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RUSSIA: Falun Gong banned for 'religious extremism'

Human Rights Without Frontiers considers the ban a grave violation of religious freedom

HRWF (13.11.2020) – On 10 November, Interfax-Religion, the press agency of the Russian Orthodox Church, announced in a press release:

“A court in the Russian city of Novosibirsk has designated the regional branch of the Chinese sect *Falun Gong*, also known as *Falun Dafa*, as an extremist organization in Russia.

The Khakassia regional organization for spiritual and physical self-improvement in accordance with the Great Law Falun *Falun Dafa* has been designated as an extremist organization and its

activities in the territory of the Russian Federation have been banned, Novosibirsk's Fifth General Court of Appeal said in a ruling handed down at its session on Tuesday.

In July, the Supreme Court of Russia's internal republic of Khakassia refused to recognize *Falun Gong* as an extremist organization. A deputy prosecutor general of Khakassia appealed the decision, and it was later repealed."

And Interfax enumerated a number of problems faced by followers of *Falun* in recent years in their activities throughout Russia:

" In December 2010, a *Falun Gong* exhibition was banned in Elista. In June 2015, officers of law enforcement thwarted the activity of the leader of the sect's cell in Izhevsk. In July 2020, six U.S. and one British non-governmental organization related to *Falun Gong* were recognized as unwelcome in Russia."

Between 2014 and 2019, one of the movement's members was fined and another one was jailed for three days for distributing a book containing the movement's teachings. The two cases were used by prosecutors to file a request to classify the group as extremist.

The movement considers the ban is a fabricated case and will appeal the ruling.

Anti-cult propaganda

In its press release, Interfax quoted a controversial professor in religious studies, Roman Silantyev, who is a staff member of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations and professor at the University of Moscow :

"Prof. Silantyev called the decision to ban *Falun Gong* an important milestone in combating extremism. 'Currently, this

is the world's largest sect. It has been active in Russia as well, and not only in Khakassia. I hope that starting from this moment, it will be possible to ban it throughout the territory of our country, as happened with the Jehovah's Witnesses. This is an occult totalitarian sect based on an interest in qigong. Its founder was able to turn a rather mild practice into rituals dangerous to both the sect's members and the people around them," Silantsev told *Interfax*.

In 2005 Silantsev was relieved from his IIRC (Interreligious Council of Russia) posts after the controversial reception of his book *A Modern History of the Islamic Community in Russia*, criticized both from the Muslim and Orthodox sides.

Along with the notorious anti-cultist activist, Alexander Dvorkin, Prof. Silantsev is known to fuel hate speech against non-Orthodox religious movements.

Human Rights Without Frontiers considers his comments as such and the ban on Falun Gong a violation of religious freedom.

Seven foreign pro-Falun Gong movements declared undesirable in Russia

In July 2020, seven foreign organizations supporting the followers of Chinese religious doctrine Falun Gong or Falun Dafa have been declared undesirable in the Russian Federation, the press service of the Prosecutor General's Office reports.

The organizations added to the so-called undesirable list are America's Global Organization for Falun Gong Prosecution Investigations, Coalition on the Investigation into Prosecution of Falun Gong in China, the World Council for Protection of Prosecuted Falun Gong adepts, Friends of Falun Gong, British Falun Dafa and others, the statement reads.

Activities of these organizations create a hazard to the safety of the Russian Federation, the Prosecutor General's Office stated.

Information on the decision has been forwarded to the Justice

Ministry to add it to the list of international NGOs declared undesirable in Russia, according to prosecutors.

Falun Gong or Falun Dafa is a religious movement founded by its leader Li Hongzhi in China in the early 1990s. After the movement had been banned several its leaders received long prison terms for organizing illegal mass events, infliction of harm to life and health of the doctrine's followers and espionage. Certain Falun Dafa information materials have been declared extremist in Russia.

What is Falung Gong?

In its report **"In Prison For Their Faith 2020"** recently published, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* wrote about Falun Gong:

"The Falun Gong movement (or *Falun Dafa*) began in 1992 in northeast China where Master Li Hongzhi taught about the healing and health benefits of the ancient Chinese practice of Qigong.[1] When he first developed the practice of Falun Gong, he was a government-registered teacher of Qigong. Li drew from the teachings of classical religious traditions –Taoism and Buddhism in particular – to construct a system of beliefs and practices that focus on the cultivation of compassion and virtue in pursuit of human wholeness. He incorporated much of that teaching in his own work and emphasised moral values and the development of character. He focused on three tenets: truthfulness, compassion and forbearance.

In the 1990s, Li travelled across China, giving classes in Falun Gong to audiences ranging from a few hundred to several

thousand. Li's first book appeared in 1993 and his first teaching video was released in 1994. His reputation spread with astonishing speed. By 1999, the government estimated the number of Falun Gong practitioners at 70 million.

At that time, Falun Gong was not politically controversial. However, China, as a totalitarian state, considers any unofficial and unauthorised organisation to be a threat to the one-party state. With Falun Gong's commitment to truthfulness, perhaps it would begin denouncing the rampant corruption across the country. Such thoughts triggered Beijing to start a propaganda campaign against Falun Gong in 1999. It shut off Internet access for websites that mentioned Falun Gong and denounced Falun Gong as a 'heretical organisation' and a menace to social stability.

When those initial measures failed to stunt the movement, the government imprisoned hundreds of thousands of practitioners, subjecting them to forced labour and sometimes torture.

By the late 1990s, Li's movement had spread to most Chinese cities and overseas to centres in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the United States (US). Li Hongzhi left China in 1995 to give lectures to large crowds in several major cities around the world. In 1996, he settled in the US where the Falun Gong movement has established a global media presence from New York City through its newspaper, website *Epoch Times*, and television station *New Tang Dynasty*.

As there are no formalised membership records maintained by Falun Gong, only rough estimates are available for the numbers

of practitioners worldwide. At the peak of its popularity in China, there were an estimated 70 million adherents. Today, some sources estimate that tens of millions continue to practice Falun Gong in China despite experiencing harsh persecution.

Hundreds of thousands are estimated to practice Falun Gong outside of China in over 70 countries worldwide. Li often lectures at conferences of Falun Gong Experience Sharing. In May 2017, he led a conference in Brooklyn, New York, US that was attended by 10,000 practitioners from 58 countries.”

Further reading

Bitter Winter: Falun Gong banned in Khakassia, “Liquidation” threatened in the whole of Russia
<https://bitterwinter.org/falun-gong-banned-in-khakassia/>

Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty: A Siberian court orders Falun Gong movement banned <https://bit.ly/2UkrQd5>

[1] “Falun Gong,” World Religious Spirituality, accessed June 2020.

<https://wrlldrels.org/2012/04/04/fallun-gong2/>.

Photo: AsiaNews.it.

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