

# *China Frees Church Leader After 6 Months in Detention*

By Ian Johnson

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BEIJING — A key figure in one of China’s best-known churches was released on bail this week, six months after she and dozens of other members of the congregation were detained and their church was closed.

The release on Tuesday of Jiang Rong, 46, still leaves her husband, Wang Yi, pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church, and four other church members in detention. According to a church news release posted on the church’s Facebook page, Ms. Jiang was reunited with the couple’s son, Shuya, who had been living without his parents since they were detained on Dec. 9.

News of the release of Ms. Jiang and another church member was confirmed by a human rights lawyer familiar with the case, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of government retribution.

More than 100 members of Early Rain, which is based in the southwestern city of Chengdu, were detained on Dec. 9 as part of a continuing crackdown on churches, mosques and temples not registered with the state. About half of them were quickly released, but 54 were held for a period of days or months.

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The releases this week seemed timed to a clause in Chinese law that allows the authorities to detain people for six months without trial. After that, they have to be criminally detained, formally arrested or released on bail.

The status of Mr. Wang and the other church members still being held was unclear. The church said he was being held in “secret detention.” Church members who have been released from detention said the authorities planned to charge him with “inciting to subvert state power,” a charge that can result in up to 10 years’ imprisonment.

Church members who had been detained also said the authorities were pursuing similar charges against Ms. Jiang, reflecting her senior role in the church. She led prayer and women’s groups, and hosted Bible study groups at their home.

Mr. Wang is one of China’s most prominent pastors. A well-known rights lawyer and essayist, he met President George W. Bush at the White House in 2006, just months after converting to Christianity.

While most Chinese pastors, even those in the unregistered or “underground” church, are fairly apolitical, Mr. Wang took high-profile positions on issues like forced abortions, and he openly prayed for victims of the massacre that crushed the Tiananmen Square democracy movement on June 4, 1989.

Over the past year and a half he had taken even stronger positions. Last year, he spoke out against President Xi Jinping’s abolition of term limits for the presidency and increasingly spoke about the likelihood of his own arrest.

The vast majority of China’s independent churches have been untouched by the recent crackdown. Observers have seen the move against Early Rain, as well as two other high-profile churches, as a signal to churches to avoid politics.

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