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# **CHINA: Church of Almighty God persecution continues to increase**

## **Church of Almighty God persecution continues to increase**

*The “2021 Annual Report on the Chinese Communist Government’s Persecution of The Church of Almighty God” is rich in statistics– and every number hides a tragedy.*

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (09.03.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3wb6brZ> –The Church of Almighty God (CAG), a Chinese Christian new religious movement, is the most persecuted religious organization in China. From 2019, when a report covered the year 2018, the CAG has published yearly reports offering statistical details of the persecution. They show how, year after year, the implacable machine of the CCP repression made the persecution worse.

A report on the year 2021 has now been published. Not even the CAG can keep track of all the cases in China, and statistics are necessarily incomplete. As far as the CAG knows, in 2021, there were at least 68,456 of its members who were directly persecuted by the Chinese authorities, an increase of 25,649 from 2020. A minimum of 11,156 suffered arrest, with a 58% increase from 2020. Of those arrested, 6,125 were subjected to torture or heavy psychological pressures, and 1,452 were given prison sentences. Of those sentenced, 632 received sentences of three years or more, 72 received sentences of seven years or more, and seven were given sentences of 10 years or more (Jia Panpan, for example was sentenced to 13 years).

At least 9 CAG members were persecuted to death. Additionally, at least 57,300 were subjected to various forms of harassment, including according to the report “being forced to write guarantees to relinquish their faith; being photographed, recorded, and surveilled without their consent; collection of their biological data such as fingerprints, blood samples, and hair; being cut off from basic social security; they and their family members being stripped of their right to employment.” At least RMB 250 million (approximately USD \$39 million) in assets were appropriated from The Church of Almighty God and its members by the Chinese authorities in 2021.

Overall, and again the statistics are not complete, in in the period between 2011 and the end of 2021, more than 420,000 CAG devotees were arrested by the Chinese authorities, and “the documented number of believers who have died as a result of

persecution since the Church's establishment has reached 216." Information on 3,636 CAG members detained in 2021 has been published by the Association for the Defense of Human Rights and Religious Freedom (ADHRRF) in its database of prisoners of conscience.

A skeptic may object that these figures come from The Church of Almighty God itself: how can we be sure that they are accurate? We at Bitter Winter regularly receive information from China about members of the CAG (and of many other religions, of course) who are detained, formally arrested, and sentenced. Until June 2021, the Chinese government's China Judgements Online, which is the largest legal data base in the world although it does not include all decisions rendered in China, had published hundreds of decisions sentencing CAG members to jail terms. With my colleagues James T. Richardson and Rosita Šorytė, I was able to publish in 2019 a study of hundreds of cases of sentenced CAG members. We did not use for that study any information coming from the CAG or other independent sources, and only relied on China Judgements Online, an official Chinese website.

Unfortunately, in June 2021 the Chinese authorities realized that human rights activists and scholars abroad, including us at Bitter Winter, were using China Judgements Online to document human rights violations in China. All of a sudden thousands of decisions disappeared, and a new restrictive policy about what is uploaded was adopted. However, before what netizens in China nicknamed "the great purge" of China Judgements Online, the decisions against CAG members published there clearly showed a trend consistent with CAG's own yearly reports.

We also read carefully Chinese governmental media, particularly those who specialize in covering the fight against the "xie jiao" (religious movements banned as "heterodox teachings") and find, if not every day, certainly every week news about dozens and sometimes hundreds of CAG

members who have been arrested. Indeed, the Chinese media periodically announce that the CAG has been eradicated through massive police operations, only to report later that for some mysterious reasons it has reappeared again. Although the CAG itself acknowledges that precise statistics are difficult to compile, we believe that these reports, which do not come from the CAG but from CCP-related sources, confirm that their numbers are generally believable.

Both the CAG report and what the CCP itself publishes are in agreement on the fact that in September 2020 the Chinese authorities launched a three-year “all-out war” against the CAG, a “final solution” aimed at wiping it out from China. This led, as the table we reproduce shows, to large operations in several provinces where thousands were arrested. For the largest waves of arrests, the CAG report offers references to external sources that covered them. They happened in 30 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. Note that due to the situation prevailing in Xinjiang, data about this autonomous region are missing, but we know the CAG has been active there too.

The saddest part of the report details how in 2021 nine CAG members, and possibly more, died as a result of the persecution. On March 4, 2021, a female CAG member from Chongqing died in jail, where she had been since 2014. The conditions of her body indicated that she had likely died during torture. In March, a female CAG member from Henan died in jail as a consequence of not having received medical treatment for her health problems. On April 5, 2021, another female CAG member, from Tianjin, died after having been kept in jail since 2018 despite a deteriorating heart condition that would have suggested proper care elsewhere.

On August 15, and November 7 and 18, 2021, two other male members, one from Hubei and another from Sichuan, and a female one from Sichuan also died while detained as a result of torture and abuse. Qin Dafu (1963–2021) died in jail on June

23, 2021. He never received the medical treatment he needed after having been abused.

Liu Zhilin (1951–2021) hanged himself on September 11, 2021, after having been arrested for his CAG faith. He was told that, unless he would cooperate with the authorities and denounce other CAG members, the CCP would make impossible for him to earn a living and provide for his family, and his children would be excluded from the possibility of enrolling in a university. Torn between the pressure from the CCP and his own family, Liu decided to commit suicide.

The report is full at each page of stories about CAG members who were hunted, mistreated by the police, arrested, abused, tortured, and makes for sober reading. While the attention of the world is focused on horrible human rights abuses in Ukraine, we should not forget that in China arbitrary arrests, tortures, and even homicides of those the CCP dehumanizes as followers of “xie jiao,” first and foremost the CAG devotees, are a daily routine.

There is a risk, as many observers of China have noted, that media and politicians in the democratic world succumb to what has been called “persecution fatigue.” When persecution becomes routine, week after week and year after year, it disappears from the news because “every new case sounds just like the previous one,” and media are afraid that their readers will lose interest.

Yet, we should not forget that behind every case and every number in a statistic are real persons, who suffer in their bodies and their souls and are victims of what can only be defined as crimes against humanity. They are victims, but at the same time they are more than victims. The story of the CAG in China is one of extraordinary resilience. It seems that, the more the CAG is persecuted, the more it is able not only to resist but to find new believers prepared to risk their life to affirm their faith. The CCP can torture their bodies,

but cannot enslave their souls.

Photo: *Numbers of CAG Christians Arrested, 2019-2021 – Bitter Winter*

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**Massimo Introvigne** (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* and of the executive board of University of California Press' *Nova Religio*. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the "Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions" of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

[Further reading about FORB in China on HRWF website](#)

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