Chinese government impunity for crackdown on lawyers fuels decade of repression

International action critical for accountability for "709" crackdown, other violations

(July 7, 2025) Ten years after the Chinese government's widespread crackdown on human rights lawyers, concerned governments and the United Nations should establish an independent, international investigation into Beijing's persecution of civil society. No Chinese authorities have been held accountable for grave rights abuses against lawyers and human rights defenders, emboldening the government to commit increasingly widespread and systematic human rights violations. Those include possible crimes against humanity in the Uyghur region, according to the UN.

On July 9, 2015, authorities across China launched an unprecedented assault on human rights lawyers and rule of law activists, an incident now known as the "709" crackdown. Police seized over 300 lawyers and activists—most of the people undertaking such work. In the days and months that followed, many were forcibly disappeared and dozens arbitrarily detained. Authorities imprisoned ten lawyers and activists on baseless charges, sentencing them to between three to eight years in prison. Officials inflicted collective punishment on family members, including children, for their association with and advocacy for their loved ones.

The "709" crackdown marked a significant increase in Chinese President and Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping's assault on independent civil society, and particularly towards the fledgling community of lawyers who sought to find redress for legal and social issues through the court system.

Over the past decade, our organizations have helped elevate the voices of people affected by the "709" crackdown. On this tenth anniversary, we call collectively for urgent action by concerned governments, including those serving on the UN Human Rights Council.

Human rights lawyers led efforts to promote rule of law

Before the "709" crackdown, human rights lawyers across the country had advocated for redress for their clients and publicized violations of the law and fair trial rights. Lawyers sought to uphold human rights enshrined in international treaties voluntarily ratified by the Chinese government, and basic rights guaranteed in China's Constitution and laws. Lawyers helped advance key rule of law reforms, including abolition of systems of arbitrary detention, such as "re-education through labor" and shuanggui, the Chinese Communist Party's internal disciplinary regime. The lawyers also urged abolition of the hukou, or household registration, system.

> *"As a human rights lawyer, I insisted on speaking truth to power, while seeking to advance freedom of religion and belief, freedom of expression, human dignity, social justice, and peace and democracy."*
>
> - Human rights lawyer detained in the "709" crackdown

Lawyers represented many groups persecuted by authorities, including human rights activists, Tibetans, Falun Gong practitioners, feminist and LGBT advocates, Christians, and victims of state corruption and public health crises such as the tainted baby milk scandal. Some lawyers had been lauded by authorities before facing arrest, like Gao Zhisheng, who in 2001 was named by the Ministry of Justice as one of the country's ten top lawyers. Gao has been forcibly disappeared for nearly eight years after enduring years of state persecution.

Impact of "709" Crackdown

> *"'709' was the first large-scale assault on the legal profession since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Many of the resources of the country were directed towards suppressing lawyers and undermining human rights and rule of law."*
>
> - Human rights advocate and wife of lawyer detained in "709" Crackdown

Many of those arrested received heavy prison sentences on trumped-up national security charges. The eight-year sentence handed down to activist Wu Gan was the longest prison sentence, while lawyer Zhou Shifeng was the most severely punished attorney after being imprisoned for seven years. Police extensively relied on the abusive "residential surveillance at a designated location" (RSDL) system of secret detention, deemed by UN experts to amount to enforced disappearance, and many of the lawyers and activists arbitrary detained during the crackdown were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment.

Following the initial prosecutions, Chinese authorities imposed new measures to further restrict lawyers' ability to practice their profession free from interference or exercise their human rights. The government made legislative changes to administrative measures that increased surveillance and ideological controls over lawyers to restrict the exercise of their human rights, and gave extensive powers to judicial authorities to suspend, cancel or revoke the license of lawyers and or law firms. In the years after these changes, at least 20 lawyers were stripped of their law licenses, and another 26 lawyers were subject to other sanctions, including being forced to leave their law firms due to official pressure, depriving them and their families of income. Beijing also punished those who persevered in advocating for rule of law by handing down even heavier prison sentences, such as the 12-year and 14-year sentences against lawyer Ding Jiaxi and legal advocate Xu Zhiyong in 2023 on the national security charge of "subversion of state power."

Chinese authorities also continue to impose collective punishment on the family members and associates of lawyers and activists swept up in the "709" crackdown. Besides serving unjust prison sentences, many still face daily police surveillance, harassment leading to loss of housing and employment, restrictions on children accessing education, and exit bans that prevent them from leaving the country. Many suffer from the psychological impact of the detentions and ongoing surveillance.

> *"The impact of '709' on me is everywhere. There are high-definition cameras installed outside the entrance of our unit. I cannot get a job and lost my part-time job after national security police spoke to my employer. We were driven away from our rental home after police told the neighbors we are 'traitors.'"*

- Human rights advocate and wife of lawyer detained in "709" crackdown

> *"Post-traumatic stress disorder has strained the family; everyone has varying degrees of anxiety and depression"*
>
> - Human rights activist and wife of lawyer detained in "709" crackdown

While some human rights lawyers courageously continue their work, the Chinese government's "709" crackdown has severely reduced the pool of lawyers willing to challenge the state over its human rights abuses. And over the past decade, authorities have increasingly used key "709" tactics, including RSDL and surveillance and controls against human rights defenders and lawyers upon the completion of their arbitrary prison sentences.

Beijing's assault on civil society requires stronger global response

In the immediate aftermath of the "709" crackdown, several governments and the European Union issued statements of concern. During China's Universal Periodic Reviews at the UN Human Rights Council in the past decade, a number of states called on Chinese authorities to release detained lawyers and defenders and to allow them to work free from interference and harassment. The UN Committee against Torture called for a domestic investigation in 2015. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and several UN human rights experts spoke out about the 709 crackdown, and called for the release of those arbitrarily detained. Last year, the UN expert on the independence of judges and lawyers condemned the Chinese government's disbarment of human rights lawyers and ongoing human rights violations against them.

Yet Chinese authorities have ignored all those calls, and instead broadened and deepened their repression. In the years since the "709" crackdown, Xi's government has carried out possible crimes against humanity in the Uyghur region, dismantled fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong, shuttered schools teaching Tibetan language and culture while requiring students to attend state school, altered the Constitution to permit Xi Jinping to rule for life, and increased transnational repression targeting activists and diaspora outside China.

> *"I hope the international community will severely condemn the Chinese government and hold it accountable to bring justice for the victims! We need increased efforts to support Chinese human rights lawyers and people from all walks of life who contribute to freedom and democracy in China. Let us fight for a ray of light for society."*
>
> - Human rights activist detained during "709" crackdown

The resilience of human rights defenders across China despite a decade of worsening repression is grounded in the desire for the government to fulfil its obligations to uphold the rule of law and universal human rights, including those freely undertaken by joining numerous legally binding international human rights treaties. The UN Human Rights Council and concerned governments should heed the calls from within the country and take steps to hold the Chinese government accountable.

Governments should support the establishment of an independent, international investigation into the Chinese government's human rights violations. Those governments can also increase support

for lawyers and other human rights defenders in China, including their families. Leaders of those states should publicly call—by name—for the release of wrongfully detained human rights lawyers and defenders, including at the UN Human Rights Council, and press that issue in all meetings with Chinese officials. Governments that have or are considering any type of bilateral rule of law cooperation agreements should demand that Chinese authorities drop all charges and quash all convictions against those wrongfully detained for peacefully exercising or advocating human rights.

The UN Human Rights Council should heed the call made by dozens of UN human rights experts since June 2020 and establish a dedicated mechanism to monitor and report on the human rights situation in China. States should also create and seize opportunities to highlight publicly the plight of human rights defenders across and from China at the UN Human Rights Council, including through joint statements, briefings, and side events.

"The most important thing about the '709' crackdown is the unity, bravery and tenacious struggle of lawyers and family members. Without family members taking the lead in rights protection, the name '709' would have been forgotten long ago."

- Human rights activist that led "709" rescue work

Signatories

Alliance for Citizens Rights

Amnesty International

ARTICLE 19

Asian Lawyers Network

Campaign for Uyghurs

China Aid

China Citizen's Movement Alliance

China Democracy Party

Chinese Democracy & Human Rights Alliance

Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation

Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE)

Freedom House

Humanitarian China

Human Rights in China

Human Rights Watch

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

International Service for Human Rights

International Tibet Network

Jewish Movement for Uyghur Freedom

Judicial Reform Foundation

Law Society of England and Wales

Lawyers for Lawyers

Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada

Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders

No Business With Genocide

Safeguard Defenders

Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy

The Rights Practice

Uyghur Projects Foundation

Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation

World Organisation against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders