

Pastor Thrown Behind Bars: 'I Must Denounce This Wickedness Openly'

A Chinese pastor and his wife who were arrested alongside 100 church members and detained in southwest China recently are accused of subverting state power, which can carry a prison sentence of up to five years.

Pastor Wang Yi and his wife, Jiang Rong, and other members of their 'underground' Protestant Early Rain Covenant Church in the metropolis of Chengdu, Sichuan province, were picked up from the church, their homes or the streets by police during a raid last month.

While Wang has been criminally detained, his wife has been placed under "residential surveillance at a designated location", which, sources say, is a form of secret detention, the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) reported Dec. 13.

A lawyer who declined to be named told the newspaper she could be held for up to six months and that "the absurdity of this situation [the detention of the pastor's wife ... and] the handling of the case shows how furious the top party leadership is about the church".

The couple's 11-year-old son, meanwhile, is staying with Wang's mother, Chen Yaxue, 73, and both been placed under 24-hour police surveillance.

"They follow us wherever we go ... The surveillance is taking a huge toll on my grandson—he's in shock after [his parents were taken away]. He hasn't slept for two nights," Wang's mother told SCMP.

‘Unlawful Action’

On Tuesday, Dec. 12, police also arrested Wang’s assistant, Li Yingqiang, for “picking a quarrel and inciting trouble,” according to church members.

Li had hidden himself in the first raid and then posted updates on social media, according to AsiaNews, which quoted Li, before he was arrested, as saying: “Even if we are down to our last five, worship and gatherings will still go on because our faith is real ... Persecution is a price worth paying for the Lord. We would rather live through it than to hide our faith, and we hope more Chinese churches will speak up and stand with us.”

Li’s wife, Zhang Xinyue, told SCMP the church would continue to meet: “We will not forsake assemblies. I was frightened at first when it happened but have soon overcome the feeling as we are prepared [for persecution].”

Two days after Wang’s arrest, church members published a letter the pastor had written in September and instructed them to publish if he went missing for more than 48 hours.

In it he wrote that he respected “the authorities God had established in China” and that his aim was not to change institutions. However, he called the government’s persecution of the church “greatly wicked” and an “unlawful action”.

“As a pastor of a Christian church, I must denounce this wickedness openly and severely. The calling that I have received requires me to use non-violent methods to disobey those human laws that disobey the Bible and God,” he wrote.

Human Rights Watch has called on the Chinese government to “immediate release” the pastor and the members of his church who are still being detained.

“The shutdown of a Protestant church in Chengdu epitomizes the

Xi Jinping government's relentless assault on religious freedom in China. It makes a mockery of the government's claim that it respects religious beliefs," said China researcher Yaqiu Wang Dec. 13.

Although an 'underground' church, Early Rain is known for operating openly, including publishing sermons and online studies, and engaging in street evangelism. It also has training facilities for pastors and a primary school which educates 40 children. Its weekly gatherings in different locations in Chengdu are attended by approximately 800 churchgoers.

In September, authorities notified the church that it was violating the government's religious policies as it was not officially registered, according to *The New York Times*.

The church had been raided by police in May, as it prepared to commemorate the 10th anniversary of an earthquake. Wang was arrested alongside 200 church members after the authorities warned him that he did not have the permit necessary to hold such an event.

Wang, a former lawyer and human rights activist, has also been vocal in his criticism of the new religious regulations introduced on Feb. 1, saying they were a violation of religious freedom and that Christians in China should resist them.

As World Watch Monitor has reported, Christians and the church are an enigma to the Chinese government. "The CCP believes the church is a de-stabilizing force, but not because it is bad; in fact, local communities and authorities tend to believe Christians are good people," Aaron Ma, an Asia-based researcher for the Christian advocacy charity Open Doors International, said in June.

"Some suggest that because Christians' allegiance is first and foremost to God and not the Communist Party, there is a

conflict of interests that the party believes can potentially hinder the process of unification. Others are more concerned by what they perceive as potential 'chaos' arising from the huge number of Christians."

China also features on the U.S. State Department's latest list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) for religious-freedom violations, and U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, called the situation in the East Asian country "one of the really worst human rights situations in the world", referring to the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang province but also to the arrests of members of the Early Rain Covenant Church. {eoa}

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