

Mail address:
P. O. Box 84
New York, NY
10116 USA



World Organization to
Investigate the Persecution
of Falun Gong
追查迫害法轮功国际组织

http://www.upholdjustice.org
Tel: 001-347-448-5790
Fax: 001-347-402-1444

Washington Post, Torture Is Breaking Falun Gong, China Systematically Eradicating Group

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By John Pomfret and Philip P. Pan
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BEIJING -- Expanding its use of torture and high-pressure indoctrination, China's Communist Party has gained the upper hand in its protracted battle against the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement, according to government sources and Falun Gong practitioners. As a result, they say, large numbers of people are abandoning the group that presented the party with its most serious challenge since the 1989 student-led protests in Tiananmen Square.

After a year and a half of difficulties in suppressing the movement, the government for the first time this year sanctioned the systematic use of violence against the group, established a network of brainwashing classes and embarked on a painstaking effort to weed out followers neighborhood by neighborhood and workplace by workplace, the sources said.

They said the crackdown has benefited from a turn in public opinion against Falun Gong since five purported members set themselves on fire in Tiananmen Square, leading many Chinese to conclude the group is a dangerous cult.

In recent interviews, the sources and practitioners described for the first time in detail the methodical efforts being used to eradicate the Falun Gong movement, efforts that the Chinese call "reeducation." They told of believers being beaten, shocked with electric truncheons and forced to undergo unbearable physical pressure, such as squatting on the floor for days at a time. Many adherents are also sent to intensive classes where the teachings of Falun Gong leader Li Hongzhi are picked apart by former believers, sometimes friends who have already been tortured into submission.

"I am a broken man," said James Ouyang, 35, an electrical engineer who was forced by labor camp guards to stand facing a wall for nine days and then sent to a brainwashing class for 20 more. "I have rejected Falun Gong. . . . Now, whenever I see a policeman and those electric truncheons, I feel sick, ready to throw up."

Two years ago, the Chinese government outlawed Falun Gong, a nonviolent movement that mixes Buddhist beliefs with slow-motion martial-art-type exercises, and denounced the group as an evil cult and a threat to society. But the underlying reason for the crackdown is the leadership's view that Falun Gong is an independent organization that threatens the Communist Party's monopoly on power.

The crackdown's recent gains have been a boost to both President Jiang Zemin, the Chinese leader most closely associated with the campaign, and the party, which some experts had thought was too fractured and ineffectual to defeat the unusually well-organized group.

"This campaign should teach us not to underestimate the Communist Party," said one party official who has advised the government on the crackdown, but opposes its use of violence. "The party has a powerful ability to synthesize experience and come up with methods to deal with challenges. All the brutality, resources and persuasiveness of the Communist system is being used -- and is having an effect."

A Strategy for Success

At the start of the crackdown, government officials estimated that between 3 million and 6 million people were serious followers of Falun Gong, which translates roughly as Wheel of the Law. About 10 percent, up to 600,000, were considered willing to fight the government crackdown, Chinese officials said. Estimates outside the government have put membership much higher -- in the tens of millions, but exact numbers are not available.

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The government's campaign against Falun Gong, launched in July 1999, struggled at first, hampered by uneven enforcement and a split between central government leaders, who viewed the group as a threat to the party's rule, and local officials, who did not. But over the past six months, China's security forces have regrouped and devised an approach they say is producing results.

That approach has three ingredients, according to another government adviser.

The first, he said, is violence. The crackdown has always been associated with police and prison brutality, but the adviser said it was only this year that the central leadership decided to sanction the widespread use of violence against Falun Gong members. Citing government reports, he said practitioners who are not beaten generally do not abandon the group.

The adviser said the second element, a high-pressure propaganda campaign against the group, has also been critical. As Chinese society turned against Falun Gong, pressure on practitioners to abandon their beliefs increased, and it became easier for the government to use violence against those who did not. The self-immolation of five purported members in Tiananmen Square on Jan. 23 was a turning point. A 12-year-old girl and her mother died, and the party made the incident the centerpiece of its campaign to discredit Falun Gong. By repeatedly broadcasting images of the girl's burning body and interviews with the others saying they believed self-immolation would lead them to paradise, the government convinced many Chinese that Falun Gong was an "evil cult."

Finally, the security apparatus has begun forcing practitioners to attend intense study sessions in which the teachings of the Falun Gong leader are picked apart by former followers. These brainwashing classes have been key to persuading members to quit practicing Falun Gong, the government adviser said.

"Each aspect of the campaign is critical," he said. "Pure violence doesn't work. Just studying doesn't work either. And none of it would be working if the propaganda hadn't started to change the way the general public thinks. You need all three. That's what they've figured out."

Some local governments had experimented with brainwashing classes before, but in January, Beijing's secret 610 office, an interagency task force leading the charge against Falun Gong, ordered all neighborhood committees, state institutions and companies to begin using them, government sources said. No Falun Gong member is supposed to be spared. The most active members are sent directly to labor camps where they are first "broken" by beatings and other torture, the adviser said. At the same time, Beijing is getting more efficient at forcing local officials to carry out its orders on Falun Gong. Internal polls conducted by the Central Party School show county-level officials placing a greater priority on eradicating the group, the government adviser said. The 610 office also dispatches teams of investigators to check up on local officials, and a "proper attitude" toward Falun Gong is now required for any promotion, he said.

No One Spared

Neighborhood officials have compelled even the elderly, people with disabilities and the ill to attend the classes. Universities have sent staff to find students who had dropped out or been expelled for practicing Falun Gong, and brought them back for the sessions. Other members have been forced to leave sick relatives to go to class.

A university student in Beijing, Alex Hsu, said he was on his way to a computer lab earlier this year when a school official stopped him and told him he had to take the class. The school had confronted him before about his faith in Falun Gong, but he had never participated in protests and had never been arrested.

Six men surrounded him, forced him into a car and drove him to a hotel near a labor camp outside Beijing. About 20 practitioners were there, all of them students, teachers, university staff members or retired professors. Hsu later learned the class was organized by the Education Ministry. "We were all very scared," Hsu said. "We didn't know what was going to happen next."

By relying on "work units," to which all state employees are assigned, and neighborhood committees to ferret out and convert believers, the government is taking a page from the mass campaign tactics used by the Communist Party under the leadership of Mao Zedong. The plan has been surprisingly effective, especially given other changes that have undermined

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the party's control over Chinese society, such as the rise of a private business sector and looser rules governing migration and housing.

Each work unit is responsible for paying the "tuition" of its practitioners. And township governments that have been successful in converting Falun Gong members, most notably in Shandong province, have been encouraged to sell their services to other townships, Chinese sources said.

Hsu said school officials told him they paid about \$800 to send him to the brainwashing class. The morning after he was picked up, the class began in a cafeteria inside the labor camp. The first lesson was a threat.

"They said if they didn't achieve their goals, if we didn't give up our beliefs, we'd be taken to the labor camp," Hsu said. "Reeducation through labor is a frightening thing to a Chinese person. We all knew we would be harmed and our lives would be in danger. We all knew someone who had died in the camps."

In the cafeteria, Hsu sat at a table with three former Falun Gong members, all of them still detained at the camp. For 12 hours a day, they tried to persuade him to abandon Falun Gong. As the days passed, more "teachers" joined his table, analyzing the writings of Falun Gong leader Li Hongzhi and refusing to let Hsu rest.

"It was mental torture. . . . The pressure just kept growing," Hsu said. "And the threat was always there. You could see these people all had suffered, and you knew what would happen to you if you didn't give in too."

Practitioners are forced to remain in the classes until they renounce their beliefs in writing and then on videotape. On average, the government adviser said, most people abandon Falun Gong after 10 to 12 days of classes, but some resist for as long as 20.

"It was like being drugged with a potion. They came at you fast, frightening you and confusing you," said Sydney Li, a practitioner who escaped from a class organized by neighborhood officials in which he was beaten about the head. "If you weren't a strong believer, it would be easy to be tricked."

The turning point for Hsu came in the third week. He looked up one morning and recognized one of the "teachers" at his table -- a friend, classmate and fellow practitioner who had disappeared earlier in the year. The student looked thin and sickly. He later told Hsu he had been tortured.

"It was a shock. I didn't know he had been sent to the labor camp, and he looked so different," Hsu said. "He didn't say much at first, but the others made him talk. I felt so sad."

A few days later, Hsu signed a statement promising not to practice Falun Gong again and another attacking the group as an evil cult. He read them aloud to his class and in front of a video camera. He wept on the ride back to his university. "I'm not sure about the others, but I never believed what I was writing," he said. "It was very painful. They forced us to lie. We knew Falun Gong is good, but they forced us to say it was evil."

Hsu has since dropped out of school and gone into hiding because he wants to continue practicing. But he acknowledged many followers have given up Falun Gong completely. There are no reliable estimates of how many followers have abandoned the group.

Those who refuse to submit in the classes are sent to the labor camps, where members face a more systematic regime of violence than in the past, according to practitioners and government sources.

Days of Beatings

The sting of torture was felt by James Ouyang, a slight man with thick glasses and crooked teeth. On the sixth day of beatings this April, he recalled, he began to denounce the Falun Gong.

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"I cursed and cursed Falun Gong, but the police said it wasn't enough," he said, running a trembling hand through thinning hair. "They continued beating me for three more days until they were satisfied."

When Ouyang, who asked to be identified only by his Chinese last name and an English name he calls himself, was first arrested in early 2000 for going to Tiananmen Square to unfurl a banner praising Falun Gong, police roughed him up but released him after a week. At the time, the government adviser said, China's security services were inflicting only a "normal amount" of abuse on Falun Gong practitioners. And in many parts of China, police ignored Falun Gong as long as practitioners did not go to Beijing to protest.

The adviser, contradicting some Western reports, said the government previously had no systematic campaign of violence to break Falun Gong. "Before this year, practitioners were beaten if they broke rules in jail or if the police were normally brutal," he said. "It must be understood that anyone in a Chinese jail will get beaten for breaking the rules. Deaths in custody are commonplace."

But the adviser said the policy changed after the Jan. 23 self-immolations and a Communist Party work conference in early February. At that time, party officials concluded the self-immolations and the unrelenting propaganda campaign that followed had turned the public against Falun Gong. The self-immolations seemed to show that Falun Gong was a bizarre cult, and that freed the party's hand, he said.

"The immolations had a huge effect," he said. "Previously, most Chinese thought the crackdown was stupid, like a dog catching a mouse. After those people burned themselves and the party broadcast that little girl's face on TV for almost a month straight, people's views here changed. Now many agree that it's an evil cult. That was a huge defeat for Li Hongzhi." Li also played into the party's hands. His spokesmen in the United States denied the people who burned themselves were Falun Gong members, disappointing some in China who felt he was rejecting his flock. And Li continued to issue circulars encouraging his followers to confront the authorities, upsetting people because he seemed unmoved by the growing casualties. So far, Falun Gong says more than 250 followers have died in government custody.

Ouyang was arrested again in April after going to Tiananmen Square to show his support for Falun Gong. This time, he said, police methodically reduced him to an "obedient thing" over 10 days of torture.

At a police station in western Beijing, Ouyang was stripped and interrogated for five hours. "If I responded incorrectly, that is if I didn't say, 'Yes,' they shocked me with the electric truncheon," he said.

Then, he was transferred to a labor camp in Beijing's western suburbs. There, the guards ordered him to stand facing a wall. If he moved, they shocked him. If he fell down from fatigue, they shocked him.

Each morning, he had five minutes to eat and relieve himself. "If I didn't make it, I went in my pants," he said. "And they shocked me for that, too."

By the sixth day, Ouyang said, he couldn't see straight from staring at plaster three inches from his face. His knees buckled, prompting more shocks and beatings. He gave in to the guards' demands.

For the next three days, Ouyang denounced Li's teachings, shouting into the wall. Officers continued to shock him about the body and he soiled himself regularly. Finally, on the 10th day, Ouyang's repudiation of the group was deemed sufficiently sincere.

He was taken before a group of Falun Gong inmates and rejected the group one more time as a video camera rolled. Ouyang left jail and entered the brainwashing classes. Twenty days later after debating Falun Gong for 16 hours a day, he "graduated."

"The pressure on me was and is incredible," he said. "In the past two years, I have seen the worst of what man can do. We really are the worst animals on Earth."

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