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### China's Banned Churches Defy Regime

By Brian Spegele

BEIJING -- On a recent Sunday at the Beijing Zion Church, Pastor Jin Mingri laid out a vision for Christians in China that contrasts starkly with the ruling Communist Party's tight reins on religion.

"Let your descendants become great politicians like Joseph and Daniel," said Mr. Jin, referring to the Old Testament figures who surmounted challenges to become political leaders. "Let them influence the future course of this country," the pastor said in one of several sermons to his 800-member church.

Mr. Jin is one of a growing group of Protestant leaders challenging China's state-run religious system, in an escalating struggle largely unnoticed by the outside world. For the first time, China's illegal underground churches, whose members are estimated in the tens of millions, are mounting a unified and increasingly organized push for legal recognition.

The government, fearing that faith in God will soon subvert faith in the party, is responding with a stepped up campaign against the churches and the networks uniting them.

The struggle is shaping up as the tensest standoff over religious freedom in China since a brutal crackdown on adherents of Falun Gong in 1999 after they made similar calls for official acceptance, China experts say.

In April, authorities evicted the Shouwang Church, one of Beijing's most popular underground congregations with about 1,000 members, from space it had rented. In response, 17 underground church leaders from across China issued their first government petition -- an unprecedented act of defiance -- seeking an overhaul of China's laws regulating religion. Police have also detained other church leaders, including a popular pastor from Jiangsu earlier this month, who was sentenced to two years in a labor camp for his role in organizing unsanctioned religious meetings.

"The situation is becoming out of control," said Yang Fenggang, director of Purdue University's Center on Religion and Chinese Society and a leading scholar on Chinese church-society relations.

More than a decade after the Falun Gong crackdown, the stakes are higher this time: A full-scale government campaign against underground Christians could risk not only domestic resistance but also damage the country's international standing and bring condemnation from Christians world-wide.

In May, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a government commission, issued a report criticizing China's "stepped up efforts to destroy churches and close 'illegal'

meeting points" for Protestant groups.

Unlike Falun Gong, which was suppressed after tens of thousands of members were arrested and disappeared beginning in 1999, today's Protestant movement may prove harder to put down. A vast national network of underground churches across the country promises to have staying power. No sooner was Shouwang shut down, for example, than Zion became more prominent and Mr. Jin more outspoken. More pastors are waiting in the wings.

Thanks to a little-known underground group of seminaries, new church leaders are being groomed every day. In Beijing alone, about 20 unsanctioned seminaries are training hundreds of students in two- or three-year programs, said Mr. Jin, who helps organize the schools. After students graduate, many are beginning their own underground parishes, continuing the spread of the illegal Protestant groups.

"[The students] all know this is illegal. When they make up their minds to serve, they've thought about these anxieties and problems," Mr. Jin said.

To be sure, tensions won't necessarily lead to an open showdown if both sides agree to compromises. The Communist Party, facing a host of other pressing social problems and a leadership transition next year, may seek to ignore the standoff for now.

Much will depend on decisions by Protestant leaders about how far they want to publicly challenge authorities, China experts say.

The government didn't begin its all-out brutal suppression of Falun Gong until thousands of members descended on central Beijing, effectively forcing a confrontation.

"When Falun Gong organized its sit-in in 1999, the state became really alarmed," said Lian Xi, an expert on the history of Christianity in China at Hanover College in Hanover, Ind. Now, "I think it is the same fear of the Christian church to organize and mobilize the masses."

The government also must consider the precedent it could set by accommodating the Protestants. The concern is, "What if the Muslims in Xinjiang come along or other religious organizations demand the same kind of exception to the current rule?" Mr. Lian said. "It's like opening a floodgate."

The State Administration for Religious Affairs and the Foreign Ministry declined to comment for this article. The State Council Information Office and the National People's Congress didn't respond to requests for comment.

Government thinking was reflected in an April editorial in the state-owned Global Times newspaper following the shutdown of Shouwang. "A church should not become a power which can promote radical change," the editorial said. "Otherwise, the church is not engaged in religion but in politics, which is not allowed for a church."

Tension over Christianity has long existed in China, where there is evidence of Christians worshipping since at least the seventh century.

After Mao Zedong's communists seized power in 1949, they officially recognized five religions: Protestantism, Catholicism, Taoism, Buddhism and Islam. But they heavily restricted worship, destroyed churches and exiled foreign missionaries. During the decade-long Cultural Revolution that started in 1966, religion was banned.

In the years after Mao's death in 1976, China began limited political liberalization that also brought a partial loosening of restrictions on religion, but kept it firmly under state control. Worship is legally permitted only at churches run by the government bodies: for Protestants, the Three Self Patriotic Movement; for Catholics, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Official Chinese organizations also exist for Taoism, Buddhism and Islam.

A decade ago, pastors hid "house churches" in living rooms because organizing religion outside the government's regulated groups is illegal. But in recent years, during periods of relative openness in China, urban churches like Zion began renting meeting space and holding services for hundreds of followers at a time. They are backed by funding from their own increasingly wealthy members and some get money from U.S. and other foreign evangelicals.

The current crackdown is focused on Protestants because of their rapid growth and their increasing organization and defiance, religious experts say. Government-backed data from 2010 said China had about 23 million Protestants, including official and unofficial members. But some scholars believe house churchgoers could range from 30 million to 60 million. By comparison, the officially atheist Communist Party claims 80 million members.

Unlike in the cities, most rural Protestant leaders still preach in secret. But there are growing signs of defiance and organization in the countryside, too. In the small, dusty city of Nanyang in the poor central province of Henan, Zhang Mingxuan runs the Chinese House Church Alliance. Every three months, about 70 pastors from rural house churches across China travel to his home, down back alleys where stray dogs roam alongside street food vendors. The pastors sleep on cement floors, pray and discuss the need for unity.

"My father is God," said Mr. Zhang, dressed on a recent day in a dark suit and a tie, silk-screened with a cross. "He's greater than Hu Jintao," he said, referring to China's president and party leader.

The police have tried to disband Mr. Zhang's group, and routinely harass him, Mr. Zhang said. He has learned to take precautions, juggling a half-dozen cellphones, removing their batteries in part to avoid being tracked by police. The cellphones are an important tool in spreading word across the countryside to various smaller networks.

On a recent weekday morning in a village among the wheat fields outside Nanyang, farmers with dirt-covered feet crouched knee-to-knee on the cement floor of a dimly lit living room. The preacher, a member of the House Church Alliance, delivered Mr. Zhang's message. "Unity is the only way we can move forward," he told the group of about 30 Christians.

Mr. Jin, the Beijing Zion pastor, came to Christianity in the aftermath of Beijing's Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. He was studying at a Beijing university at the time -- as was his friend Jin Tianming, who would go on to lead Shouwang church (the two aren't related) -- and joined demonstrations by students and others demanding political reform.

After the brutal suppression of Tiananmen, "we felt life didn't have meaning whatsoever -- such desperate pain," said Zion's Mr. Jin, who goes by the Christian name Ezra. "Suddenly after hearing the gospel, we were attracted by it."

For a decade beginning in 1992, Mr. Jin preached as a state-backed pastor, but came to see the government's control over religion as too tight. "Basically, the Three Self church doesn't have autonomy," said Mr. Jin. "The government controls them."

As Christianity was growing in China, so were other faiths. One was Falun Gong, a spiritual discipline that combines the moral beliefs of founder Li Hongzhi with meditation and breathing exercises. Its growing popularity in the late 1990s triggered criticism from some government-backed scholars.

In April 1999, some 10,000 Falun Gong believers descended on the Communist Party leadership's fortified compound, Zhongnanhai, in central Beijing. They surrounded it in a silent protest to demand legal recognition. Party leaders, furious that a group they knew little about could organize members nationwide, labeled Falun Gong an "evil cult" and banned it. Tens of thousands of practitioners were detained, according to rights activists. Many were sentenced to time in hard labor camps. Some died in custody.

Mr. Jin left Three Self to study at a seminary in California in 2002, as the fallout from Falun Gong widened. When Mr. Jin, now 42 years old, returned to China in 2007, he was no longer interested in participating in the state church. He founded Beijing Zion, and began preaching independently.

"We have a religious belief just like hungry people have a need to eat something," Mr. Jin said in one of several recent interviews. "The government doesn't need to and also doesn't have the right to decide what you eat, whether you should eat or not."

Soon after his return, Mr. Jin helped start the Beijing Ministerial Prayer Fellowship network. More than 20 other large Chinese cities today have similar urban house-church networks, Mr. Jin said.

Police quickly began pressuring the group, Mr. Jin said, arguing that it was unregistered and illegal. Mr. Jin and others said their goals were prayer, not politics. One time police shut down a building's elevators to prevent the group from entering a meeting hall. The Christians would sometimes have to use a restaurant to pray.

Last year, Mr. Jin and about 20 other prominent urban and rural house-church leaders held meetings to prepare to attend the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, a semiregular summit of global evangelical leaders. More than 200 Chinese house-church leaders planned to attend.

As the delegation arrived at Beijing's airport, bound for the Congress in Cape Town, police blocked them from departing. Many Christians refused to go home. For two days, some of the group holed up at a hotel in the Beijing suburbs. At one point, about 100 police arrived at the hotel to try to break up a meeting of about 30 Christians, said Mr. Jin. They were rounded up and taken home.

In January, the State Administration for Religious Affairs outlined its goals for the year, declaring the state should take "those believers who attend privately established venues and guide them to the activities of registered and open religious venues." The announcement came shortly before a broad new crackdown on dissent prompted by the unrest in the Mideast that has also led to the detention of hundreds of bloggers, lawyers, artists, and rights activists.

After police closed the Shouwang church, its parishioners tried to hold services outdoors each Sunday, only to be rounded up by police. Some have been confined to their homes while others have been expelled to their hometowns in the provinces.

In May, Mr. Jin was slated to send the pastors' petition asking for more religious freedom to the National People's Congress. A few days before, a state security agent visited him, taking him to a nearby coffee shop. The agent "simply said the consequences would be severe," Mr. Jin said. He told the agent he'd think it over.

"This (issue) is very complex, especially in China, where there are no simple religion questions," said Mr. Jin. "Religion and politics are closely bound. We brought our petition to the National People's Congress, not as people who identify ourselves as Christians, but as citizens demanding our rights. Of course, there's political action in this."

He mailed the pastors' petition a few days later. The group hasn't yet received a response.

So far, Mr. Jin has been allowed to continue preaching, though he continues to be visited by security agents. He said he has no plans to back down.

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