

China: Religious freedom rhetoric fails to translate into reality

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As Christmas approaches, the Chinese government has announced measures that are, in the words of the official China Daily, "a significant step forward in the protection of Chinese citizens' religious freedoms." Good news then for all of those being persecuted for their religious activities in China? Good news especially for the prominent church leader Zhang Rongliang, who was detained by police in Henan Province on 1 December, and others detained and imprisoned for their beliefs?

Unfortunately, closer examination of the new "Regulations on Religious Affairs", due to be promulgated on 1 March 2005, shows that there is little change in Chinese policy, where religion is strictly controlled by the government. The rules do not define "religious belief" nor do they give any elaboration of the "normal" and "legitimate" religious activities it is claimed the regulations protect.

While five religions are officially recognised -- Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism -- these are only allowed to organise under the control and scrutiny of the authorities. For example, Catholicism in China exists in the form of the Patriotic Catholic Church of China, which is not united with Rome and its Bishops are chosen by Beijing and not by the Pope. Members of the Roman Catholic Church in China are heavily persecuted, as are members of any other church not among those recognised by the state.

Zhang Rongliang is the leader of the China for Christ Church, one of the largest "house church" networks in China, and is also leader of the Protestant Fangcheng Mother Church. He was detained in Xuzhai village, where he lives, in Zhengzhou city. According to a church member, the police searched every household in the village and confiscated Christian DVDs, other materials and photos revealing Zhang's "connections with foreigners and foreign agencies that showed Zhang had contacted organisations overseas."

Communicating with people overseas can be grounds for imprisonment in China. His wife and child are in hiding. Zhang Rongliang has already been imprisoned five times for his beliefs, for a total of 12 years, during which he was severely tortured. He is the co-author of "House Churches of China - Confession of Faith and Declaration" and he has been mentioned in a number of international media reports on religion in China. This puts him at greater risk of arrest and torture.

The police also raided at least three unofficial "house" churches in nearby Fangcheng county, at around the time they detained Zhang Rongliang.

This case is far from an isolated incident; Amnesty International's recent report "Human rights defenders at risk" (ASA 17/045/2004) included the case of three other members of the unofficial Protestant church, Liu Fenggang, Xu Yonghai and Zhang Shengqi, imprisoned for their peaceful investigation and disclosure of the persecution of fellow Christians in Zhejiang Province.

The three Christians were detained during an intensified crackdown against unofficial churches in Zhejiang Province, launched by the authorities in March 2003. In July 2003, more than a dozen house churches were reportedly destroyed and at least 300 Christians arrested, some were reportedly ill-treated and beaten.

In its indictment against the three men, the procuratorate stated that the charge of "providing state secrets to foreign organizations" was made in connection with Liu Fenggang's decision to write, disseminate and publicise several reports written over a two-year period, documenting the destruction of churches and the harsh treatment suffered by members of underground congregations. According to the indictment, Xu Yonghai, a doctor, sent these documents to a US-based Chinese-language magazine, Christian Life Quarterly, while Zhang Shengqi, a computer technician, e-mailed the reports overseas.

On 6 August 2004, the court sentenced Liu Fenggang to three years, Xu Yonghai, to two years and Zhang Shengqi to one year. These sentences included the period of time that they had already served in pre-trial detention. While Amnesty International has been unable to confirm his release, it is thought that Zhang Shengqi has been released from prison as his

one-year sentence ended in November. However, Liu Fenggang and Xu Yonghai remain imprisoned in Hangzhou Xijiao Prison.

The new regulations do nothing to reduce the restrictions on underground churches or the persecution that accompany them. On the contrary, the new regulations merely define the supervisory role over religious affairs for various government departments and offices. While they may improve the administration of state-recognized religions and allow for input from members of state-recognised churches in some decision-making, there is nothing that would curtail the ongoing patterns of arbitrary detentions, arrests, sentencing and demolition of churches and buildings.

China Daily reports "the new provisions are designed to deal with new situations and issues that have emerged in recent years, with China's rapid socioeconomic development." For China to be taken seriously on these issues, it will have to do more than extending the government's control under the guise of extending religious freedom. If religious freedom is going to exist beyond rhetoric, the Chinese authorities must acknowledge the right of all individuals to peacefully practice their own religious beliefs, whatever they are.