

China syndrome: Authoritarian habits

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The People's Republic of China marked its 50th anniversary on October 1, and in preparation for the occasion China's Communist Party did more than spruce up the streets of Beijing. It reasserted the authority of the party and made clear in old-style communist fashion that it intends to remain the sole actor in the political realm.

That resolve has been evident in the continuing crackdown on Falun Gong, a popular exercise and meditation movement. In April, after 10,000 adherents of Falun Gong demonstrated in Beijing to protest the detention of movement leaders, authorities arrested thousands of members, banned further meetings, and called for the group's eradication. In September, the *People's Daily* demanded "complete victory" over Falun Gong. "If we don't thoroughly destroy the organizational setup of Falun Gong," said the party newspaper, it will "publicly contend with our party and government in politics."

Falun Gong, which blends Buddhist and Taoist beliefs and claims to cultivate truth, compassion and forbearance, has no stated political agenda. Its leaders insist that practitioners become healthier and more harmonious citizens. So why are China's leaders so worried about a group best known for gathering in city parks for meditative exercise?

China's leaders feel threatened by any organization that can marshal social and political energies outside the party. Mindful of the lessons of 1989 in Eastern Europe, Chinese leaders worry that energies released in religious and social groups could eventually topple their regime. Therefore, despite opening up the economic system to some private enterprise, they remain vigilant against liberalization in other spheres. They aim to preserve the political if not the economic meaning of Mao's revolution.

Recent months have also seen renewed repression of unregistered Christian groups. The First Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, issued in September by the State Department, summarizes the situation: China has persecuted religious believers by means of "harassment, prolonged detention, and incarceration in prison

or 'reform-through-labor' camps and police closure of places of worship."

Such incidents of repressive rule are no surprise to longtime China watchers. But they underscore the difficult series of questions that face those in the West who formulate policy toward China: How will political and religious freedom emerge in China, if it ever does? Will Chinese leaders be able to maintain their experiment in capitalism? Can reformers in China move toward loosening political controls without triggering an authoritarian backlash and perhaps a militaristic adventure?

As these questions indicate, the advocates of human rights must be not only straightforward in assessing China's dismal record on religious freedom, but also shrewd as serpents in assessing how best to help the Chinese to embrace freedom.