

*Statement for the Roundtable on  
Spiritual Movements in China  
The Congressional Executive Committee on China  
June 18, 2010*

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Thanks you for inviting me to participate in this roundtable. My remarks will focus on three issues. The first is how the Chinese government views the level of political and security threat the Falun Gong presents in recent years. The second is what type of Falun Gong practitioners and their activities the Chinese government considered illegal and unacceptable, and ground for legal sanction. The third are the implications for the Chinese government positions on religious freedom at large.

*I. The Diminished Security Threat of the Falun Gong in China*

Last July was the tenth anniversary of the banning of the Falun Gong in China. In the past decade, the Chinese state has been effective in suppressing the public forms of the organized activities of the Falun Gong. Before the imposition of the ban on July 22, 1999, there were between 2.3 to 80 million practitioners of the Falun Gong. They were organized into 39 main stations, 1,900 guidance stations, and 28,000 practice sites. Every

morning, these assemblies of Falun Gong practitioners conducted breathing exercises in city parks and town squares. They also gathered in special convocations in sports arenas and auditoriums on special anniversaries. There were also training sessions lasting 3-4 days where practitioners learnt more advanced breathing exercise, meditation techniques and Falun Gong doctrine. Since July 22, 1999, these three forms of organized activities (morning assemblies, large convocations, training seminars) can no longer be seen in public. All known Falun Gong organizations (main stations, guidance stations, practice sites) are duly registered and the assemblies disbanded. Their leaders were arrested, went into hiding or self-exile. The rank and file practitioners were registered, and required to write severance papers where they declared their official withdrawal from the Falun Gong. Its publications met a similar fate. Before the official ban, the Falun Gong published 11 titles. Total distribution of these publications by the Beijing head office (Falun Dafa Research Society) was over 11 million copies. As part of the ban, all copies of these Falun Gong publications were seized, their existing stock confiscated. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the ban (July 29<sup>th</sup>), mass rallies were held in 17 major cities where these publications were set ablaze or turned into paper pulp. In sum, these organized activities of the Falun Gong, as well as their publications enterprise, did not outlive the official ban on the Falun Gong imposed on July 22, 1999.

. There are still periodic reports in official media on arrests of Falungong practitioners for staging protests in provincial and national capitals, sabotaging media broadcasts, displaying Falungong banners in public places, but these acts of overt defiance have become rare in recent years. These can be seen in three developments. The first is the

annual report of the Chief Procurator (the equivalent of the Attorney-General), which enumerates the major law-enforcement problems in China in the given year. From 1999-2003, the Falun Gong was listed as a major law-enforcement problem nation-wide. But from 2004 on, it was dropped from the list. Below the national level, each of the 31 provinces also issues its annual procuracy report, and these largely mirror the national trend. From 1999 to 2001, a great majority of the 31 provinces (29 in 1999, 28 in 2000, 21 in 2001) list the Falun Gong as a major law-enforcement problem in their province. But from 2004 to 2008, there was a monotonic decline from 7 in 2004 to 2 in 2008.

The second related development is the absence of follow-up campaigns to consolidate the gains of the crackdown and to mop up Falun Gong remnants and resurgent elements. After the initial nationwide blitzkrieg in late July, 1999, a four-month nation-wide Strike at the Falun Gong campaign was launched in summer, 2001, to ferret out fugitive Falun Gong leaders, underground Falun Gong hide-outs, inventories of Falun Gong publications they had missed in the first security-round-up. For some Falun Gong strongholds, local law-enforcement agencies conducted single-day campaigns every quarter, or on Falun Gong special occasions. Other localities organized sustained 100-day campaigns to systematically check all printing shops, photocopying vendors, internet cafes and rental properties for suspicious Falun Gong activities. From 2003-2008, no such follow-up campaign aimed at crushing the Falun Gong has been reported.

The third related development was the re-reorganization of the special law-enforcement agency that deals with the Falun Gong. To prepare for the crackdown, a

special agency called the “June 10” Office was established at both the central, provincial, and municipal levels, and even within universities and large state-owned enterprises, with the exclusive mission to organize, manage and coordinate the business of arresting, registering, detaining, interrogating Falun Gong practitioners, and dissolving Falun Gong organizations. As the name suggests, most were established on June 10, or 40 days before the crackdown on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1999. Their full office titles were “the Office dealing with the Falun Gong” or the “Office dealing with the problem of Cults”. After April, 2002, close to three years after the crackdown, most of these offices were renamed “Offices to maintain social stability”. Their mission was broadened to encompass other serious sources of social stability in the locality, including the protests of laid-off workers, those who have lost their pensions, peasants evicted from their land by real-estate developers, tenants with disputes against landlords in housing projects. In combination, such absence of follow-up campaigns, the lack of reference to the Falun Gong as a local serious security problem in national and provincial procuracy reports, the reorganization of the June Offices to deal with other local security issues, suggest that the Falun Gong has ceased to be a serious political threat and security problem for the regime since 2003 or 2004 to 2008, both at the national and provincial levels.

## ***II. Differentiation of Offences by and Sanctions of Falun Gong Practitioners***

Next, I want to address the question of what type of Falun Gong practitioners and what type of offences warranted regime sanction. Let me begin with the simple fact that there was wide-ranging estimates of the number of Falun Gong practitioners in July 1999

before the official crackdown. The estimate varies because there is no clear definition of what is a Falun Gong practitioner. Unlike Christians, there is no rite of formal induction into the religious community. Falun Gong organizations also did not keep a roster of its practitioners. Even at the conservative low-end estimate of 2.3 million, mass detention and incarceration of Falun Gong practitioners was out of the question. 2.3 million is 4 times the total population of Washington DC. Even for an authoritarian state, the Chinese judicial system lacked the capacity to process 2.3 million cases. There were not enough judges and prosecutors to prosecute, indict, convict and sentence 2.3 million cases, public security agents to enforce coercive detention, and the prison and labor reform systems to house them. In 1998, the year before the crackdown, the total number of criminal cases prosecuted in Chinese courts was 400,000, and total number of defendants was under 600,000. These include all cases – homicide, assault, robbery, fraud. At that rate, it would take the Chinese courts at least 4 years to process the 2.3 million cases. If we use the smaller number of only cases pertaining to endangering state security, endangering social order, obstructing social order (the usual alleged crimes that Falun Gong practitioners were charged), the Chinese court system in 1998 processed under 74,000 cases of such offences. At that rate, it would take them 31 years to clear the 2.3 million cases. Clearly, lacking the capacity to process all these cases, they need to differentiate among Falun Gong practitioners.

On the same official notice announcing the ban issued on July 22, 1999, Falun Gong practitioners were divided into four types. For the great majority, rank and file members, there would be no disciplinary action taken, provided they would sign a

document renouncing the Falun Gong and withdrawing from the congregation, after which their names would be entered into a registry. Disciplinary action refers to dismissal or demotion from positions held in government agencies or enterprises, denial or reduction of staff benefits, expulsion from the Chinese Communist Party, and prosecution in case of alleged criminal offences. The triage applies to three types of core leaders. The first group were those who had participated in illegal activities – participating in protest rallies and distributing Falun Gong publications on the official black list. If they would also renounce and withdraw from the Falun Gong, and provide an account of these activities, then no disciplinary action would be taken. The second type of core leaders were those who had committed serious errors, not only participating in, but facilitating protest rallies, not only distributing, but printing Falun Gong publications. If they would also renounce, withdraw from the Falun Gong, account for their activities, and in addition, provide a conscientious confession and self-examination, and accrue merit (persuading other practitioners to confess, informing authorities where the hide-outs were, finger-pointing other core leaders), then no disciplinary action would be taken. The third type is where the sanctions and disciplinary actions would be imposed. These were the core leaders who planned and organized “political turmoil”, viz, protest rallies in front of party and government headquarters and other public places without permission, and who remained unrepentant (refusing to renounce or withdraw from the Falun Gong, not providing information about the Falun Gong activities and leaders), then they would be dismissed from the Party, or government post, sent to labor reform institutions, or prosecuted in trial if criminal laws were violated.

### ***III. Implications for Religious Freedom in China***

The foregoing analysis suggests several implications for the larger issue of religious freedom in China. The first is religion is still a managed religion in China. The state claims the right to manage religion. It claims the authority to define what is religion and what is a cult, what is official religion and what is not official religion, what is normal religious activities and what are not. There are religious affairs bureau at the national, provincial, municipal, and at county levels in China. The state requires the mandatory registration of all religious organizations and religious venues, and approval of the publishing and distribution of the Christian Bible.

Second, the capacity of the party-state to manage religion has been eroded by market economy. On the supply side, the market economy has created political space where heterodox spiritual movements can survive outside the control of the party-state. In the Maoist planned economy, where virtually the entire working population were employed in government owned enterprises, lived in public housing, relied on government issued ration-coupons to get their daily necessities, religious believers who defied state rule could find no job, no housing, no food, no clothing. With the establishment of private and foreign owned enterprises, the end of rationing and the creation of the housing market, religious believers do not have to choose between practicing their faith and their maintaining their livelihood.

On the demand side, 30 years of the market economy has fostered other social issues that pose threats to the social order and that compete for administrative attention and action. The annual procuracy report lists a rising crime wave, manifested in organized crime, murder, robbery, kidnapping, drug trafficking as serious law-enforcement problems. Aside from rising crime, the regime has to contend with another source of social instability. Market reform has created sources of social conflict that did not exist in the Maoist era – unemployed workers, those who lost their pensions because their companies went bankrupt, discharged soldiers who could not live on their meager severance pay, peasants evicted from their farms because the township secretary colluded with real-estate developer. In 1994, there were 10,000 of these collective protests with 50 or more participants. The number was increased to 74,000 in 2004, or more than 200 incidents per day. In May, 2004 alone, there were 2,180 collective protests each with 500 or more participants. With demonstrators in the street or outside their offices, these are much more urgent problems that the regime had to take care of. In comparison to organized and violent crime, or collective protests, religious congregations are much more tame, and it is not in the interest of the regime to drive them to the street to join other demonstrators.

Third, a more benign religious policy is also the collateral beneficiary of market reforms. Before China launched its market reforms, there was convergence between its religious policy with the larger political, economic and social policies. China was a Communist state, subscribing to Communist ideology. Its 1973 Party Constitution states that the CCP is committed to the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by the



dictatorship of the proletariat. Its economic system was a centrally-planned, socialist economy, with no private ownership of means of production. There was no labor market and no capital market. In its social system, there was no civil society, no independent NGO's. Internationally, there was no foreign direct investments, nor foreign economic presence in China, and were few other links with the global community. There was a thus a close fit of its religious policy with other policies of a Leninist state – where the state had virtual total control over the economy and society, including religion. But with 30 years of market reform, there is increasing divergence between its religious policy with its political, economic and social policies. Politically, China has ceased to be a Communist state. Major Communist anniversaries, like the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto, the 100<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Karl Marx, the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, were not commemorated with a *People's Daily* editorial in post-reform China. In Orwellian fashion, the current version of the Party Constitution was changed to remove references to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Its economy is arguably a market economy, almost fully integrated with the global economy, with thriving labor and capital markets. There are now 150 million investment account holders in the Shanghai and Shenzhen Stock exchange, while there are only 72 million CCP members. One can say that there are twice as many capitalists as communists in China today. Socially, there is an emerging civil society, with over 200,000 registered social organizations, many are independent NGO's, some with international connections. There are thriving gay and lesbian communities in major cities, where open gay marriages are celebrated in downtown Beijing. Thus there is a increasing divergence between its political, economic

and social policies with its religious policy, which is anachronistic, belonging the antiquated bygone Leninist era. Especially for a centralized, hierarchical system where first principles matter, China needs to reconcile its religious policy that is divergent with the more forward looking and progressive political, economic and social policies.

And in some important ways, it has. At least since the promulgation of the New Regulations on Religious Affairs of March 2005 if not earlier, the Chinese regime has granted increasing institutional autonomy to religious organizations and circumscribed the authority of the state to manage religion. Religious organizations are no longer required to accept the leadership of the CCP, to pledge support of socialism and patriotism, as some earlier religious regulations stipulated. The onerous requirement for mandatory, annual re-certification of religious venues was dropped. House fellowship Christians is allowed by a majority of provinces. The authority to certify religious personnel, to examine and admit candidates for religious schools, to determine the curriculum of seminaries, to appoint and dismiss prelates of religious venues, to set the number of religious personnel in religious venues and the number of religious venues in each locality, now rests with religious organizations and not with the local religious affairs bureaus. The economic interests of religious communities are protected. Religious personnel can collect fees for performing religious functions. Religious organizations can now receive donations from both individuals and corporations, and from both domestic and foreign individuals and institutions. They can also invest in income-generating property and collect rents. When religious property has to be relocated or demolished in eminent domain cases like highway constructions, they need

to be compensated by fair market value that is independently appraised. In addition, religious organizations are not only permitted, but encouraged to engage in philanthropy and social welfare programs. Both the Protestant and Catholic churches now operate nursing homes, hundreds of clinics, plus mobile dental and ophthalmology units. The Catholic church has two leprosy sanatoriums. There are thriving YMCA's in major cities, offering athletic programs, vocation training courses, foreign language classes.

Just as significant, Chinese Christian churches have developed vital links with the global church. Many foreign religious leaders, including American evangelicals, superiors of Roman Catholic male religious orders have visited China multiple times, celebrated mass, gave retreats, and held conferences. Beyond visits, many faculty from Protestant and Catholic divinity schools in Europe, Canada and the U.S. have also taught in Protestant and Catholic seminaries in China. Outside seminaries, there are foreign Catholic priests who serve as a director of a leprosy sanatorium, chaplains in Chinese universities for American and European exchange students, professors with long-term contracts teaching philosophy and foreign languages in top Chinese universities. Conversely, hundreds of protestant and Catholic priests, nuns and seminaries have enrolled in degree programs in European, Canadian and U.S. divinity schools, after applying for and were granted exit visas and Chinese passports as religious personnel. One U.S. Catholic male religious order has sponsored over a hundred Chinese Catholic priests, nuns and seminarians to study in U.S. theologates. Upon completion of their European and North American divinity studies, some Chinese Christians now hold important positions in the church hierarchy. The present dean of the national Union

Theological Protestant Seminary in Nanjing has a doctorate degree in divinity in Stockholm. The Seminary will have a new campus on 33-acres granted by the government, with a construction cost of 140 million yuan, some of it as grant or loan by the government.

To conclude, there is still no religious freedom in China of the kind as in the U.S. The state still manages, monitors, and often intervenes in affairs of religious organizations. Outside the five official religions, the fate is worse. Unregistered temples and churches have been demolished, their property and publications confiscated, their prelates jailed. But compared to that of the Maoist era, or even of the past two decades, there has been conspicuous and substantial progress. Whether one views the degree of institutional autonomy of religious organizations, the protection of their economic interests, their ability to operate social welfare programs, and their freedom to foster links with their universal community, there are positive developments in all these fronts, some unprecedented in the history of the People's Republic. There are increasing signs that religious policy is converging with the political, economic, and social policies of the market reform era in China.

Thank you.