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Free Wu Zeheng

The detention of Wu Zeheng for eight months and counting is an example of how Beijing's crackdown on religious freedoms has been expanding beyond ethnic minorities.

By Jared Genser

In July 2014, Chinese authorities detained members of Huazang Dharma, a Buddhist sect with millions of followers across China. More than 100 armed Chinese policemen staged a coordinated [raid](#) on a number of businesses and living compounds run by the group. The sect's leader, Wu Zeheng, and 18 others have been held for some eight months and counting.

On Thursday, my law firm filed a formal complaint with the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. On behalf of Mr. Wu, we requested it investigate whether he and his followers are being detained in violation of China's obligations under international law to protect religious freedom.

The Chinese government's latest attack on a range of groups began with a Xinhua state news agency article last June on the social harms caused by 14 so-called "evil religions." State-run newspapers now describe Wu's sect as an illegal organization that "takes advantage of followers' trust" and "forces them to take orders." Mr. Wu was even accused of enriching himself and raping young girls, even though he was never charged with these crimes.

Mr. Wu was previously imprisoned because of supposed economic crimes after he wrote open letters to the Chinese government in 1998-99 complaining about endemic corruption in the one-party system and the infringement of religious liberty. His arrest and that of his colleagues have been condemned by the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#), International League for Human Rights, and [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#), among others.

The crackdown on Huazang Dharma is part of a larger attack on organized religious groups that don't seek or obtain approval from government bodies. The Chinese Communist Party has long treated religious groups as a threat to its control over society and so has subjected them to a political vetting process.

Although China's constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief, in practice the Party insists that all faiths submit to intrusive monitoring and control. An "evil cult" law adopted in 1979 gives the Party power to declare any group illegal.

The law says that whoever “organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil cult organizations or sabotages the implementation of the State’s laws and administrative regulations by utilizing superstition” can be imprisoned for anywhere between three years and life. In practice, the Chinese government has substantially used the evil-cult law to demonize and shut down legitimate faiths.

It is difficult to influence the Chinese government’s treatment of religion because it views all organized groups as potential security threats. Many countries have been unwilling to confront China directly on this issue because of its view of organized religions as an existential security threat.

Perhaps the most effective way to advance religious liberty in China is to tell the stories of Chinese prisoners of conscience who are religious leaders. Those cases are a window into the Party’s systematic violation of freedom of religion.

Mr. Wu’s imprisonment is an example of how Beijing is tightening control over Buddhism as practiced by the Han people, who make up 90% of the country’s population. In the past, such groups were given greater leeway.

Up until now, the religious authorities mainly targeted ethnic minorities, and the plight of these groups are more widely known. For years, the authorities in the region of Xinjiang have shut down mosques and restricted the observance of Muslim customs. In Tibet, the continued detention of Buddhist monk Tenzin Delek Rinpoche is a small part of the decades-long campaign to suppress Tibetan culture, impose “patriotic education” and reduce religious practice.

Christians in China are also a marginalized minority. Last July Pastor Zhang Shaojie was jailed for 12 years. Catholic Bishop James Su Zhimin has been in detention for the past 17 years. While official Christian groups are tolerated, the state continues to demolish other churches, confiscate bibles and detain leaders.

The detainees are not only wrongly imprisoned but often tortured. It is only by consistent, repeated and public demands by governments and the U.N. for the release of these prisoners of conscience, for changes in policies that directly discriminate against religious practice, and for reform of arbitrary national security laws used against people of faith that the Chinese government can be forced to confront these issues.

Mr. Genser is an international human-rights lawyer and serves as counsel to Wu Zeheng.