



The UIA Institute for the Rule of Law

STATEMENT

Paris, 11 August 2025

**UIA-IROL Expresses Deep Concern about the Situation of Human Rights
Lawyers and Defenders in China**

As July 2025 marked the 10th anniversary of the “709 crackdown” on human rights lawyers, defenders and activists, UIA-IROL remains concerned about the significant and increasing challenges and risks that defending human rights and representing clients in politically sensitive cases, as well as upholding the rule of law, implicate for legal professionals and human rights defenders in China.

- ***The “709 Crackdown”***

Starting on 9 July 2015, the Chinese authorities launched an unprecedented large-scale wave of arrests, detentions and interrogations across China, targeting lawyers and other persons associated to their work, including law firm employees, legal support staff and activists. About 300 hundred legal professionals and defenders, all committed to human rights and the rule of law, were subsequently summoned, questioned, taken into custody and/or detained in the following weeks and months. Some of them were held incommunicado for months, placed under the grievous “residential surveillance in a designated location” (RSDL), without the possibility of challenging before a court the basis of their deprivation of liberty, which exposed them to serious human rights abuses. In some cases, lawyers indeed reported being subject to physical and psychological torture as well as other forms of ill-treatment. Ten lawyers and activists were sentenced to up to eight years in prison on unsubstantiated and vaguely defined charges related to national security offenses, such as “incitement to subvert state power” and “subversion of state power”. Acts of intimidation and other forms of harassment have also targeted family members of lawyers charged with crimes¹.

Even after serving their time, lawyers regularly reported being subjected to harassment and close surveillance², as well as facing significant challenges for accessing basic services such as housing, employment and even enrolling their children in school.

- ***Ten years after, widespread attacks against Chinese human lawyers and defenders continue***

UIA-IROL notes with deep concern that, a decade after the 709 incident and despite the international mobilisation, the situation for human rights lawyers and defenders in China has not only failed to improve, but has, in fact, become steadily and increasingly constrained, resulting in an effective criminalization of human rights lawyers³. We further share the concerns raised by UN independent experts in some particular cases, that the punitive measures the lawyers may be subjected to constitute

¹ See, for instance, [UA CHN 5/2017](#), 28 April 2017.

² See, for instance, <https://www.uanet.org/en/actions/chinese-lawyer-wang-quanzhang-released-still-subject-restrictions>

³ See, for instance, [“China: Shock at continued crackdown on human rights defenders and lawyers – UN expert”](#), 16 December 2020.

not only a violation of international human rights law and standards, but are “also indicative of a concerning cycle of detaining and indicting human rights defenders and lawyers advocating for the rights of other human rights defenders who have been detained and indicted⁴”.

New regulations which entered into force between 2016 and 2018 (provisions and amendments made to two Chinese administrative regulations: the Administrative Measures for the Practice of Law by Lawyers and the Measures on the Administration of Law Firms), have strengthened the control exerted over lawyers and their management, further restricting legal professionals' ability to defend clients, especially in public, and deterring them from taking high-risk cases. In February 2024⁵, the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers analysed these new administrative regulations on the practice of the legal profession and concluded they were not in line with international standards related to the right to a fair trial and its guarantees, and could in their application, limit the functions of lawyers in China by restricting both their work and their freedoms. The Special Rapporteur also underlined the “patterns apparent from the application of these measures”, including their use to revoke or suspend human rights lawyers' licenses without an appeals process. Dozens of human rights lawyers have been deprived of their license to practise since 2017, including lawyers that have represented those affected by the 709 crackdown.

The continued use of national security related provisions and other broadly and imprecisely defined charges such as “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” and “inciting subversion of state power” to criminalize lawyers and human rights defenders in relation with their peaceful human rights activities remains of particular concern. As consistently stressed by United Nations experts⁶, charges involving vague and imprecise offences “jeopardize the ability of individuals to exercise their fundamental rights and are likely to result in arbitrary deprivation of liberty⁷”.

UIA-IROL also echoes the concerns consistently expressed by international observers and experts⁸ regarding the ongoing use of RSDL against human rights defenders, including lawyers and activists. We reiterate that this coercive measure is incompatible with international human rights law⁹ and could be considered as “tantamount to an enforced disappearance¹⁰”, putting individuals at risk of suffering further human rights violations including torture, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

In this context, UIA-IROL draws attention to recent developments in individual cases involving lawyers who – due to their work - have been for years subjected to persistent harassment and expresses its grave concern over:

- 1) sentencing on 18 April 2025 of prominent human rights lawyer Lu Siwei to 11 months' imprisonment for the alleged offence of ‘illegally crossing the border’ following a closed trial in Chengdu, China. While UIA-IROL welcomes his release on 5 August 2025, it remains concerned about his security;

⁴ See [AL CHN 6/2024](#), 8 April 2024.

⁵ See [AL CHN 1/2024](#), 14 February 2024.

⁶ See, for instance, Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), Report on its Visit to the People's Republic of China [E/CN.4/1998/44/Add.2](#) par. 42-48; [Opinion No. 62/2018](#), par. 57.; [Opinion No. 15/2019](#), par. 33-34; as well as joint statement “China: UN experts gravely concerned by enforced disappearance of three human rights defenders”, 23 March 2020.

⁷ [Opinion No. 15/2019](#), par. 33.

⁸ See, for instance, [OL CHN 15/2018](#), 24 August 2018

⁹ See, for instance, joint statement “China: UN experts gravely concerned by enforced disappearance of three human rights defenders”, 23 March 2020, and Working Group Arbitrary Detention [Opinion No. 82/2020](#), par.45, and [Opinion No. 30/2021](#), par. 52.

¹⁰ See [OL CHN 15/2018](#), 24 August 2018.

- 2) infringement on fair trial rights of lawyer Xie Yang, a Chinese human rights lawyer, who on 30 July 2025 was tried by the Changsha Intermediate Court in Hunan Province behind closed doors on charges of “inciting subversion of state power after having been held in in pre-trial detention for over three and a half years, during which he alleged he was repeatedly tortured.

- ***UIA-IROL’s urgent call for the effective protection of human rights lawyers and defenders in China***

UIA-IROL recalls that lawyers have a crucial role to play in advancing human rights and the rule of law in China. To fulfil this role, they must first be entitled to those same human rights themselves. In this regard, UIA-IROL recalls that China is obliged by its international commitments to respect freedom of expression¹¹ and ensure that no one is subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention¹². It must ensure that no one is deprived of their liberty except on the basis of grounds and procedures established by law. These must be sufficiently precise to prevent overly broad or arbitrary application, and must comply with international human rights standards¹³.

Lawyers are also protected by further specific guarantees to ensure that they are able to perform their professional activities freely, independently and safely. Among those guarantees, Principle 16 of the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, provides that “(g)overnments shall ensure that lawyers (a) are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference; (...); and (c) shall not suffer, or be threatened with, prosecution or administrative, economic or other sanctions for any action taken in accordance with recognized professional duties, standards and ethics.” Article 23 further affirms that “(l)awyers like other citizens are entitled to freedom of expression, belief, association and assembly. In particular, they shall have the right to take part in public discussion of matters concerning the law, the administration of justice and the promotion and protection of human rights.”

UIA-IROL joins the international community and, in particular, the international legal community, in their repeated calls to end all forms of intimidation and harassment against Chinese human rights lawyers, defenders, as well as their families, including in the form of judicial harassment, disciplinary sanctions, non-judicial constraints and surveillance.

UIA-IROL further stresses the urgent need to ensure the independence and freedom of the legal profession in China effectively, in line with all relevant international standards including all those enshrined in the [UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers](#).

UIA-IROL takes this opportunity to express its support for and solidarity with all lawyers who have faced and continue to face all forms of persecution for their courageous commitment to defend human rights and the rule of law in China.

UIA-IROL will continue to monitor this situation closely, and calls on the international legal community to remain vigilant and mobilize in favour of the rule of law, independence of the profession and the protection of lawyers' fundamental rights in China.

¹¹ See [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#), Article 19

¹² *Idem* Article 9

¹³ *Idem* Article 29

More about the UIA-IROL

The Institute for the Rule of Law of the International Association of Lawyers (UIA-IROL) promotes the Rule of Law and supports and defends, in particular, (1) lawyers, judges and human rights defenders who are harassed, threatened and/or persecuted in the exercise of their professions, (2) the independence of the legal and judicial professions, and (3) the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, especially in defense of human rights.

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