

PRISONER PROFILE

Prisoner Name: **Pastor Zhang Shaojie**

Location: **China**

Arrested: **November 2013**

Sentence: **12 years' imprisonment**



Arrest and background

On July 4, 2014, the state-sanctioned Nanle County church pastor, Shaojie Zhang, was sentenced to 12 years in prison in China. Zhang was detained on November 15, 2013, when he met Nanle County authorities in the church — a meeting that turned out to be a set-up in order to detain the pastor. Pastor Zhang was later charged with gathering a crowd to disrupt public order and fraud. He was convicted on both charges.

The alleged victim of fraud, Ms Li Cairen, has been detained in an undisclosed location since December 21, 2013, when police caught her attempting to hide from them at the Zhang household. Pastor Zhang's lawyers explained that when Li's son was killed in a work-related accident in 2010, Zhang helped her negotiate a compensation package with her son's employer. Authorities claim that Pastor Zhang then blackmailed Li for part of the payment. However, as the lawyers pointed out, there is no reason for the victim to be held in a black jail (extra-legal detention centre). It is this unusual detention that led lawyers to speculate that the testimony against Zhang had been coerced.

The Nanle County Christian Church had been in dispute with local government authorities over a plot of land. The authorities wanted the church to relinquish its legally-acquired rights to the land, but the church refused. Pastor Zhang and the church leaders had already drawn up plans to erect a new church building, Bible school and ministry centre on the land, but local government officials wanted to seize the plot and sell it to property developers at a huge profit.

Pastor Zhang and church members decided to go to Beijing to petition for the land, but were prevented by the local government. Then, in November 2013, the pastor and more than 20 other Christians were suddenly detained. Pastor Zhang was tried in April 2014 and sentenced. Church members and local Christians believe the Chinese officials targeted Pastor Zhang to get the land and prevent the ministry of the church from growing. Several thousand members gathered to meet in the old dilapidated church building, as well as in more than 40 cell groups across Nanle County.

Various church members and others suggest this persecution is also linked to a plan to replace Pastor Zhang as the local Three-Self Christian Church President. The church believes their pastor has fallen foul of the authorities because of his frequent defence of marginalised social groups and individuals who have had their rights violated.

'This verdict is totally unacceptable,' said China Aid founder and president Bob Fu. 'This case shows the Chinese Government continues to cover up religious persecution with fabricated criminal charges against an innocent church leader.' Pastor Zhang's family has decided to bring an appeal to Puyang City, hoping for a better result in a higher court than at the county level.

Send a card of encouragement to Pastor Zhang Shaojie

Prison address – c/o Release International, PO Box 54, Orpington, BR5 9RT, Kent

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