher understanding of life’s purpose and one’s place in society. They state 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.²

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 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 1,900 persons by discouraging medical treatment and causing or exacerbating 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 ideas in a book, *Zhuan Falun*. In 1993, Falun Gong 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.³ 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.⁴ 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 four times since May 1999 and has not granted an interview since the crackdown in China began.

The Demonstrations and PRC Government Responses. 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.⁵

³ 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.

⁴ 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 4,000-5,000 Falun Gong “sympathizers” in the PLA air force. See David Murphy, “Losing Battle,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 15, 2001.

⁵ Chan, Vivien Pik-Kwan, “Sect Ban Rumour Not True — Beijing,” *South China Morning Post*, (continued...)

Premier Zhu Rongji met with a delegation of practitioners to consider its request for official approval, 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. 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.⁶

The crackdown began on July 21, 1999, when Falun Gong was officially outlawed and an arrest warrant was issued for Li Hongzhi.⁷ In Beijing alone, public security officers closed 67 teaching stations and 1,627 practice sites.⁸ 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. The state also attempted to block Falun Gong Internet sites and close the e-mail accounts of 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. An estimated 150 to 450 group leaders and other members have been tried and sentenced to prison terms of up to 18 years.⁹ In December 2000, Teng Chunyan, a Falun Gong practitioner and U.S. resident, was tried in a Beijing court and sentenced to 3 years in prison on charges of espionage.¹⁰ An estimated 10,000 unrepentant

⁵ (...continued)

June 15, 1999; John Pomfret, “Jiang Caught in Middle on Standoff,” *Washington Post*, April 8, 2001.

⁶ Xiao Jiang, “List of Major Demonstrations,” *China Daily* (August 6, 1999): p. 2.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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).

⁹ 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 approval from the Office of Legal Administration.

¹⁰ 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
(continued...)

followers have endured long periods of detention or “labor re-education.”¹¹ Human rights organizations claim that 400 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, 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 to stage several large demonstrations (several hundred to over a thousand persons) – many were sent home repeatedly or evaded the police. 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.¹²

In January and February 2001, as large demonstrations abated, six persons widely believed to be Falun Gong practitioners immolated themselves at Tiananmen Square. Subsequently, the central government began to intensify its crackdown, pressuring local officials, universities, state-owned enterprises, and neighborhood organizations to carefully monitor all Falun Gong activities, even those done privately. Sporadic, small demonstrations continued through July 2001, but they involved only a few dozen to several protesters each. According to some sources, in August 2001, the central government sanctioned violence by local authorities against demonstrators and detainees and directed a policy of “using all means” to suppress the movement completely.¹³ Meanwhile, the CCP exploited the self-immolations in an extensive propaganda campaign to discredit Falun Gong.

Falun Gong Organization

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.¹⁴ 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

¹⁰ (...continued)

calls upon the PRC to release detained U.S. citizens and U.S. residents of Chinese ancestry.

¹¹ “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.

¹² See John Pomfret, “China’s Steadfast Sect,” *Washington Post*, August 23, 2000.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Li was reportedly en route from Hong Kong to Australia when the April 1999 demonstrations broke out and denies that he instigated them.

Internet, pagers, and pay phones, carried on for over two years.¹⁵ Some reports suggest that Li Hongzhi has directed the movement from behind the scenes. At the least, his public statements have had profound moral influence upon many of his followers. As the crackdown entered its third year, some of Li's exhortations became 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."¹⁶

New Tactics

As much of the movement's core following was silenced or physically and mentally broken in Chinese jails by the summer of 2001, Falun Gong adherents abroad began to bolster their already intensive lobbying and public relations efforts with legal action. On behalf of plaintiffs in China, they have filed numerous civil complaints in U.S. federal courts against PRC officials for violation of the Torture Victim Protection Act, the Alien Tort Claims Act, and other "crimes against humanity."¹⁷ Falun Gong followers in the United States have also filed several lawsuits claiming that PRC embassies and consulates have been responsible for harassment, eavesdropping, and destruction of their property.¹⁸ Since November 2001, over 100 non-Chinese (Americans, Canadians, Europeans, Australians, and Asians) have gone to Beijing to demonstrate in support of Falun Gong by unfurling banners and chanting slogans at Tiananmen Square. They have reported being immediately attacked by police, detained, and then expelled from the country.

Between March 5 and March 12, 2002, Falun Gong adherents in Changchun, Jilin Province, tapped into local cable television signals and broadcasted three programs defending their movement.¹⁹ According to some reports, the government responded by conducting door-to-door searches in the area and arresting 18 people.²⁰

Implications for Chinese Politics

Social Stability. The PRC government has reportedly referred to Falun Gong as "the most serious threat to stability in 50 years of communist history." The movement involved a large, diverse, well-linked organization of loyal followers that threatened the

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ "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.

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 The PRC government denies these accusations. See Neely Tucker, "Falun Gong Followers in the U.S. Sue China," *Washington Post*, April 4, 2002.

¹⁹ Vivien Pik-Kwan Chan, "No More Sabotage, Broadcast Chiefs Told," *South China Morning Post*, March 11, 2002.

²⁰ Falun Dafa Information Center.

CCP's social control. Furthermore, many members of the Party, government, armed forces, and public security apparatus became ardent practitioners. Vice-President Hu Jintao stated that of 2.1 million known members of the Falun Gong group, one-third belonged to the Chinese Communist Party.²¹ However, even if the organization were destroyed, the socio-economic ills that gave rise to the movement – lack of spiritual or philosophical engagement, rising cost of medical care, economic dislocation – remain. Many followers, such as pensioners and industrial workers at state-owned enterprises, have benefitted relatively little from the economic reforms of the 1990s. The areas with the largest and most fervent followings, as indicated by the reported numbers of those who have died in local prisons, have also witnessed massive and frequent labor protests.²² Thus, by stifling Falun Gong, the PRC government may have denied many disaffected citizens a relatively peaceful form of self-expression.

Public Opinion. On the one hand, the crackdown and suppression of Falun Gong deepened anti-government sentiment among not only followers but also non-followers, including many intellectuals. On the other hand, many other Chinese remained indifferent or critical toward Falun Gong adherents. Some Chinese blamed Li Hongzhi, arguing that he exploited vulnerable people and caused their suffering by encouraging them to forgo medical treatment or to continue to oppose the government. The January-February 2001 self-immolations further alienated many Chinese. In 2002, some Beijing residents reportedly expressed being offended by the sight of foreigners protesting against their government on Chinese soil.²³

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" for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.²⁴ P.L. 106-286 (H.R. 4444) extended permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) status to the PRC but criticized China's denial of religious, spiritual, and other freedoms, including the persecution of Falun Gong adherents, and established the U.S.-China Commission to monitor human rights in China. Members of the 107th Congress have introduced H.Con.Res. 68, condemning China for its poor human rights record, and H.Con.Res. 188, calling upon the PRC to cease its persecution of Falun Gong practitioners.

²¹ Pomfret, John, "China Takes Measured Steps Against Sect," *Washington Post*, August 6, 1999.

²² Nearly two-thirds or 64% 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.

²³ Erik Eckholm, "China Expels 53 Foreign Falun Gong Followers," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2002.

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Report on International Religious Freedom, 2001 – China."