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CHINA INSIDER

PROTEST SCARS

HONGKONGERS STRUGGLE
WITH MENTAL BURDEN
FROM PROTESTS

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Protesters are detained by riot police during a rally against parallel traders in Hong Kong on Jan. 5, 2020. Anti-government protesters in Hong Kong continue their demands for an independent inquiry into police brutality, the retraction of the word "riot" to describe the rallies, and genuine universal suffrage.

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HONG KONG PROTESTS

'I Can't Go Through the Pain': Hongkongers Struggle With Emotional Scars From Protests

ANNIE WU

HONG KONG—Zack Ho has a recurring nightmare in which a man throws him off a tall building.

Other times, he is being chased by Hong Kong police. Most nights though, he has trouble falling asleep.

Ho, 18, is in his last year of high school. Before mass protests erupted in mid-2019, before the Hong Kong government proposed the controversial extradition bill that prompted Ho to join a concern group and begin his journey as an activist, he was like any average high school kid. He was studying for his finals and training as a student athlete, representing his school in basketball competitions.

But after half a year of joining protests, witnessing bloody arrests at the frontlines, and being tear-gassed by police—with the government shelving the bill but refusing to concede to protesters' other pro-democracy demands—Ho says he feels the movement is taking a mental and physical toll on him.

"The feeling is hard to describe. It's like something is tugging at my heart," he said

during an interview in December.

He devotes most of his time and attention to serving as convener of student activist group Inspidemia Hong Kong and planning logistics for protest events. His grades have suffered, and he has stopped playing basketball. It's a sacrifice he's willing to make, but he can't help but feel frustrated and hopeless when thinking about the current situation.

"I will blame myself. I feel, even though I'm doing so much, why has nothing happened? I loathe that. ... Why hasn't the government woken up?"

Amid Hong Kong's ongoing protest movement against the Chinese regime's growing encroachment over the city's autonomy, teens and young adults are often at the frontlines, organizing events or confronting police during clashes.

Counselors and social workers worry about the impact on young protesters' mental health.

The Youth

At the start of mass protests that began in June 2019, several people who participated in protests reportedly committed suicide.

At the time, the government hadn't yet agreed to completely

withdraw an extradition bill that would allow the Chinese regime to transfer individuals in Hong Kong for trial in mainland China.

Clarence Tsang, executive director of the Samaritan Befrienders, an NGO that provides counseling services in Hong Kong, said that that period was marked by a sense of hopelessness among young protesters.

His organization runs a hotline, mobile app, and a suicide crisis intervention center for people with suicidal thoughts or behavior. Some impacted by the political movement needed such help.

But as the protests continued and the public focused on instances of alleged police violence toward protesters, their emotions turned to anger. "It turned to a stage where they had to get revenge. They had no time to focus on the emotional status of themselves. It turned into actions to deal with the government and the police," Tsang said.

Young students were especially distraught after the Hong Kong government in October 2019 banned citizens from wearing facial masks during public gatherings. As a result, some schools even had to cancel

We always say that family is the best shelter for everybody. But now it's not the case. People don't have a place where they feel safe to talk about emotions.

Clarence Tsang, executive director, Samaritan Befrienders

Mourners react as they pay their respects at the car park where student Alex Chow, 22, fell during a protest in the Tseung Kwan O area on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong on Nov. 8, 2019.

classes.

"They felt the government really did not listen to their voices ... that the government is doing more and more to control everything," Tsang said. In November 2019, a Hong Kong court ruled that the ban was unconstitutional; the government has appealed the ruling, with the next court hearing scheduled for this month.

The emotional reactions to the mask ban were alarming enough that the Hong Kong Psychological Society's department of educational psychologists issued a statement at the time, urging the government to consult with mental health professionals and reprimanding it for "ignoring students' feelings." Following the protests, the organization also issued a guide on how school staff can identify students with emotional needs, recognize suicidal tendencies, and how to console them or direct them to mental health services.

But youth have been reluctant to turn to institutions for help, fearing that organizations that receive funding from the government would leak their information to the police, or believing that they won't be understood by adult service

providers, said Tsang.

For example, Ho has contacted a social worker at his school, but he found it difficult to put into action the advice the social worker gave. "I can't go through the pain ... it's quite a big burden for me," said Ho.

He said that one of his biggest frustrations is the constant arguing among student organizations advocating for pro-democracy causes. Their discussion meetings usually run past midnight. He has found himself stress-eating on midnight snacks. "I was more handsome back in June," Ho said half-jokingly, noting that he has gained weight.

Meanwhile, some of his peers have intense fears of getting arrested by police; when walking on the streets, they feel as if they're being followed.

Social worker Ah Ming (nickname) noted that youth tend to turn to counseling staff who volunteer at protest sites.

At the start of the protest movement, most social workers appeared at protests as third-party monitors of police behavior and to help de-escalate tensions between police and protesters. Later, a group of roughly 30 to 40 decided to form a volunteer group to assist protesters who need counseling or mental health services.

Because the volunteers are often at the protest sites, protesters tended to feel comfortable opening up to them.

"A lot of inner thoughts, they [protesters] may not easily speak out loud ... their emotional states are quite complicated," Ah Ming said. The volunteers could refer them to formal services, or if they preferred something informal, introduce them to mental

health professionals they know.

Ah Ming said some youth have mood disorders and are so distressed that even with prescribed medication, they still have insomnia.

But the emotional trauma isn't confined to young protesters. She recalled a story of one older protester who managed to leave Polytechnic University before a two-week siege in November 2019. During the stand-off, police sealed off the campus and

bombarded the school with tear gas, water cannon, and projectiles, leaving dozens of protesters trapped inside.

The protester decided to eat a meal out one day. After ordering a dish, he suddenly burst into tears. "He felt happy that he got to eat well, but he also thought back to those people who are still inside [the university]. He didn't know what to do."

Ah Ming said that protesters who escaped police arrest, or first-aid workers who left Polytechnic after their supplies ran out, shared that they felt a kind of survivor's guilt.

"Some people feel they want to do more ... but they don't know how," she said.

Family Disagreements

Tsang said one of the biggest triggers of emotional distress is differences in political opinions among family. Some protesters have been kicked out of the house due to their parents being pro-government and disagreeing with the protest movement's goals.

"We always say that family is the best shelter for everybody. But now it's not the case. People don't have a place where they feel safe to talk about emotions," Tsang said. The arguments at

home are stressful for both parents and children.

For protesters who feel "lonely, [that] they do not have people listening to them," Samaritan Befrienders tries to "lend a pair of ears to them" so they can openly discuss their feelings.

Ho, for example, said he has tried to share with his family, but gets the sense that they don't understand him. He often gets into arguments with his mother, who believes protesters are causing too much trouble, and feels she is constantly judging him for his choices.

Tsang said it can be especially difficult for young students, as some schools and universities have discouraged their students from openly discussing the protest movement. Without an outlet to discuss their emotions, they can feel stifled.

Samaritan Befrienders has started to give talks at secondary schools to teach parents how to improve communication with their children. Tsang encourages parents to be good listeners and accept that their child may hold differing viewpoints. "Try to show your love for them, even though how different you are in your political views," he said, such as by giving them a hug or pouring a glass of water.

Trauma at Large

Ah Ming said that while Hong Kong has yet to resolve the crisis, something must be done to help citizens make sense of their collective trauma.

In mid-December, thousands of staff in the city's social welfare sector organized a three-day strike to call out the government for the current "humanitarian crisis." They organized an event in

Tsim Sha Tsui, a busy shopping district, where people were encouraged to write down what they've lost in the past six months.

One woman broke down crying as she spoke of her family disagreements.

Ah Ming said that for some, such as the more than 6,000 citizens arrested for protest activity, "there's very practical things that indicate your life is now different. ... You have to learn how to adjust and live as normal." For example, at the police station, officers may have confiscated their phones. Others may have to report to the station regularly after receiving bail.

Ho said he'll keep going despite feeling defeated. "I can't walk away now. I feel like I will let down others if I give up."

He hopes to make use of his English language skills to conduct international advocacy for the protest movement.

He's also thinking about studying politics and public administration in college later this year, though for now, he just wishes for a little normalcy, such as finding time to play ball again.

And looking back at photos of himself in June—maybe working on getting his "jawline" back.

If you or someone you know is showing signs that they might be considering suicide, the suicide prevention hotline is available 24-7 for those in Hong Kong at 2382 0000. For urgent assistance, call 999.

Those in the United States can call 800-273-TALK or go to suicidepreventionlifeline.org. Texts can also be sent to The Crisis Text Line at 741 741.

The feeling is hard to describe. It's like something is tugging at my heart.

Zack Ho, a student activist

(Below) Ah Ming, Hong Kong social worker, at a studio in Hong Kong on Dec. 20, 2019.

(Bottom) Zack Ho, a student activist, at The Epoch Times office in Hong Kong on Dec. 16, 2019.



ANTHONY WALLACE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



YU GANG/THE EPOCH TIMES



NINA WONG/THE EPOCH TIMES

MIDDLE EAST

China, Russia and US: New Power Dynamics in Middle East After Soleimani's Death

Iraq emerges as a new battleground of geopolitical opportunities



China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi shakes hands with Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif during a meeting at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing on Dec. 31, 2019.

VENUS UPADHAYAYA

The power dynamics in the Middle East after Qasim Soleimani's death are likely to be redrawn between Iran, China, and Russia vis-a-vis the United States. Added to this paradigm is Iraq—sandwiched between the United States and Iran and increasingly being pushed toward China, according to geopolitical analysts who study the region.

"Frankly, the Iranian government will remain closer to Beijing than ever before. Because Tehran knows well that Russia could not be the only balance of power vis-à-vis the American hegemony in the Middle East," Esra Serim, a Turkish analyst based in France, told The Epoch Times in an email.

Serim believes that Tehran needs the presence and support of both Russia and China following Soleimani's death to "counterbalance Washington and Tel-Aviv in the region."

"In addition to the economic relationship between Iran and Russia/China, Tehran also has robust military relationships with them, such as transference of military technology and equipment, and even infrastructure services to Iran's nuclear facilities," she said of the already existing relationship.

Kanishkan Sathasivam, a Massachusetts based Geopolitical analyst, told The Epoch Times that he expects a notable improvement in Iran's relationship with China after Soleimani's death, but it's Iraq that is a greater emerging opportunity for both China and Russia.

"I would expect a significant upgrade in their relations," said Sathasivam.

"By contrast, Iraq is a more open opportunity because it is an adversary state [to] the U.S., whose influence China would be supplanting. So, my expectation is that both Russia and China will now make a huge play for influence with the Iraqi government, offering themselves as a viable alternative to the U.S.," he said.

Sam Bazzi, a Lebanese Middle East expert based in the United States, told The Epoch Times in a written interview that both Iran and Iraq will increasingly need China after Soleimani's death because only it can come to their rescue in the face of increasing U.S. economic sanctions.

"The advantage that China offers is its willingness to engage in barter and exchange oil for the implementation of major projects such as reconstruction, infrastructure development, and industrialization, at a relatively low cost (in terms of oil value)," he said.

China and Iran recently found another way of bypassing the U.S. sanctions—last year China signed a multi-decade oil-supply deal that would inject \$280 billion in the Iranian petrochemical industry—all to be paid in Chinese Yuan, thus bypassing the established petrodollar system, reported The Telegraph.

China and Russia Diplomatically Shield Iran

In the situation emerging after Soleimani's killing, China and Russia acted diplomatically in ways to dilute the United States' posture against Iran because the United States killing the Iranian commander on Iraqi soil has strategic implications for them as well, explained experts.

A day after Soleimani's killing, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in his call with his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, talked about China playing a constructive role in maintaining peace and security in the Middle East, according to Xinhua, China's state-controlled news agency.

On Jan. 5, Wang also spoke to his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, to discuss the emerging state of affairs in the Middle East. Wang opposed the abuse of "military force" and cautioned the United States against "military adventurism," reported the Turkish Anadolu Agency.

Sathasivam explained that China and Russia were quick to respond

because the U.S. strategic deterrence posture against Iran impacts them. Strategic deterrence is a "politico-military posturing of capabilities (military power and technology) and doctrinal principles that represents the grand strategy of the nation," according to the Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis.

Sathasivam said that the United States had been rolling back its deterrence posture for some time, but things changed with Soleimani's killing.

"The U.S. has been slowly giving up its deterrence posture against Iran for many years now, from the GW Bush years through especially the Obama years... What Trump has now (seemingly) done successfully is to reestablish deterrence with Iran," he said.

"And yes, when you establish deterrence with one state, that also helps establish deterrence with other potential adversaries, for example, China, Russia, and North Korea," he added.

Sathasivam, however, added that we can't conclude from these developments that China and Russia are ready to go to war with the United States over Iran.

"A key realist view is that states help one another when interests are common, but will usually be willing to fight wars only for their own interests and never for another state's interests. Even Russia is not at the point yet in its relationship with Iran where it will go to war against the U.S. on behalf of Iran," he said.

Serim, a Senior Researcher, Ph.D., at the University of Aix Marseille, is of the view that China intervened because it cannot afford war between the United States and Iran.

"Any war in the region could likely harm China's present investments in the Middle East, notably in Iraq and Iran, as well as in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Egypt. Since right now, Beijing has become a major power and game-changer in the region. China wants to rise by implement-

ing soft power in the region," she explained.

So while China and its ally, Russia, condemned the New Year's Eve attack on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, the duo also blocked a U.N. Security Council statement condemning the attack because it didn't address the subsequent killing of Soleimani.

"It is a classic realist approach to international relations. If the Russian or Chinese embassy had



IRAQI PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS OFFICE VIA AP



been attacked in this way these states would be outraged. But because it is something happening against their perceived adversary, they have a different reaction," said Sathasivam.

Serim said China is a rising threat to Washington in the Middle East, the way it is in the Pacific region.

"Because, for many years, Beijing, unlike Moscow, has been an implicit ally of Iran. For example, Beijing and Tehran have still been holding joint naval and military exercises in Strait of Hormuz where oil/gas tankers have been transiting. This is in the open."

In major developments before Soleimani's death, China decided to invest \$120 billion into Iran's transport infrastructure and also decided to deploy 5,000 Chinese security personnel to guard the Iranian assets and shipments of oil on tankers en route from Iran to China, according to The Telegraph.

Serim is of the belief that U.S. allies don't want to get involved in China's military activities in the region because of their own

American soldiers taking position around the embassy in the capital Baghdad on Dec. 31, 2019, after supporters and members of the Hashed al-Shaabi military network breached the outer wall of the diplomatic mission during a rally to vent anger over weekend airstrikes that killed pro-Iran fighters in western Iraq.

A photo released by the Iraqi Prime Minister's Press Office shows a burning vehicle at the Baghdad International Airport following an airstrike, in Baghdad, Iraq, early on Jan. 2, 2020.

economic interests and don't want to "antagonize China."

"Almost all of the U.S. allies are still doing business with China, as an alternative power to the U.S.," she said.

Sathasivam said that every situation like this has its unique dynamics and that it always comes down to influence and power.

"In today's Middle East, and, for that matter, today's world, the U.S. has the vast majority of influence and power. So every other state that wants to become more powerful automatically targets the U.S., and we have the U.S. versus everyone else situation. If in the future the U.S. has less power and influence and these other states have more, then surely they will start competing with each other as well."

Iraq Wants US Forces Out, Where's China?

Since Soleimani was killed on Iraqi soil and because it hosts multiple U.S. military bases, by default it became the target of the Iranian missiles. After the strikes, the Iraqi government tried to distance itself militarily from the United States and talked more about China.

After Soleimani's killing, the situation between Iraq and the United States developed to the point that the outgoing Iraqi prime minister, Adil Abdul al-Mahdi, asked U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during a phone call on Jan. 9 to make plans for troop withdrawals.

The Iraqi government seriously started talking about American troop withdrawal on Jan. 5 when the Iraqi Parliament passed a non-binding resolution to expel foreign troops from the country. The very next day, al-Mahdi received China's ambassador to Iraq, Zhang Tao, who expressed a readiness to provide military assistance to Iraq.

"The outgoing Iraqi PM met with the representative of a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council to gauge Beijing's intentions in the upcoming phase as he most probably anticipated a military escalation," Joseph A. Kéchichian, a senior fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, told The Epoch Times in an email.

"In turn, China is interested in taking Abdul Mahdi's pulse as the caretaker PM tries to figure out how he may salvage what's left of his country's sovereignty," he said.

The day al-Mahdi met Zhang, Iraq's U.N. Ambassador Mohammed Hussein Bahr Aluloom called on the U.N. Security Council to condemn the U.S. airstrike and the killing of Soleimani and a senior Iraqi militia commander. It condemned the U.S. airstrike

that killed Iran's top military commander as a "flagrant violation" of the terms of the American forces' presence in the country and "a dangerous escalation that might ignite a devastating war in Iraq, the region and the world."

Bazzi, who is also the founder of Hezbollah Watch, told The Epoch Times that the meeting between al-Mahdi and Zhang is not a high-level engagement.

"But it was amplified to highlight the Axis of Resistance countries' collective desire and determination to resort to China as an alternative to the United States and nations that deal in only hard currency, particularly the U.S. dollar. This is consistent with Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's call upon Beirut to open the door to Chinese investments in Lebanon," said Bazzi.

The Axis of Resistance refers to the anti-Western and anti-Tel Aviv alliance between Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, Iran's proxy militia in Lebanon. "Nasrallah alluded to Chinese investments even in his speech in the aftermath of Soleimani's liquidation," said Bazzi.

Serim also expressed similar insights about Iraq's economic dependency on China after Soleimani's death. "China has still been very willing to invest and play both an economic and political role in Iraq as well as making big investments, along with the European firms/banks in Iran," she said.

Serim said that Iraq will use its relationship with China and Russia as a "trump card" and will try to use it to "jump over U.S. sanctions."

She said despite sanctions, "Baghdad will speed up to make oil and trade deals with both Russia and China."

Kéchichian, however, believes that the developments don't indicate that the Middle East is looking for an alternative to the United States. "This is wishful thinking at best but everyone is entitled to be delusional," he said.

The senior analyst, who has authored several books on Saudi Arabia, also said that both China and Russia would draw a cautionary line as they go about their affairs with Iran and Iraq.

"Time will tell whether China and Russia will set their own markers in the area. For now, it looks like a rejectionist front, though both countries—permanent members of the U.N. Security Council—know that their long-term interests are with the leading Western economic powers," said Kéchichian.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Woman Who Splashed Ink on Xi Jinping's Image Released, but Is Now a Totally Different Person

Chinese authorities punished a young woman for exercising her freedom of speech

OLIVIA LI

The young woman who splashed ink on a poster with a photo of Chinese leader Xi Jinping in mid-2018 was recently released after she was subjected to "compulsory treatment" in a psychiatric hospital for more than a year. Her father suspects that she was a victim of psychiatric abuse and is worried that her health has deteriorated because she now appears to be a totally different person.

'Ink Girl' Victim of Psychiatric Abuse

Dong Yaoqiong, 29, a former real estate agent in Shanghai, live streamed herself on Twitter on July 4, 2018, splashing ink on a propaganda poster bearing Xi Jinping's image.

Standing in front of the poster at Shanghai's HNA Plaza in the early morning hours, Dong declared, "I am here using my real name to oppose Xi Jinping's authoritarian dictatorship, and to protest against the mind control abuses the Chinese Communist Party perpetrated on me."

She then turned toward the poster and splashed ink on Xi's image, while continuing her statement: "I detest him to the bone. See, I am now taking action, and I am doing it all on my own, opposing the Chinese Communist Party, its dictatorship, its tyranny."

She challenged Xi to "come and catch" her, saying, "I want to see how he is going to deal with me."

Dong also called for international organizations to get involved in investigating mind control abuses she had suffered. "I am willing to collaborate with them to provide evidence," she said.

Dong was taken away by Shanghai police that same afternoon and went missing for several days.

Shortly after Dong's disappearance, Voice of America revealed in an exclu-

Dong Yaoqiong, 29, a former real estate agent in Shanghai, live streamed herself on Twitter on July 4, 2018, spray-painting a propaganda poster bearing Xi Jinping's image.



SCREENSHOT VIA YOUTUBE/GOODHU

sive report on July 22, 2018, that she was taken to her hometown in Zhuzhou City in Hunan Province, where she received psychiatric treatment at Hunan's Zhuzhou No. 3 Hospital, a psychiatric institution.

Dong was released on Nov. 19, 2019, and is now living with her mother in Hunan's Taoshui township. Her parents divorced shortly after her act of vandalism.

After her father, Dong Jianbiao, went to visit her on Jan. 2 this year, he was very concerned about her mental health and revealed some details to a human rights attorney, named Ou Biaofeng, who has been a strong supporter of Dong's family, Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported.

"Her demeanor is very different from before. She basically remains silent all the time, to the extent that I feel she shows signs of dementia," Dong Jianbiao told the attorney, add-

Her demeanor is very different from before. She basically remains silent all the time, to the extent that I feel she shows signs of dementia.

Dong Jianbiao, Dong Yaoqiong's father

ing that his daughter used to be a lively young woman.

"When I asked her what had happened to her in the hospital, she just kept her mouth shut. Her only response was 'Umm, umm' to those questions," he said.

He told the attorney that he believes the change in his daughter's behavior is likely the result of her being force-fed medication while being held in the psychiatric hospital. He also shared a photo of his daughter and pointed out that her face had become swollen, and she has gained a lot of weight, RFA reported.

According to the RFA report, attorney Ou Biaofeng said that the authorities subjected Dong Yaoqiong to forced "psychiatric treatment" in order to silence her after her Twitter video garnered widespread support. She was dubbed as the "Ink Girl" on Chinese social media.

"It seems that there are various medications that she is still taking, which would account for [the changes in Dong Yaoqiong]," Ou told RFA. "The authorities must be using this to intimidate her, so that she no longer speaks out in public."

"The illegal detention [of Dong Yaoqiong] in a psychiatric hospital comes from their fears of anyone who protests, and it's meant to create a climate of fear," he said.

Disidents and Petitioners Treated as Mentally Ill

According to statistics from China's medical community, more than 200 million Chinese citizens, or 17.5 percent of the adult population, suffer from mental disorders, a much higher ratio than in any other country.

Using the United States as a reference, only 5 percent of U.S. adults, 18 or older, experience a mental illness in any one year.

In addition, of the more than 200 million Chinese citizens suffering

from mental disorders, over 16 million were diagnosed as being serious cases that require treatment, amounting to more than one percent of China's adult population.

Wang Shuying, a Chinese petitioner, told New Tang Dynasty TV, a sister publication of The Epoch Times, that Chinese authorities actually detain many sane people in psychiatric hospitals as a means of suppression and persecution, and this is the reason why China has such an unusually high statistics of mental patients.

Among the mentally healthy people who may get sent to psychiatric hospitals are dissidents, petitioners, members of religious groups and ethnic minorities—basically anyone who the Chinese regime deems as a threat to their authority.

Chinese petitioners are simply citizens who seek redress from authorities according to Chinese law after becoming victims of some injustice. However, instead of investigating and remedying such cases, Chinese authorities often treat petitioners as "factors causing social instability," and use various ways to quell and silence them.

Wang said she was subjected to forced medication, both pill form and injectable, at a psychiatric hospital and described it as being unbearable.

"It was so painful that many times I wanted to ram my head into the wall to commit suicide," she said.

Practitioners of Falun Gong, a meditation and exercise practice that has been persecuted in China for over 20 years, are also being detained in psychiatric hospitals in large numbers in order to force them to give up the practice. According to Minghui.org, many practitioners have become disabled or were driven to insanity as a result of the psychiatric torture and abuse they were subjected to.

GREG BAKER/APP VIA GETTY IMAGES



A man walks past a roadside poster of Chinese leader Xi Jinping after the closing of the 19th Communist Party Congress in Beijing on Oct. 24, 2017.

HUMAN RIGHTS

China's Courts Continue to Punish Falun Gong Adherents for Their Faith

CATHY HE

The Chinese regime in 2019 sentenced 774 people for their faith in Falun Gong, a spiritual practice that has been intensely persecuted by the communist regime for more than 20 years.

Falun Gong (also known as Falun Dafa), a meditative practice that includes a set of moral teachings, grew immensely popular in China in the 1990s, with official estimates placing the number of practitioners at 70 million to 100 million by the end of the decade. Threatened by its popularity, the communist regime banned the practice in 1999, deploying the state's security apparatus to track down, arrest, and detain Falun Gong adherents.

Since then, hundreds of thousands of practitioners have been detained at labor camps, prisons, and brainwashing centers, according to the Falun Dafa Information Center. While in detention, many have endured torture as part of the regime's efforts to force adherents into renouncing their faith.

To date, more than 4,300 deaths have been confirmed by Minghui.org, a website that serves as a clearinghouse for the persecution of Falun Gong in China. The actual number is believed to be much higher due to the difficulty of obtaining and verifying sensitive information from China.

Minghui.org published the figures in a Jan. 9 report based on Chinese court records. Human rights experts such as Freedom House believe that thousands more are held in black jails, extralegal brainwashing centers, and pretrial detention centers without formal sentencing.

An influential U.S. congressional commission also recently called out Beijing for its escalating suppression of faith groups in 2019.

"Scholars and international rights groups have described religious persecution in China over the last year to be of an intensity not seen since the Cultural Revolution," the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) said in an annual human rights report released on Jan. 8.

Over the past year, U.S. officials have repeatedly condemned the Chinese Communist Party for its widespread violations of religious freedom.

"The party demands that it alone be called God," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in June 2018.

"In China, the government's intense persecution of many faiths—Falun Gong practitioners, Christians, and Tibetan Buddhists among them—is the norm."

The Falun Gong practitioners sentenced in 2019 came from 28 provinces and municipalities, the website said, with the greatest numbers from the provinces of



MARK ZOU/THE EPOCH TIMES

Falun Gong practitioners perform the exercises at a rally commemorating the 20th anniversary of the persecution of Falun Gong in China, on the West Lawn of Capitol Hill on July 18, 2019.

HUMAN RIGHTS

US Commission Urges Sanctions for Chinese Regime's Rights Abuses

CATHY HE

A U.S. congressional commission led by bipartisan lawmakers has called on the Trump administration to sanction Chinese officials involved in human rights atrocities.

It also urged the United States to incorporate rights concerns in all interactions with the Chinese regime, including in trade discussions.

The recommendations formed part of an annual human rights report by the Congressional-Executive Commission (CECC) on China, released on Jan. 8. It found that human rights and the rule of law in China continued to worsen in 2019.

"Rising authoritarianism in China is one of the most important challenges of the 21st century," Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.), CECC chair, said at a press briefing on the report in Washington on Wednesday.

The 323-page report called for strong action and a whole-of-government response to counter the regime's abuses, which includes its sustained suppression of faith groups—such as Falun Gong practitioners, Christians, and Uyghur Muslims—and labor activists; its expansion of high-tech surveillance for social control; and its political influence and censorship campaigns overseas.

For the past few decades, the Chinese regime has "expanded a costly and elaborate authoritarian system designed to intimidate, censor, and even imprison Chinese citizens for exercising their fundamental human rights," the report said.

"People want freedom in China," Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.), CECC commissioner,

association to U.S. and Chinese interests." "Every delegation that comes here, every interface with anybody in the Chinese government ... human rights has to be on the tip of the tongue," Smith said.

The report called for sanctions against Chinese officials responsible for human rights abuses under the Global Magnitsky Act. The federal legislation authorizes the U.S. government to punish foreign violators of human rights by freezing their U.S.-based assets and barring their entry into the country.

Last year, the United States enacted, with overwhelming support from both houses of Congress, the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which included provisions paving the way for sanctions against Chinese and Hong Kong officials responsible for rights abuses in the city.

Versions of a human rights bill targeting officials for atrocities committed against Muslim minorities in the northwest region of Xinjiang also passed the House and the

Senate last year. McGovern said he expected a compromise bill will progress "hopefully soon" in both houses, and that he expected President Donald Trump to sign it.

Every delegation that comes here, every interface with anybody in the Chinese government ... human rights has to be on the tip of the tongue.

Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.)

The commission also recommended restricting access to U.S. capital markets for Chinese companies that provide support or technical capabilities that facilitate the Chinese regime's human rights abuses.

To counter the Chinese regime's influence in the United States, the USCC said the administration should heighten scrutiny of its influence operations and expand information-gathering on agents of Beijing.

At the same time, such a strategy needs to "avoid fostering an atmosphere of unfair suspicion of Chinese-Americans who are often targets of coercive political influence operations," the report noted.

Congress should also require U.S. universities, think tanks, and other non-governmental organizations to report gifts or contributions that exceed \$10,000 from foreign sources, the report said.

In response to the regime's growing "digital authoritarianism," the report said the United States should lead a global effort to develop a set of principles to ensure artificial intelligence development does not infringe on human rights, including the right to privacy.

The administration should also expand "global alliances" to advance human rights with like-minded countries and organizations, the CECC said. For example, it could coordinate responses when the Chinese government uses international bodies "to undermine human rights norms and closes off discussion of its failures to uphold its international obligations."



ANTHONY KWAN/GETTY IMAGES

A man is detained by riot police during a demonstration in a shopping mall in Hong Kong on Dec. 28, 2019.



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