



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on April 13, 2011

China Cracks Down on Large Underground Church in Beijing

Leaders of the Shouwang Church, one of China's largest unregistered churches with over 1,000 members, had announced the planned service after government officials, nervous about the large un-approved meetings, had pressured the restaurant owner to stop allowing the church to use his facility. According to witnesses, as church members arrived at the plaza where the peaceful service was to be held, both uniformed police and plain-clothes guards arrested the faithful and hauled them away in buses. The congregation's pastors had been taken into custody earlier, and were not on the scene when the congregants arrived at the outdoor location.



As protests have increased in the Middle East and elsewhere over the past several months, the Chinese government has been cracking down on a wide variety of home-grown opposition, but the aggressive action against the Shouwang congregation, which has been in existence for nearly 20 years, has some Christian leaders concerned that China's large underground church, which far outweighs the country's officially sanctioned Christian churches throughout the country, is now being included in government sweeps.

While China's government-supervised Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Protestant Churches boasts around 20 million members, some estimates place the number of believers in the country's unregistered, illegal churches at well over 100 million. China's repressive government has eased its opposition somewhat to unregistered congregations in recent years, but officials in some areas maintain a hard-line stance against local congregations, with many church leaders suffering severe persecution and even long prison terms. "The authorities give more slack to religious organizations than they used to a decade ago, but they want to harness them to state control," Nicholas Bequelin, an expert on Asia at the organization Human Rights Watch, told the [Los Angeles Times](#). "Religion is a business now. The government sees that and wants to get in on it. If a church refuses to come into the fold or locks horns with authorities, persecution can be severe."

According to the [China Aid Association](#), a Christian group that monitors persecution in the country, as police rounded up scores of the church's worshipers at the outdoor meeting location, many of them sang hymns and prayed as they were taken away to a local school to be fingerprinted and questioned. While most of the worshipers were eventually released, some of the church's leadership, including head pastor Jin Tianming, continued to be held as of April 12. "This has something to do with the severity of the across-the-board crackdown on dissident voices," the *Los Angeles Times* quoted Bob Fu, head of China Aid and a friend of the pastor, as saying.

The [New York Times](#) reported that the government's opposition to the Shouwang church has been



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increasing since 2008, “when the authorities began forcing the 1,000-member congregation out of its rented quarters. In 2009, after an earlier eviction, the church paid 27 million renminbi, or \$4.1 million, for a full floor of an office building but the owner of the space, under pressure from the authorities, has refused to hand over the keys.”

While the government issued no formal statement following its actions against the church, the country’s official news service, Xinhua, released a statement from the head of the Three-Self Protestant group, declaring that Christians ought to be both good followers of God and good citizens. “The love for the country does not conflict with the love for religion,” Cai Kui said, adding that Christians should contribute to “national and social stability and unity.”

A day after the crackdown, the Shouwang Church’s leadership released a statement saying that despite government opposition they would continue to meet in the open air. “The church’s position remains unchanged,” the statement read. “We will continue to gather outdoors until the Lord shows us the way.” But the leaders insisted that the church’s members were not a threat to the government or to security in Beijing, assuring officials that the gatherings were purely religious. “Shouwang’s gathering last Sunday, and future outdoor services, are purely religious activities,” the leaders said in the statement. “They have nothing to do at all with politics or some people’s rights activities.”

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