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CHINA | More Lawyers, Activists Formally Arrested as Crackdown Intensifies

At least 15 Chinese human rights lawyers and activists were formally arrested on suspicion of “subversion of state power” or “inciting subversion of state power.” They include the prominent human rights lawyers Wang Yu and Li Heping, and the Christian activists Liu Yongping and Gou Hongguo.

Wang Yu, the first rights lawyer to be detained in what has been dubbed the “709 Crackdown” beginning on July 9, is accused of “subversion of state power.” A member of Fengrui law firm in Beijing, Wang has worked on numerous cases involving religious freedom, land rights and discrimination. Li Heping, a prominent human rights lawyer who has defended Christians, Falun Gong practitioners and other rights defense lawyers, was formally detained on suspicion of “subversion of state power.”

Christian activists Liu Yongping and Gou Hongguo face the same charge. Both Liu and Gou are church members of an unregistered Protestant church in Beijing. Hu Shigen, an elder at the same church, was formally arrested on suspicion of “subversion of state power” on Jan. 8. According to the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, Hu, Liu and Gou were detained while they were preparing to attend a church gathering. All three have been held incommunicado for six months and have not been allowed meetings with their lawyers since their detention.

Under China’s Criminal Law, “Subversion of state power” and “Inciting subversion of state power,” fall under the category of Crimes of Endangering National Security, carrying maximum penalties of life imprisonment and 15 years in prison, respectively.

The 15 individuals accused of these charges are among over 300 lawyers and activists, as well as relatives and associates, who were interrogated, detained, imprisoned and disappeared between July and December 2015. This crackdown on the legal rights defense community in China comes at a time when many observers believe the space for civil society is shrinking.

A statement issued on the six month anniversary of the beginning of the crackdown signed by 108 civil society organizations, including Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), calls 2015 a year of “exceptional challenges” for civil society in China, including members of religious and socially disadvantaged groups, who were “seized and/or detained in unprecedented scale.”

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We continue to be deeply concerned about the formal arrest of lawyers and activists in China in connection with this crackdown on the rights defense community. Lawyers play an essential role in the defense of human rights. In China, lawyers and rights activists have been instrumental in defending the rights of religious communities and in calling for further improvement of the protection of freedom of religion or belief. We join international human rights organizations, lawyers, and other voices in the international community in calling on China to release those held without legal basis, to protect and uphold the rights of all those detained, and to guarantee the personal rights of lawyers when they perform their duties, as stipulated in the National Human Rights Action Plan of China.”