

The Falun Gong crackdown: a crisis in China's corridors of power

James Conachy
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The crackdown initiated on July 19 against the quasi-religious Falun Gong sect is the most serious act of state repression in China since the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989. Some 5,000 adherents have been arrested over the last fortnight. Falun Gong videos and literature are being collected and destroyed across the country. Around 200,000 books were reportedly burnt in the city of Wuhan alone. Its web-sites have been shut down or firewalled from Chinese viewers and any practice of its beliefs made a criminal offence.

Since it was officially declared illegal on July 22, denunciations of Falun Gong and repudiations of it by former members have dominated the state media. News broadcasts on the state-run TV have been extended to as long as two hours to provide for lengthy segments of anti-Falun Gong propaganda. The movement has been accused of causing suicides and insanity, charlatanism and plotting to bring down the Communist Party government. Attempts are being made to extradite its leader-in-exile, Li Hongzhi, who currently resides in New York, to face trial.

The crackdown has been widely interpreted as a response to the Falun Gong demonstration in Beijing on April 25. About 10,000 members assembled at the Zhongnanhai compound, the location of the private residences and offices of China's highest leadership, to protest against defamation of the sect by state-run media. In the midst of heightened security due to the approaching 10th anniversary of Tiananmen Square, the demonstration came as a sharp shock to the Beijing hierarchy. It reportedly sent Chinese president Jiang Zemin into a rage.

During the 1990s, Beijing has not opposed religious movements. In fact, in response to the widespread anti-government protests of 1989, the regime pursued a deliberate policy of encouraging the revival of religion as a safety valve for social discontent. The Taoist, Buddhist and Christian faiths that were suppressed in other periods

have rebuilt a worshipper base of some 100 million people. Government departments also facilitated the spread of Falun Gong after it was founded in May 1992.

Incorporating aspects of the traditional Chinese religions, Falun Gong is derived from popular fitness exercises known as qigong. Holding out the hope of mental and physical well being, it advocates adhering to an austere lifestyle and performing specific types of qigong movements unique to the sect.

Until 1996, government bodies gave the sect assistance to publish and distribute its ideology, to lecture around the country and internationally and to establish teaching centres in most major Chinese cities. The most enthusiastic support was provided by a foundation associated with the Police Ministry, which sponsored lectures and "healing" sessions. Numerous government and party officials adopted Falun Gong. Just last week, Li Qihua, a former general, a veteran of the Long March and an associate of Mao, was forced to "confess" his mistakes and renounce his allegiance to the sect.

If the figures given by the Chinese government in April are at all accurate, Falun Gong experienced a meteoric rise, gaining a membership numbering in the millions in the space of several years and opening 39 teaching centres, 1,900 places of instruction and over 28,000 group exercise areas.

Its growth is rooted in the economic and social upheaval China has passed through. Twenty years of market reforms have produced a country polarised by region and social class. While top government bureaucrats and new capitalist elements have made great fortunes, most people have faced a steady undermining of their economic and social situation.

Most Falun Gong adherents come from the urban centres of China's former industrial heartland, the north eastern and central provinces, which have been hard hit by retrenchments and factory closures. Price reforms, the

stagnation and cutback of state-owned industries and the loss of social security provisions have all contributed to a growing social crisis in municipalities such as Changchun, Dalian, Shenyang, Shijiazhuang, Tianjin and Wuhan. Unemployment has become endemic and living standards are far below those of the coastal provinces that have experienced massive inflows of foreign capital.

Dalian, for example, has an average monthly income of 474 yuan (\$US59) compared to 813 yuan in Shanghai. Changchun, the birthplace of the Falun Gong, has an average monthly income of 394 yuan, less than half the 974 yuan average in Guangzhou, the southern city near Hong Kong.

There is little belief by the mass of the population, or by Communist Party members, in the occasional speeches by state leaders that a better society is being built. The eruption of discontent at the government in 1989 was cruelly repressed, fueling the grievances and bitterness. Distrust and outright hostility to government institutions is widespread; yet all avenues for its political expression—whether through political parties or labour organisations—have been blocked.

In this environment, it is not difficult to understand how Falun Gong was able to thrive by exploiting the fears, insecurities and profound alienation produced by widespread unemployment, poverty and hardship. For those who no longer had access to state-funded health care, the Falun Gong offered an alternative form of healing. Its conservative philosophy, based on disdain for both government and science, provided the confused and the disoriented with a mystical explanation for the deterioration in society.

Falun Gong's rapid growth has clearly created a major political crisis for the Stalinist bureaucracy, despite repeated assurances by the sect's leadership that it has no political objectives and does not intend to challenge Beijing's power. The first conflicts emerged in 1996 when the movement refused to accept the formation of Communist Party branches within its centres or other forms of state supervision, and reacted to official criticism by staging protests. The initial acts of state repression began in July last year.

This official reaction reveals the extreme nervousness and even paranoia of the Chinese leadership toward any form of opposition. Suddenly confronted with a mass organisation, over which they had little direct control, the Beijing bureaucrats have resorted instinctively to brutal police repression. Undoubtedly the top leaders recall the great eruptions of discontent of last century against

imperial rule and foreign domination. Both the Tai Ping rebellions of 1850-1861 and the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 took the form of vast religious movements that suddenly emerged and swept across China. Their fear is that the apparently innocuous Falun Gong has the potential to become a dangerous vehicle for the opposition of broad layers, who have no other outlet for their hostility.

Thus the ossified bureaucracy, increasingly isolated from the masses and utterly incapable of meeting their needs, has resorted to crude police state methods and an extraordinary Maoist-style ideological campaign of denunciations and self-confessions. Party members and the public are exhorted to turn to Marxism and dialectical materialism to combat religion, mysticism and the Falun Gong in particular. But the entire exercise is completely farcical—few people believe that the top leaders in any way uphold socialism or Marxism or even the traditions of the Chinese revolution to which they appealed in the past.

The main aim of the upper layers of the Stalinist hierarchy is to enrich themselves, hold onto to power and transform themselves into the leading representatives of the emerging Chinese capitalist class. They are keenly aware of their precarious position and the slender social and ideological supports on which they depend as all the elements of a social explosion accumulate. To meet the demands of international finance capital, the bureaucracy has no choice but to press ahead with its economic restructuring and the closure or privatisation of state industries. But these policies, under conditions of economic slowdown, will only exacerbate the already widespread unemployment and poverty in rural and urban areas and thus the discontent and hostility to the regime.



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