

Falun Gong members go on trial in China

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The first trial involving members of the quasi-religious Falun Gong movement took place on November 12, in China's Hainan province. Despite having pled guilty and appealed for leniency, Song Yueshang, a local leader of Falun Gong, was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment for "using a cult to violate the law". Two other men received seven and three-year sentences, while a woman, Liang Yulin, received two years for assisting Song Yueshang evade arrest.

More show trials are likely to take place before the end of the year. On November 8, the Chinese government stated that 111 Falun Gong members had been formally charged. The Hong Kong based Information Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China alleged over the weekend that the true figure is at least 300, and that 1,000 more will be sent for "education through labor"—a punishment that does not require a trial.

There are signs that the Chinese government is contemplating the execution of Falun Gong's main leaders. On October 28, Falun Gong was officially declared to be a cult and an "evil sect", amid accusations that it is responsible for 1,400 deaths. Two days later, a ruling was issued that leaders of cults can be charged with murder and endangering national security, offenses that carry the death penalty.

The major Communist party newspaper, the *Peoples Daily*, has supported this move with continuous editorials and columns that denounce Falun Gong in hysterical and often ludicrous language. The November 3 editorial, for example, was entitled "Heresy is Heresy", and compares Falun Gong with the Aum sect in Japan and the Branch Davidians in the US, describing it as an "anti-society, anti-humanity, anti-science and anti-government malignant tumour".

Established in 1992, Falun Gong is based on popular fitness exercises known as qigong, which its founder Li Hongzhi combined with a conservative social outlook and mystical conceptions derived from traditional Chinese Buddhist and Taoist religions. By 1998 it claimed to have millions of adherents, including numerous Communist party members.

The turn against it dates to the middle of last year when some of its activities were curtailed and accusations that Falun Gong was a cult were first aired by the state media. Falun Gong responded by mobilising its practitioner base in 18 peaceful but large protests to demand recognition as a legitimate and independent qigong trend. The protests culminated in an April 25 rally in Beijing by 10,000 people, in front of the private residences of China's highest leadership.

Confronted with a mass organisation that displayed a degree of autonomy, a faction within the Chinese regime led by president Jiang Zemin pushed for its illegalisation and destruction. Falun Gong was banned on July 22 and a campaign reminiscent of the 1960's Cultural Revolution undertaken against it, complete with book burnings, public confessions and ritualistic self-criticisms.

In the face of state edicts that they renounce their beliefs, Falun Gong adherents have displayed a determined defiance. The organisation has used visits to China by German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and UN secretary general Kofi Annan to stage internationally publicised demonstrations. Protests by small groups who traveled to Beijing from neighbouring provinces were almost daily events in Tiananmen Square throughout October. Over 3,000 people, many of them middle-aged women, are believed to have been temporarily detained and subsequently expelled from the capital.

The Chinese government has confirmed that a woman named Zhu Shaolan, who began a hunger strike on September 28 in protest at her detention, died on October 7, and that an 18-year-old girl died when she leapt from the train taking her away from Beijing. Human rights groups have alleged that at least one person was beaten to death in police custody and that four others have committed suicide in symbolic protests. Falun Gong alleges that over 200 people have been subjected to police beatings while in custody.

The plight of Falun Gong is evoking sympathy for its victims and revulsion toward the government. The November 11 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* carried a report, which claims that a network of safe houses

has developed in Beijing to protect the Falun Gong from the authorities. The article quoted an unnamed Asian diplomat saying: “What is at issue is that some people are starting to help Falun Gong members and even make fun of the government, saying it must be out of touch with the real world for cracking down on old grannies”.

Irrational and vindictive as it seems, there is method in the madness of China's rulers. The October 31 editorial of the *Peoples Daily* spelt out the official rationale for the Falun Gong purge: “If we tolerate the criminal activities of evil sect organisations like Falun Gong, the country and the people will not know a day of peace and it will be hard to protect social order and consolidate the results of reform and opening”.

While the direct political threat posed by Falun Gong is being exaggerated, its rise is a reflection of the ideological and social chasm that separates the beneficiaries of the regime's economic agenda and the mass of China's population. Not even Beijing questions the fact that Falun Gong has appealed to wide numbers of people due to factors like economic hardship, pessimism about the future, and alienation at the rapid changes convulsing the country.

The results of the accelerated market reforms in the 1990s and the further opening of China to transnational investment are levels of inequality and class tensions that far exceed the conditions that produced the 1989 upheavals. Recent years have seen constant, but localised, eruptions of urban workers and rural peasants, protesting the rise of unemployment, poverty and deprivation.

The ability of China's new capitalists and their international partners to dismantle the past social conditions of the masses and develop the vast manufacturing cheap labour zones along China's coast has depended, in the final analysis, upon the monolithic Communist party apparatus. Drawing on the lessons of 1989, any sign of social discontent taking an organised political form has been rooted out and ruthlessly suppressed. As the profits have flowed, the prisons have filled with the leaders of strikes, rallies, peasant associations and democratic movements.

Of particular alarm to the central Chinese government therefore was the fact that Falun Gong was defended by sections of the party and state bureaucracy, particularly those based in the former industrial north eastern provinces that have suffered severely from the bankruptcy and closure of state-owned enterprises.

One of its principal backers in the early 1990s was the China Foundation of Heroes and Justice, a body associated with the Central Propaganda Department and the Police Ministry. Even after the state began to persecute Falun Gong last year, hundreds of government officials in the north-east remained members. In fact, according to Falun Gong sources

cited by John Pomfret of the *Washington Post* on November 12, police in the city of Tianjin actively encouraged the organisation to take its protests for recognition directly to Beijing—the origins of the April 25 rally.

A picture is emerging from China that substantial numbers of lower level bureaucrats and functionaries are also embittered by the results of reform and alienated from the central government. While enormous wealth is being amassed by the businessmen that Beijing champions, other layers have lost a degree of position and privilege due to the cutbacks of state-owned industries and government departments.

Months before the Falun Gong crackdown, the central government had been forced to launch an intense campaign, known as the “Three Stresses”, to combat the lack of cohesion, the demoralisation and endemic corruption within the state apparatus. This was followed by the fiftieth anniversary celebration that predicated China's future on unquestioned unity around the national leadership of Jiang Zemin.

Describing the “Three Stresses” for the August 19 issue of *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the chairman of the Australian Chamber of Commerce office in China, Clinton Dines, said: “This is the reaction of leaders who have been sending out orders and directives and finding that everyone is ignoring them. They've been feeling no end of frustration. They've reached the end of their tether”.

The crushing of Falun Gong, while contributing to the general atmosphere of repression, has to some extent merged with the disciplining of China's vast bureaucratic apparatus. Falun Gong is being presented as an example of what can happen if it relaxes its grip and allows an organisation to thrive off the discontent in society. With the economy slowing and perhaps the most severe restructuring yet to be carried out, any form of challenge is a potential threat to the entire political establishment. A flood of popular opposition is waiting to flow through the first cracks in dictatorial rule.



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