

INDEPENDENT PEOPLE? ICELAND, FALUN GONG AND THE VISIT OF THE CHINESE PRESIDENT IN 2002

By HERMAN SALTON *

Abstract: *In June 2002, just before the official visit of the Chinese President to Iceland, the Icelandic Government allegedly compiled a blacklist of peaceful Falun Gong practitioners, sent it to Iceland's national airline Icelandair and ordered it to deny passage to them. The series of events that followed – together with the disturbing incidents during the visit – form the object of a substantial, forthcoming Report that this article anticipates. The Icelandic events are not an isolated occurrence but represent one more example – although extraordinarily transparent – of Beijing's bullying diplomacy on foreign soils. They are also a disturbing illustration of how easy it is, for a democratic state, to succumb to the pressures of an authoritarian regime – particularly when the latter has a population of 1.3 billion and an almighty economic power.*

Keywords: *Iceland, Falun Gong, China, Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Movement, Freedom of Religion, Diplomacy.*

A. INTRODUCTION

It was a chilly summer afternoon when I first met Falun Gong practitioners in Reykjavík. That day, the director of the Icelandic Human Rights Centre had scheduled a meeting with some people “about the forthcoming visit of the Chinese president”, as she herself put it to me. Little did we know that the visit would become Iceland's news item of the year and, arguably, the single most controversial episode in the country's well-respected human rights history.

To say that the outcome of the meeting was unexpected is to put it mildly. After a brief introduction of the movement, we were informed that usually-tolerant Iceland was in those very hours implementing a comprehensive anti-Falun Gong policy which consisted in barring the movement altogether during the time of the Chinese president's tour; sending policemen overseas in order to prevent practitioners from boarding Iceland-bound planes; and ordering Icelandic embassies to deny them visas and recall those already issued. Even more worryingly, it appeared that China's officials were following practitioners around and were even trying to intimidate them in various ways—all this on Icelandic soil.

Iceland being the peaceful, sparsely inhabited, proudly independent and highly civilized land that it is, these assertions were surprising if not downright implausible. The Icelandic

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capital is a small town with a population of little more than one hundred thousand where people are either acquainted with, related to or gossip about each other. So try to put Iceland and physical intimidation, anti-protest bans, spying activities and uncovered intelligence in the same sentence and people will almost certainly think that you are suffering from persecution mania. I must admit that, after hearing these allegations from Falun Gong followers, I myself began to have doubts about their mental fitness. It took very little time and effort, however, to find out that the ban was a fact and that more disquieting events were soon to unfold later on, in what was already a surprising day.

It was June 11, 2002, when many Icelanders woke up and discovered that their country was less liberal than they used to think.

B. WHAT HAPPENED IN ICELAND?

1. SETTING UP THE BAN

From 13 to 16 June 2002 the President of the People's Republic of China, Mr Jiang Zemin, paid an official visit to Iceland on the invitation of the President of the Icelandic Republic, Mr Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson. In order to prevent human rights protests against Mr Zemin and consequent disruptions, the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs of Iceland issued, on 11 June 2002, a formal order denying entry to the country of all "known or suspected members"¹ of the spiritual movement called Falun Gong. Falun Gong is a meditation exercise, similar to 'Tai-chi', practised by several million people in China and fifty other countries (Iceland included). Although followers are generally considered peaceful individuals embracing a doctrine of non-violence, in 1999 the Chinese Communist Party declared the movement an "evil cult"² and accused it of killings, destroying lives and threatening social stability. These allegations ushered in a harsh clampdown on Falun Gong members, who were subjected to re-education-through-labour policies that soon escalated into the arrest, torture and death of several hundred practitioners.³ The movement has no record of violence but is confrontational in character and has made a habit of peacefully protesting against Chinese dignitaries abroad. Crucial to the events mentioned in this article, it does not maintain a formal system of membership and it does not keep lists of members.

¹ Icelandic Ministry of Justice, Letter to Icelandair, 11 June 2002. Unless otherwise stated, materials in this article are on file with the author and are contained in my forthcoming *Arctic Totalitarianism? A Report on the Events Surrounding the Official Visit to Iceland of the Chinese President in June 2002* (hereinafter, 'my Report').

² Zhang Haishi: *Combat Cults and Protect Human Rights* (Beijing: New Star 2001). See also *Memorandum on Falun Gong* (Beijing: New Star 2001) (materials provided by the Chinese Embassy in Reykjavík).

³ Amnesty International: *2002 Report*, 2003; Human Rights Watch: *Dangerous Meditation: China's Campaign Against Falun Gong*, 2002.

The ban issued by the Ministry of Justice took various forms. First, in the days preceding the official visit, a detailed list of names, flight and passport numbers of “known or suspected Falun Gong members”⁴ was sent by the Ministry to Iceland’s national airline *Icelandair*, a private company.⁵ Second, in the accompanying letter the airline was told to “refuse carriage to Iceland during the above-mentioned period to known or suspected members of the Falun Gong movement according to lists already submitted to you.”⁶ Third, these documents were also sent to Icelandic diplomatic missions abroad with instructions to deny visas to those on the black list and recall those already issued.⁷ Fourth, passport control of passengers arriving from Schengen countries was fully resumed at Iceland’s International Airport from 8 p.m. on 7 June to midnight, 16 June on grounds of “public policy and national security.”⁸ Finally, the Icelandic government deployed the police at major airports served by *Icelandair* in order to help airline personnel identify Falun Gong members and prevent them from boarding Iceland-bound planes.⁹

2. CONSEQUENCES OF THE BAN

As a direct result of this policy, in June 2002 a considerable number of people were denied entry into Iceland.¹⁰ Some were refused visas by Icelandic embassies; others had their visas cancelled; still others—who possessed both tickets and visas but whose name figured on the blacklist—were denied boarding cards at *Icelandair* check-ins around the world. As a consequence, at least forty people were stranded at Copenhagen airport¹¹; thirty-four in Paris¹²; sixteen in London¹³; sixteen in Boston¹⁴; and dozens more in Frankfurt, Stockholm, Oslo,

⁴ Icelandic Ministry of Justice, Letter to *Icelandair*, cit.

⁵ Icelandic Ministry of Justice, Letter to Icelandic Data Protection Commission (‘Persónuvernd’), 10 September 2002. “Telur tilvist svarta listans sta festa” (“The Black List is a Fact”),

Minneapolis¹⁵, New York, Washington/Baltimore¹⁶, Toronto¹⁷ and other major airports. None of these people carried weapons or other dangerous equipment; none had criminal records of dangerous behaviour; indeed, none had any record of violence whatsoever. Most of them had families (the majority were women, sometimes with children) and friends. All were law-abiding, had valid passports and legally purchased air tickets.

Unsurprisingly, given the unusual nature and scope of the ban, its implementation soon prompted a sequence of bizarre events. On several occasions, Asian-looking people unaffiliated with Falun Gong were stopped, questioned about their spiritual beliefs, and only later allowed to board once it was clear they were not Falun Gong members.¹⁸ In one case a Chinese academic—who was unrelated to Falun Gong and was going to Iceland for a seminar—was denied entry because his name was similar to a practitioner's.¹⁹ In another case, a blacklisted mother was prevented from boarding the plane but her partner and child were not.²⁰ Finally, spelling mistakes by *Icelandair* and Icelandic officials resulted in the 'wrong' people being denied entry into the country.²¹

In this confused situation—and because there are many tourist visa exemptions—several Falun Gong entered Iceland anyway, either before or during the ban. Seventy from Canada, the USA and Australia, for example, arrived at Iceland's International Airport on June 10—only to be interrogated for several hours about their spiritual beliefs, arrested, brought to an impromptu detention centre near the airport and kept there for hours awaiting deportation (which, they were told, was to take place on the first planes available). When news of their

were made to disrupt their visit.²⁴ Still others that, after pressure from the Chinese delegation, some hotel bookings were arbitrarily cancelled.²⁵

The most disconcerting aspect of the whole episode is not so much complaints as such, but the fact that most of them turned out to be accurate. According to various sources, in fact, the allegations were substantiated by a number of Icelanders, not to mention video footage shot by an Icelandic TV station.²⁶ A well-known Icelandic journalist, for example, not only witnessed the spying and photographing of Falun Gong practitioners—he says the Chinese Embassy in Iceland was behind it.²⁷ The Icelandic press, in addition, took several pictures of personnel from the Chinese delegation taking pictures of Falun Gong supporters.²⁸ And some hotel managers reported being pressured by unidentified Chinese-looking officials to cancel hotel bookings made and paid in advance by Falun Gong practitioners, with the result that some dozens of bookings were, in consequence, cancelled throughout the capital. The fact that the hotels were actually pressured by Chinese officials was confirmed to me, in a written statement, by the Icelandic Ministry of Justice.²⁹

4. MY INVESTIGATION AND REPORT

During my time in Iceland I conducted an investigation into the events that preceded, accompanied and followed the June 2002 official visit. The gravity of the allegations called for an especially rigorous methodological approach, which is one of the reasons the enquiry took many months to complete. A considerable number of documents were reviewed, and the institutions and individuals involved were contacted: the Icelandic Ministry of Justice; the Icelandic State Police; *Icelandair*; the Chinese Embassy in Iceland; Falun Gong spokespersons in USA and Europe; and some of the practitioners and Icelanders affected by the June events. The result is a detailed, forthcoming report that this article anticipates.³⁰

²⁴ “Vísað af hóteli þegar þær klæddust Falun Gong-bolum”, (“Thrown Out of a Hotel When They Came Dressed in a Falun Gong T-Shirt”), *Morgunblaðið*, 15 June 2002.

²⁵ “Óvissa ríkir á hótelum og gistiheimilum borgarinnar” (“Uncertainty Prevailing in Hotels in Reykjavik”), *Morgunblaðið* 13 June 2002.

²⁶ For interviews with private individuals and description of video footages, see my *Report*.

²⁷ See my Interview in my *Report*.

²⁸ “Tók myndir af mótmælunum” (“A Man from the Chinese Embassy Photographed the Protests”), *Morgunblaðið* 15 June 2002.

²⁹ My interview, cit.

³⁰ For security reasons, only the initials of my interviewees are given here. Anonymous testimonies were *never* accepted.

C. PROBLEMATIC BAN, SINISTER BLACKLIST, DISASTROUS IMPLEMENTATION

1. THE BAN

On June 10, 2002, the Icelandic Ministry of Justice sent a confidential letter to *Icelandair* headquarters in Reykjavík. In it, Permanent Secretary Björn Friðfinnsson informed the airline that the Ministry had been "...empowered to give Icelandair strict instructions to refuse carriage to Iceland during the above period to known or suspected members of the Falun Gong movement".³¹ By way of justification Friðfinnsson said that "[a]ccording to information received by Icelandic authorities, a considerable number of followers of the 'Falun Gong' movement are expected to visit Iceland during this period in order to protest the treatment of that movement in China. As Icelandic Police force is small in number and the expected number of protesters large, it is deemed necessary by the Government to secure public order by limiting the influx of Falun Gong members into Iceland from 12th–16th of June"³². As a matter of fact, the Ministry concluded, "Those who are known or suspected Falun Gong members will be denied entry to Iceland at the Keflavík airport."³³

Because the ban would have hardly been enforceable by Icelandair without further information, the government attached a detailed list of people said to be Falun Gong practitioners. After Friðfinnsson's signature, in fact, the letter prompted the reader to "See lists attached" ("Hjálagt listi" in Icelandic).³⁴ Citing national security reasons,³⁵ the government consistently refused to make public either the letter ordering the ban or the blacklist, and it was only after legal action was taken that it publicised the letter.³⁶ The blacklist, however, remains secret.³⁷

On June 11 the Ministry issued a second letter to *Icelandair* (an English translation of the first letter) as well as a third document, this time addressed to all passengers travelling to Iceland. Apparently broadening the scope of the ban, this note explained that "It has been decided to limit access to Iceland of those who may intend to travel to Iceland in order to participate in protest actions against the President of the People's Republic of China. They will not be issued visitation visas to Iceland while the official visit is in progress and will not be allowed entry into the country until [it] is concluded".³⁸

Following to the governmental ban, *Icelandair* promptly showed its passengers a note informing them of the government's decision. Without explicitly mentioning Falun Gong, the

³¹ Icelandic Ministry of Justice, Letter to Icelandair, cit.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ In 2002 the Icelandic Data Protection Commission wrote: "...the existence of such a list is confirmed and ... the Ministry has used it, including sending it to ... Icelandair". Persónuvernd, Letter to Ministry of Justice, 19 September 2002.

³⁵ Persónuvernd, cit, §4 ('What Happened').

³⁶ Ibid., §3-4.

³⁷ Ibid., § 8.

³⁸ Icelandic Ministry of Justice, Letter to Passengers Travelling to Iceland, 11 June 2002.

airline wrote: “We have been advised by the Government of the Republic of Iceland that it will not permit any person (except a citizen of Iceland) to enter the country whose purpose of travel is to demonstrate, protest, or join a demonstration or protest against the official visit of the President of the People’s Republic of China. Please be advised, therefore, that you may be refused entry into Iceland on arrival and removed directly to the place where you boarded your flight if the Icelandic immigration officials determine that you are travelling to Iceland for this purpose”.³⁹ The airline further asked passengers to “kindly acknowledge receipt of this message by signing below where indicated”⁴⁰ adding that, “by signing this document, [passengers] also expressly agree to fully release *Icelandair* and hold it harmless for any and all claims resulting from being refused entry into Iceland by the Icelandic government.”⁴¹

Despite swift compliance, *Icelandair*’s embarrassment at the government’s decision soon became palpable—a signal, perhaps, of the forthcoming difficulties facing the airline in executing the order. At 2.27 p.m. on June 12 the company’s Public Relations Manager—sensing the likely damage to the airline’s image—issued an “urgent” internal staff memo saying: “The following statement is to be read to people who question denied boarding in regard to the Chinese president’s visit to Iceland. Please do not say **ANYTHING** [bold and capital letters in the original] more than this statement. Do not try to explain the situation, etc. If you have questions please see me”.⁴² The official statement read: “*Icelandair* is a private company not affiliated with the Government of Iceland and is acting under strict order of the Icelandic Government. *Icelandair* has no further comment and advises you to contact the Embassy or Consulate of the Icelandic Government in Reykjavík”.⁴³

2. THE BLACKLIST

Apart from the ban, the existence of an official—but secret—blacklist of Falun Gong practitioners raises a number of questions. Who compiled it? When? Why? And, moreover, how was it done, given that Falun Gong does not keep records of members? According to one practitioner stopped at Copenhagen airport, “The blacklist consists of many pages and all the names are ranked in alphabetical order. Most of the names on the page I saw were Chinese, but there were some Western and non-Chinese names as well.”⁴⁴ Another, stopped at London Heathrow, wrote to me: “I saw the staff at [*Icelandair*] check-in counter looking at the list with a stack of computer print-outs of 2–3 inches thick with a lot of names and details...”.⁴⁵

Authorities in Iceland have consistently taken responsibility for the blacklist. When I interviewed the Permanent Secretary of the Justice Ministry, I asked him if “the Government has a list of Falun Gong practitioners” “We made such a list of people concerned”⁴⁶, he repli-

³⁹ *Icelandair*, Letter to Passengers Travelling to Iceland, 10 June 2002.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Icelandair*, Internal Memo, 12 June 2002.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ My Interview with Y.L., 4 November 2002, § 17.

⁴⁵ My Interview with D.Y., 13 August 2003, § 15.

⁴⁶ My Interview, *cit.*, § 5.

ed. According to the Ministry, the ban and blacklist were exclusively the responsibility of the Icelandic government, while the police were in charge of searching, collecting and assembling the necessary information on Falun Gong practitioners. “The responsibility of this police project was with the Chief of Police Department, that is also responsible for all the data that was made in relation with it, including the list,”⁴⁷ the Ministry wrote.

As for the blacklist sources, the government insist their information came both from the outside (that is, from other countries) and within Iceland itself (following police investigations, enquiries into hotel bookings, questions to incoming passengers at Keflavík airport and interviews at overseas embassies). However, since foreign police authorities have reportedly denied involvement in this issue, since several blacklisted practitioners never ‘came out’ as followers of the discipline nor were interrogated by the Icelandic police, and since Falun Gong is an individual meditation practice, there are a series of problems associated with both these points.

As far as the outside sources are concerned, the Icelandic authorities have been reluctant to provide information—and no wonder, considering that the very existence of a document containing details of people on the basis of their spiritual belief borders on the illegal. “When gathering information”, the Icelandic Police Department loosely wrote in 2002, “we were given a number of names of people coming or wishing to come to Iceland.”⁴⁸ But given names by whom? At first the Ministry pointed in the general direction of “foreign police authorities”.⁴⁹ Then, pressured by the Icelandic Data Protection Commission, it argued that “[i]n accordance with the security of the Icelandic state, it [is] not possible to state specifically in more details...⁵⁰” the sources of information used. Finally, again rebuked for its vagueness by the Commission, the Ministry wrote that the “...information was collected from the authorities...in Germany and the USA”⁵¹, while Interpol was also mentioned as a possible source.⁵² The problem is that, according to Falun Gong, both Germany and the US deny having supplied information to Iceland: “We have enquired with the relevant departments of these and other countries”—the spiritual movement wrote—“and all of them have denied having provided the name list of Falun Gong practitioners to Iceland.”⁵³ Interpol, too, denied involvement, adding that it was “unlikely” their archives contained any information on Falun Gong.⁵⁴ “Under Interpol’s constitution”, the organization wrote in August 2002, “such records may not include any matter of political, military, religious or racial character.”⁵⁵ The sources issue remains therefore to be clarified—and this makes the secrecy practised by the Ministry of Justice lamentable.

⁴⁷ Icelandic Ministry of Justice, Letter to Persónuvernd, 10 September 2002, §3. Icelandic State Police, Letter to Ministry of Justice, 4 September 2002, §2.

⁴⁸ Icelandic State Police, Letter to Ministry of Justice, 4 September 2002, § 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Persónuvernd, cit, §4 (‘What Happened’).

⁵¹ Icelandic Ministry of Justice, Letter to Personal Data Commission, 4 November 2002, §2.

⁵² “Aggressive but Peaceful Protests”, *Morgunblaðið*, 8 June 2002.

⁵³ Falun Gong-Iceland Dialogue Committee, cit., 7.

⁵⁴ Letter by Interpol General Secretariat, 22 August 2002, § 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid., §§ 2-3.

Nor do we know enough about the investigations allegedly carried out by the Icelandic police in order to compile the blacklist. The first question has to do with the exceptional nature of the task. Gathering the names, flight and passport numbers, nationality and birth dates of apparent members of a spiritual movement which itself has no membership records—there are simply too many followers—and whose members are spread all over the world, must have been a massive undertaking—requiring considerable resources. The paradox, however, is that the Icelandic government justified the introduction of the Falun Gong ban precisely on grounds of scarce resources. “Iceland has a very small police force and we only had about 200 officers available,” Stefán Eiríksson, Director of Police and Judicial Affairs at the Ministry of Justice, said.⁵⁶ The government stance sounds equally problematic in light of the acknowledgement of the Ministry of Justice that Icelandic officials were hardly Falun Gong specialists before June either. “Apart from information from the Chinese Embassy”, I asked the Permanent Secretary, “what kind of information did the government have on Falun Gong?” “Most people were ignorant about the Falun Gong,” he replied.⁵⁷

3. IMPLEMENTING THE BAN

Predictably, given the circumstances, the ban immediately stumbled into practical difficulties. Its scope; the many people from different nations it was meant to cover; the difficulties of distinguishing actual practitioners from people who merely looked like they might be practitioners; and the inherently problematic character of a prohibition against members of a peaceful spiritual movement—all contributed to the final outcome: chaos. Visitors who had nothing to do with Falun Gong were stopped and questioned about their spiritual beliefs; people who were not supposed to enter Iceland managed to slip in; a group of seventy practitioners was interrogated, arrested, transferred to a school nearby the airport and freed after a few hours⁵⁸; and, in a clumsy action, a German practitioner was first allowed to reach Iceland, then questioned at Keflavík airport about his spiritual beliefs, admitted into the country, re-questioned again outside while waiting for a bus, then formally arrested and detained for six hours “without charge . . . after legally having entered Iceland”, and finally freed for good.⁵⁹ “They weren’t quite sure what to do”, he wrote.⁶⁰

Events soon proved him right. “[W]e made a mistake when a scientist, who was supposed to come to a conference and had nothing to do with Falun Gong, was prevented from entering the country because he had been put on the list by mistake,” the Ministry of Justice admitted.⁶¹ It was not the only gaffe. E. W., a medical doctor and Falun Gong practitioner, experi-

⁵⁶ “Protesters Are Denied Chance to Air Views”, *Cambridge News*, 26 June 2002.

⁵⁷ My Interview, cit., §9.

⁵⁸ “Falun Gong-iðkendir gista í flugstöðinni og Njarðvík” (“Falun Gong Members sleep in Keflavík Airport Terminal and in Njarðvík”), *Morgunblaðið*, 11 June 2002.

⁵⁹ Falun Gong-Iceland Dialogue Committee, cit, 13.

⁶⁰ My Interview with P.R., 12 November 2002. See also: “German Student Detained in Iceland”, *Associated Press*, 10 June 2002; “German Detained in Iceland Says He Was Questioned about Falun Gong”, *Associated Press*, 10 June 2002.

⁶¹ My Interview, §10.

enced the following. “I went to Boston Logan Airport”, she wrote to me. “One [Icelandair] staff told me to go to talk to the manager while I was waiting for check-in. At the moment, he didn’t know who I was but just judged by my [Asian] face. My passport was taken away. The manager checked my name carefully with a list in his hand. Several minutes later, he told me that I couldn’t board and go to Iceland because my name was on the list. I insisted I would like to see the list and my name spelling on the list. Also, I wanted a copy of the list to protect my rights. He was scared and asked me to wait. Then he went to check my name again. Five minutes later, he came back and said to me: ‘I’m sorry, Madam. It’s a mistake. Your name was not on the list. It’s only because there’s another name on the list, which is very similar to yours’. So I successfully boarded.”⁶²

As this incident suggests—as if the ban and blacklist were not problematic enough—it soon became clear that passengers with Asian traits were mostly singled out for questioning. Nearly all of the seventy people detained by the Icelandic police were Asian-looking, and several of my interviewees maintained this was the case also for those questioned by Icelandic officials. “All Asian-looking passengers before me who were waiting at the customs were stopped and questioned,” Chinese national Y.L. disturbingly recalls, adding that, at Keflavík airport, there was “a special zone for Falun Gong practitioners and Asian-looking people [where] a group of ten tourists from Shanghai with a female interpreter who were not Falun Gong practitioners . . . were also stopped and questioned.”⁶³ This experience was far from isolated. “When I was waiting in line”, another Asian practitioner wrote, “a policeman came to ask for my passport and sent me to a room without giving any reason. There were around 10 people (3–4 males and others are females) in that room, all of them were Asian-looking.”⁶⁴ “There were two practitioners in front of me”, recalls another. “An immigration officer blocked one of them and asked the other to step out of line before reaching the counter. An American couple behind me was curious for what was going on and asked out loud, ‘What is happening to these people? How come any person who looks Chinese is being prevented from entering the country?’.”⁶⁵ Although embarrassed officials did not answer, American citizen W.Z. had little doubt and told a newspaper that “he was not detained because he was white. He said anyone with an Asian face was asked to step to the side for police questioning.”⁶⁶

D. ARCTIC HOST, ICY VISIT:

1. EVENTS AFTER THE ARRIVAL OF THE CHINESE PRESIDENT

Jiang Zemin touched down on Icelandic soil on the evening of June 12, got a taste of the mid-night sun and received a welcome that was as friendly from the authorities as it was icy from

⁶² My Interview with E.W., 23 September 2002.

⁶³ My Interview with Y.L., 4 November 2002.

⁶⁴ Falun Gong-Iceland Dialogue Committee, cit, 31.

⁶⁵ “My Experience Passing Through Customs in Iceland”, *Clearwisdom*, 4 July 2002

⁶⁶ “Pair Recount Iceland Protest”, *Courier Post*, 19 June 2002.

the population.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, what happened while he was on the island did little to warm them to him.

2. PHOTOGRAPHING PRACTITIONERS

Allegations were soon made that, during the presidential visit, members of the Chinese delegation tracked practitioners and took pictures of them. "It is well-known that people from the Chinese Embassy followed Falun Gong practitioners around and took pictures of them"⁶⁸, an Icelander wrote to me. T.S.T., another Icelandic national who joined in the demonstrations but is not affiliated with Falun Gong, confirmed this circumstance and explained that "[a]t Gey-sir... Thingvellir and... Perlan, the Chinese were taking pictures of us"⁶⁹. "At Thingvellir", he continued, "Chinese officials followed us. I parked my car in the parking area where the tourists were staying in their tents; we went in 9–10 rings and these guys from the Chinese Embassy were after my car."⁷⁰

Reykjavík's small size and limited population made it difficult for the photographers to disguise their activities, which were even captured by the Icelandic media. On June 15 *Morgunblaðið* reported that "[a]round one dozen Falun Gong practitioners were at Hofdi yesterday morning... A man in the Chinese president's team walked from Hofdi and took a few pictures of the group."⁷¹ Practitioners say it is normal behaviour when Chinese officials visit foreign countries and that the purpose is to ensure files are up to date, files which, they say, are handed over to foreign governments with a request to deny entrance to such 'undesirable elements'.

3. SPYING ON FALUN GONG ACTIVITIES

The fact that Chinese officials were monitoring practitioners became apparent on June 10, during a Falun Gong press conference at the Hotel Loftleiðir in Reykjavík. L.S., a Swedish practitioner involved in the organization of the event, recalls the incident: "A Chinese man walks in. I ask him: 'Are you sure that you have come to the right place?' He answers 'Yes, I am the *Associated Press* journalist'. I knew it was impossible since I had spoken to the AP journalist less than five minutes ago, and he was far away and not able to come. So I replied: 'I spoke to the AP journalist less than five minutes ago, and it was not you. Now would you please be kind to leave'".⁷² Unluckily for the Chinese, this episode was also witnessed by Channel Two reporter Arni Snaevær, who investigated the identity of this self-proclaimed correspondent and discovered he was in fact a Chinese diplomat. Mr Snaevær, an award-winning

⁶⁷ Jiang's visit caused Iceland's largest political demonstration in recent memory: "Iceland Protesters Give China's Jiang Cold Shoulder", *Reuters*, 14 June 2002; "Frosty Reception for Jiang's Iceland Visit", *The Times*, 15 June 2002; "We Apologize", *Morgunblaðið*, 11 June 2002.

⁶⁸ Interview with T.H., 22 November 2002 and 4 December 2002.

⁶⁹ Interview with T.S.T., 16 November 2002.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ "Tók myndir af mótmælunum" ("Took Pictures of Protestors"), *Morgunblaðið*, 15 June 2002; "Hugleiðsla við Höfða" ("Meditation at Höfði"), *Morgunblaðið*, 14 June 2002.

⁷² My Interview with L.S., 11 October 2002, § 4.

journalist, recalls the event as follows: “An oriental-looking man came into the room where the Falun Gong’s press conference was about to begin. When asked which news organization he represented, he answered Associated Press but couldn’t produce any documentation and then left. After the conference I interviewed a couple of Falun Gong activists. Then a car circled around us and the passenger filmed us. We noted the registration number. Meanwhile the ‘AP journalist’ sat in his car which was parked next to our car. I asked him a couple of questions like ‘Why did you leave instead of producing your press card?’ Then he claimed he wasn’t a journalist and acted like he never came to the press conference and as a matter of fact had never heard of Falun Gong. Actually [he claimed] he was a British citizen, although he spoke somehow broken English and was indeed of oriental origin. We rang [to know] the registration [details] of his car and the previous one: both were rental cars, rented by the Chinese Embassy in Reykjavík.”⁷³

4. PUTTING THE PRESSURE ON HOTEL OWNERS

Another example of improper behaviour concerns the cancellations of hotel bookings. It emerged that, before and during the presidential visit, Chinese officials went to B&Bs and hotels in Reykjavík and candidly asked the management to cancel bookings made—and in some cases pre-paid – by Falun Gong practitioners on the ground that these were dangerous people and that it was in everybody’s interest to dismiss them. More disturbing still is the fact that these Chinese officials were successful (leaving many practitioners without accommodation) and that, in an attempt at convincing reluctant hotel managers, they maintained to be acting in full cooperation with Icelandic authorities (a false claim). These episodes have been officially confirmed to me by the Icelandic authorities: “The press reported that the Chinese Embassy in Iceland pressured Icelandic hotel managers to cancel the bookings of Falun Gong members. Is that true?”, I asked the Permanent Secretary of the Justice Ministry. “Yes”, he answered. “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iceland made an official protest to the Chinese Embassy about this.”⁷⁴ According to *Morgunblaðið*, “the [Chinese] ambassador did not deny the main story of this news. Because of that, he was given a verbal warning regarding the employees’ behaviour.”⁷⁵ “Altogether we know of sixty beds that were cancelled in a mysterious way,” one practitioner wrote to me. “But there might be more. In one of the places fifteen persons were cancelled although they had already paid in advance.”⁷⁶

5. THE POPULAR PROTESTS

Apart from the formal ban, the secret blacklist, the holding back of boarding passes, the allegations of ethnic profiling, the arrests at Keflavík and the allegations of illegal actions by Chi-

⁷³ My Interview with Arni Snaevar, 19 November 2002.

⁷⁴ My Interview, 28 October 2002, Question 15.

⁷⁵ “Mjög óviðeigandi framkoma kínverskra sendiráðsmanna” (“Chinese Embassy Employees Behave in a Very Inappropriate Manner”), *Morgunblaðið*, 26 June 2002.

⁷⁶ My Interview with L.S., 2 October 2002.

nese officials, the week of the presidential visit is likely to be remembered for a number of equally alarming episodes that took place during the demonstrations at all tourist sites visited by Jiang Zemin. During these visits, Chinese officials were reported to be extremely busy ensuring that the demonstrators were kept out of sight of the President—with, according to several people, the assistance of the Icelandic police. “There were many incidents of Icelandic police and Chinese agents vigorously attempting to obscure Jiang Zemin’s view of Falun Gong practitioners,” one of the Falun Gong representatives wrote to me.⁷⁷ D.Y., a British national, confirmed this report and added that, at the Perlan site, “the Chinese delegates stopped their cars at places so as to hinder the sight of practitioners to Jiang.”⁷⁸ One (row) videotape screened by your author at Channel 2 TV Station in Reykjavík, in addition, shows that cars, vans and minibuses were put in front of the protesters—supposedly to prevent them from being seen by the Chinese President.⁷⁹ A second tape suggests that bogus demonstrators were used by the Chinese delegation.⁸⁰ And a third tape features one Icelandic police officer seemingly acting on the orders of Chinese officials and holding what looks like a confiscated Falun Gong banner.⁸¹ Several Icelandic witnesses seem to corroborate this version of events, and are scathingly critical of their own authorities. “The thing that is getting the most attention these days,” one non-Falun Gong person writes, “is how the Icelandic Government has used the police force to block demonstrators out of view, by ‘removing’ them by force and [by] doing other dubious stuff when there are no witnesses [read: photographers] around. I myself watched as police officers received orders to stop harassing demonstrators as their commanding officers noticed a couple of press photographers standing nearby. They were clearly about to do something they weren’t comfortable about the public knowing.”⁸²

Another witness, also unaffiliated with Falun Gong, validates this version and, in colourful terms, blames the Icelandic police of following orders from the Chinese officials: “I saw the Icelandic police harassing people and later breaking their banner”, he wrote to me. “I sat talking to two tourists when that happened, and they were surprised and asked ‘What kind of police is this?’. Then one Chinese took pictures of us while we were talking about the police, and I told them ‘Now you are both on the blacklist’... The police did nothing to help, even when they saw what was taking place they did nothing, they saw the Chinese communists taking pictures of us and did nothing. To tell you the truth, I didn’t see any difference between the Icelandic police and the Chinese Embassy members—the Chinese Embassy was there at Geysir using the Icelandic police like dog or puppet and Icelandic police followed their master like dogs. Whatever the master said, the dog followed without questions.”⁸³

⁷⁷ My Interview with J.N., 19 September 2003.

⁷⁸ My Interview with D.Y., 18 September 2003.

⁷⁹ Tape n. 02-742 (‘Perlan’), recorded 14 June 2002, seen 16 November 2002. Many thanks to Channel 2 TV station for allowing access to this material.

⁸⁰ Tape n. 02-746 (‘Geysir’), recorded 15 June 2002, seen 16 November 2002.

⁸¹ Tape n. 02-735 (‘Bessastade’), recorded 14 June 2002, seen 16 November 2002.

⁸² Report by M.Ö.: *An Eyewitness Account of Jiang Zemin’s Visit to Iceland by a Native of Reykjavík*, Friends of Falun Gong USA, June 2002.

⁸³ My Interview with T.S.T., 16 November 2002.

E. ARE THE ICELANDIC EVENTS ISOLATED?

China's disregard for the sovereignty of democratic countries calls for a dedicated analysis. Here, suffice is to say, as the record of Chinese official visits suggests, that what took place in Iceland may not be the exception to the rule but rather an illustration of Beijing's strategy to export its authoritarian methods abroad.

Examples abound. In Italy, Members of Parliament were told to "be extremely careful [and] ... treat [Falun Gong practitioners] like our Chinese government and people: put them aside with contempt. These moths deserve neither pity nor protection."⁸⁴ In Lithuania, the local government reportedly admitted that when Jiang Zemin visited the Baltic country only a few days before Iceland, "Tibetan protesters were kept at a distance according to instructions from China."⁸⁵ "I could not guarantee that Chinese security officers would not shoot them [peaceful demonstrators] on the spot," the Lithuanian Interior Ministry Chief commented.⁸⁶ In Germany, the Chinese President apparently threatened to leave "if there is a chance of catching a glimpse of the trademark yellow T-shirts of Falun Gong practitioners."⁸⁷ In Switzerland, local authorities caused a diplomatic incident when they allowed Tibetan protesters to demonstrate within earshot of Jiang Zemin: "Don't you have the ability to run this country?", the Chinese President is reported to have snarled at the Swiss Justice Minister. "You have lost a good friend. I have been president of China for ten years and have visited many countries. Everywhere else I have been received warmly."⁸⁸ Finally, these words of the Chinese General Consul in Milan speak for themselves: "We must reinforce and perfect the work of transformation of the thoughts of those who practice Falun Gong. We must monitor very carefully the various Falun Gong activities abroad [by] speedily contrasting and isolating their actions, [and] to some obstinate members of the Falun Gong who continue to create disorders we must give harsh punishments. Generally speaking, we can say that the battle is not far from the end, [so] we must continue our battle."⁸⁹

Sadly, China's bullying seems to be paying off—further proof that putting money above morals is an ever-expanding trend. In Australia, "lawful and peaceful demonstrations outside the Chinese Embassy were banned to avoid upsetting [the] Chinese Foreign Minister ... when he was visiting."⁹⁰ In New Zealand, an innocuous and perfectly legal Falun Gong sign was removed from Auckland Airport after the Chinese Consulate complained that it was "offensive ... because Falun Gong is banned in China."⁹¹ In Mexico, the Chinese President "was spa-

⁸⁴ "Lettera Aperta al Parlamento Italiano", *Europe-China News*, 16 July 2002.

⁸⁵ "Iceland, Lithuania, the US: China Pushes Fight Against Dissent Abroad", *Associated Press*, 8 July 2002.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ "Mexico Spares China Leader an Embarrassing Sight", *Reuters*, 25 October 2002.

⁸⁸ "Outrages of the Week", *National Review*, 18 June 2002.

⁸⁹ "Il Consolato Generale Cinese di Milano ha Organizzato una Riunione per Criticare il Falun Gong", *Europe China News*, 26 Febbraio 2002, § 4. In ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA FALUN DAFA: *Atto di Denuncia-Querela alla Procura della Repubblica presso il Tribunale di Roma*, 7 May 2002.

⁹⁰ "The Disappearance of Freedom", *Taipei Times*, 3 July 2002.

⁹¹ "Auckland Airport Bows to China's Ire", *New Zealand Herald*, 17 July 2002.

red a glimpse of members of a spiritual movement that he has banned when buses hid a small group of demonstrators.”⁹² In the US, a mayor who had issued a proclamation in honour of Falun Gong suddenly revoked it after receiving a high-ranking visitor. “The Chinese Ambassador did make his displeasure clear in no uncertain terms”, a spokesman for the mayor stated, adding that his boss “is well aware of the amount of trade we do with China.”⁹³ In Hong Kong, “immigration authorities have been instructed to bar foreign Falun Gong practitioners from entering the territory based on a blacklist supplied by Beijing”, CNN reported.⁹⁴ Last but not least, in Macau, too, a blacklist emerged on the occasion of a visit by Jiang Zemin—and, according to *The South China Morning Post*, the enclave “has announced openly that Beijing has given it a blacklist.”⁹⁵

Recent developments are not less troubling. In June 2005 Chen Yonglin, the Consul for Political Affairs at the Chinese Consulate in Sydney, resigned from his job, walked into an Australian immigration office and lodged an application for political asylum, accusing his own government of “having up to 1000 spies operating in Australia who have been kidnapping Chinese nationals.”⁹⁶ In a letter to immigration authorities Mr Yonglin wrote that “his work in Australia included monitoring the activities of dissent Chinese groups, including Falun Gong practitioners and supporters of Tibet, Taiwan and Uighur separatists in Western China.”⁹⁷ “Whenever there was an important event, such as a Chinese leader coming to visit”, he said in an interview, “we [the Chinese Consulate in Sydney] would get information from the security body in China. Very detailed information on what, where, and when about [Falun Gong] activities were being planned in protest.”⁹⁸ Mr Yonglin also confirmed that “there are professional spies right in the consulate” and that “they definitely tapped dissidents’ phones.”⁹⁹ Asked about the existence of Falun Gong blacklists, he declared: “When I got there, there were around 800 names on the Falun Gong blacklist”¹⁰⁰, adding that “[o]ne of the other things they did to them ... was to refuse to extend their passports and to confiscate them.”¹⁰¹ “I love

⁹² “Mexico Spares China Leader an Embarrassing Sight”, cit.

⁹³ “Falun Gong Honours Rescinded: State, City Proclamations for Spiritual Group Irked Chinese”, *Washington Post*, 11 December 1999.

⁹⁴ “Freedom Under Fire As Hong Kong Marks Handover Day”, *CNN*, 1 July 2001. “Security Chief Admits to Most Unwanted List”, *South China Morning Post*, 23 May 2001.

⁹⁵ “3000 Activists ‘On Mainland Blacklist’”, *South China Morning Post*, 19 December 1999.

⁹⁶ “Chinese Diplomat Plea for Asylum in Australia Under Investigation”, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)*, 6 June 2005.

⁹⁷ “Howard Rejects Asylum, Trade Link”, *CNN*, 9 June 2005. See also “Chinese Envoy in Hiding as Australia Rejects Asylum Plea”, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 June 2005.

⁹⁸ “Asylum-Seeking Chinese Diplomat Says He Was Told To Harass Falun Gong Followers”, *Radio Free Asia*, 27 June 2005.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*. Mr Yonglin finally mentioned that “his own monitoring activities had also been under scrutiny by [the Beijing-based anti-Falun Gong office] 6-10”. See “Chinese Diplomat Fears Being Sent Home”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 2006.

my country”, he said about the reasons for his desertion. “But I hate the Communist Party for what it did to [China]. My conscience led me to abandon [it].”¹⁰²

A few days after, it was the turn of another Chinese official to defect to Australia. Mr Hao Fengjun used to work for China’s Security Bureau in Tianjin but sought political asylum in Australia during a holiday in February. “As far as I know [Chinese authorities] have spies in the consulate, but they also have a network of spies they have sent out”, he was reported as saying by the BBC.¹⁰³ “They send out businessmen and students to overseas countries as spies. They infiltrate the Falun Gong and other dissident groups.”¹⁰⁴ According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Mr Hao smuggled into Australia over 200 governmental documents in his MP3 player: “ABC TV’s Lateline has had a number of documents translated”, the paper wrote, “which detail information about individual members of Falun Gong in Australia, as well as a secret plan by the movement to sue the Chinese government over human rights abuses.”¹⁰⁵

F. CONCLUSION

“The chief point, and the point towards which I have always directed my course, is independence”, Bjartur of Summerhouses, one of Iceland’s greatest literary characters, says in *Independent People*. “And a man is always independent if the hut he lives in is his own.”¹⁰⁶

Although this article cannot be exhaustive (a legal assessment of the events, for example, requires a separate piece), prima facie evidence seems to exist that, in 2002, Bjartur’s land did not live up to her well-deserved reputation for independence and that, on the contrary, something went wrong at the top of Icelandic institutions—directly affecting practitioners and the Icelandic public alike. The conclusions of the Icelandic Parliamentary Ombudsman, in 2004, that “...there were no reasonable grounds for him to criticise the government...”¹⁰⁷ and that “he did not feel that this issue warranted further consideration...”¹⁰⁸ sounds optimistic. The seriousness of the events is such, we argue on the contrary, that they call for a public enquiry – the only way to restore Iceland’s reputation as a defender of human rights.

¹⁰² “Spie Cinesi Chiedono Asilo e Mettono in Crisi i Rapporti tra Pechino e Canberra”, *Asia News*, 20 June 2005. In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Mr Yonglin says that the Australian government did not interview him, rejected his application within 24 hours, encouraged him to return to his post at the Chinese Consulate and even rang the Consulate. “*The [latter] then called his mobile, at which point he decided to go into hiding*”, BBC News reported. See “China Defector Accuses Australia”, *BBC News*, 6 June 2005.

¹⁰³ “Second Chinese Man in Asylum Bid”, *BBC News*, 8 June 2005.

¹⁰⁴ “Second Chinese Seeks Asylum in Australia”, *United Press International*, 9 June 2005.

¹⁰⁵ “Chinese Diplomat Fears Being Sent Home”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 2005. See also: “Un Desertor Chino Asegura Que Pekin Tiene Una Red de Espionaje Mundial”, *Terra News*, 8 June 2005; “Un Diplomate Chinois Demande l’Asile Politique en Australie”, 4 June 2005.

¹⁰⁶ Halldór Laxness, *Independent People* (Sjálfstætt folk), New York: Vintage, 1997, 512.

¹⁰⁷ Omboðsmadur Althingis: Summary (Mál 3820/2003), 6 January 2004.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

As for China, Deng Xiaoping used to say of his nation's 'capitalist enemies' that, "[w]hen you have a lot of money, you can afford to huff and puff." Today, there is hardly a better expression to describe his own country's attitude. With the Chinese economy already bigger than those of France, Great Britain, Germany and Japan – and with Beijing set to become the next economic superpower in a matter of decades – democratic states may want to take a closer look at the Dragon's not-exactly-conventional diplomacy. The risk, otherwise, is to sacrifice human rights on the altar of business – and end up like one of the world's oldest democracies: bullied, harassed and humiliated on her very own soil.