

Hearings on Religious Persecution in China: Dr. Merle Goldman Oral Testimony

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(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

Dr. Merle Goldman

DR. GOLDMAN: I would like to begin by saying that outside pressure on China to modify or change its treatment of religious groups is going to be very slow, and it's going to take a long time, and its impact will be marginal. I don't mean to start out with such a pessimistic view, but if you study China's history, one of the major features and differences in China's history and Western history is the fact that religion has always been under the control of the state from the beginning of its history, starting back at the beginning of the Confucian state in 2 B.C. And when the Leninist party-state was established in 1949, that made that control that much more severe and that much more tighter.

Under the Confucian system, for the most part, religious believers were left alone. The only time the state really exerted pressure on them was when they gathered together and in many ways became a political movement, something like the Falun Gong today, and wanted some change in the political system, and it usually happened at the end of a dynasty. But on the whole, religion was relatively free except at those moments when you got a kind of mass movement, coming up from below, joining at some kind of a political movement to overthrow the dynasty.

So by having said that, let me then go on to say that doesn't mean it has no impact, but the impact for change in China is going to come domestically, internally, through changes within the political system. And we can only, I think, effect it on the margins.

Now, one of the changes has been the change from the Mao Zedong era to the Deng Xiaoping era, and I would like to use Gene Kirkpatrick's term. They moved from totalitarianism to authoritarianism, and that did make a difference, frankly.

Under the Deng Xiaoping regime that came to power in late 1978, there was immediately a loosening up of controls over personal life and over religious life. Religion then revived; there's just no question about that. And as one of the speakers said today, up until the crackdown on June 4, 1989, religious life was relatively free. At this point, China became more involved in the -- during the Deng Xiaoping era in international organizations, and became a member of the U.N. Human Rights Commission, and when they became a member of the U.N. Commission -- or the Human Rights Commission, that they began to accept some of the concepts of religious freedom from the Western World.

So what I conclude is that as China becomes part of this international organization, whether it's the Human Rights Commission or whether it's the World Trade Organization, they are slowly, reluctantly, but they are influenced by those values.

Now, we could have talked to Mao Zedong and it would not have made any difference. He would not have responded, because he was isolated; he didn't care what the outside world said.

But the post-Mao regime of Deng Xiaoping, despite very harsh, I think, crackdowns, nonetheless are influenced by the outside world. They want to be treated as a respected member of that world. They want to be treated as a major power, and they know they have to play by the rules. And where I have seen this in the Human Rights Commission has been in their acceptance -- it's been slow, there's just no question, but their acceptance, for example, of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Now, you say, "So what?" Well, it's a big deal for them, because they did not recognize the universality of human rights. The only human rights Mao talked about was national rights, sovereign rights. But in the 1980's, they accepted that declaration. They would say that of course sovereign rights and economic rights take priority over political and civil rights, but they did not reject political and civil rights. They have come to the conclusion that they really are interrelated, that economic rights and civil rights are interrelated. Their delegates say that; Jiang Zemin, when he came to the United States, said that; Jiang Zemin said that in a major speech in December of 1998 at a 50th anniversary of U.N. Declaration on Human Rights. So that has had an impact.

Every year we have -- since 1989, we have sought to

bring up a resolution in the United Nations condemning China's human rights practices, its persecution of religious believers. In fact, up to that point, we didn't give any attention to China's human rights abuses. China was our tacit partner in the supposed fight against the former Soviet Union, and we just didn't pay attention to them.

With

the crackdown on the demonstration in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989, we were able in August to pass a resolution, but that was the only one we've been able to pass. Every year I've -- well, every year we have attempted to pass one of those resolutions, and every year we haven't, except for one. We haven't even been able to bring it to a vote. It's always been a no-action, rather than even dealing with the resolution, except in 1995, when Jerry Herrar (phonetic) really went and lobbied the Latin American countries; that our officials in the State Department lobbied the African countries, and we at least had a vote on a resolution. But of course, that did not pass either, because at the last moment Russia switched its vote, and it lost by one vote.

Ever

since, our numbers are getting less and less, but that doesn't really matter. China is really very concerned about this resolution. I called a scholar named Ann Kent, who wrote a very interesting book about China's role on this, and she talked about a form of public shaming, the threat of loss of face. China does not want to lose face on that Commission, and so every year they bring a huge delegation. Members of their delegation -- they bring a large number of what they call NGOs, which of course aren't NGOs, to these meetings in Geneva, and they work the floor; they lobby. The concept is very important to them.

And

so the very fact that we bring this resolution, even if it never passes, means something, and let me explain what we've gotten from it. In 1997 we lost the cosponsorship of the major European countries, France, Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada, and Japan on this issue. In return, China agreed to sign the covenant on economic and social and cultural rights. The following year, 1998, the United States did not, for the first time, cosponsor the resolution; and that year, China signed the covenant on civil and political rights.

Now, all

it is, in signing, you could say, "It's just rhetoric." But it really isn't rhetoric. The Chinese government says these covenants are not operable until they're passed by the National People's Congress. Well, they're not going to be passed by the National People's Congress, at least in the near future; but that certainly is an effort, I think, we should put more attention to, the passing by the National People's Congress.

But why it is important is because it has helped

religious believers, it has helped dissidents. For example, the China democracy party, the first effort to set up an opposition party in China, in 1998, cites or points to China's signing this covenant as justification for what they did. The Falun Gong points to the covenant on civil and political rights as justification for their demands for recognition.

So it is something like the Helsinki Accords that were signed in 1978. It didn't much affect the policies of the government, but it gave great support to those in the former Soviet Union who were trying to bring about change, and which ultimately was a critical factor in overthrowing the Soviet regime. So even though a lot of this is symbolic, it means something to people in China who care to assert their rights; in certain ways, it means something to religious believers.

My view is that the U.S. joining with other countries is much more effective than the U.S. acting alone; that in this time of rising nationalism, it carries more weight, the Chinese are more frightened by it. They can always say -- the Americans say something, and they say, "Oh, there they go again. They're hegemonic. They want to contain us. It's like they want to revive the cold war." But when we are able to get the support of our allies on something like this, it is much more effective, and I believe in this year, 1999 -- I'm sorry, 2000, we will have the support of our allies on a very strong resolution.

Now let me talk about this whole issue of tying human rights issues to the Most Favored Nation treatment. In the early '90s, tying human rights to Most Favored Nation treatment made possible the release of some very important political prisoners. There's no question about that. And they did it usually just before -- the Chinese did it just before this MFN was to come up.

But ever since President Clinton delinked Most Favored treatment from economic sanctions, that no longer happened. And even with the release of political prisoners, they're really not changing China's human rights policy. It has a very, I believe, peripheral impact. So it has become a ritual, but no substance is really there. Therefore, I do support China becoming a member of the World Trade Organization. I do support that we use other means in our Congress to deal with human rights issues, rather than continuing this charade.

And the reason I support them becoming a member is, again, like with Human Rights Commission, they're going to have to be forced to play by the rules; they're going to have to have transparency and rule of law in their business dealings, or at least that's what it calls for; whether that's going to happen is another story, of course. And they will open

their country to the new technology, and that new technology, the pager, the cell phone, the Internet, the E-mail have been extremely effective for human rights group. The China democracy party is very active in using this new technology. It keeps them in contact with the outside world.

One of the reasons why China's government has had such a terrible time bringing the Falun Gong under control, when all their resources of the state are being used against it, is primarily because the Falun Gong is very adept at these new technologies. They can organize protests, and it's very difficult for the government to stop them. And how they got that protest right in front of the party headquarters in 1999, is they did it through use of these new technologies. And so it seems to me the more we open up China to these new technologies, the more these dissident groups and certainly religious groups will have opportunities to get organized.

And then finally, and it really is finally, I would like to say that China's abuse of human rights is going to continue. There's no question about that. But the more that China becomes integrated into the outside world, the more that it is forced to play by the rules, the less those abuses become.

Now, having said that, I have to deal with 1999, because that really has been a step backwards; there's just no question about that. And what I think the reason for the crackdown, for example, on Roman Catholics and other religious groups is what has happened with the Falun Gong; they are truly frightened by that. And I think that is a fact of their history; that throughout Chinese history, the Taiping rebellions in the middle of the 19th Century, the Boxers in the early 20th century, these are religious movements coming up from below and literally breaking down -- the Taiping certainly -- with the beginning of the end of the Ching Dynasty.

And this is not a group that's just in one major city or a couple of major cities. It's everywhere, from Manchuria to Southwest China. So this is something they fear tremendously, and they are cracking down on all religious groups. But it does no good to isolate China and to impose sanctions on them, because you're not going to deal with the real problem. The only way you can deal with it is to bring China into the international community, and frankly, it takes time.

We saw -- the Helsinki Accords were signed in 1978. It wasn't until the late Gorbachev era, the late 1980s, that you really began to see the ending of human rights abuses. This is going to take an equally long time. And frankly, we can act as a form of pressure, but it has to come within China. It's only when they establish democratic and legal institutions

that protect religious freedom that we really will have religious freedom in China.