

China sentences 'Vulgar Butcher' activist to 8 years' prison

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The Tianjin No. 2 Intermediate People's Court handed down the sentence after finding activist Wu Gan guilty of subverting state power. Wu will appeal the sentence, his lawyer Ge Yongxi said.

In this May 19, 2015 photo, Wu Gan also known as the Ultra Vulgar Butcher is seen behind bars at police station in Nanchang city in eastern China's Jiangxi province.

Beijing: A prominent activist who called himself the Ultra Vulgar Butcher as he mocked and pressured Chinese officials was given an eight-year prison sentence on Tuesday for subversion, the harshest sentence handed down in a sweeping crackdown on rights campaigners.

The Tianjin No. 2 Intermediate People's Court handed down the sentence after finding activist Wu Gan guilty of subverting state power. Wu will appeal the sentence, his lawyer Ge Yongxi told The Associated Press.

Wu had become known among rights advocates and lawyers for his attention-grabbing campaigns. In one, he posed for online portraits brandishing knives that he said he would use to "slaughter the pigs" among local officials who'd done wrong.

In court on Tuesday, Wu struck an irreverent note in his remarks following the sentence, saying he was "grateful to the party for granting me this lofty honor," according to Ge, who was in court.

"I will remain true to our original aspiration, roll up my sleeves and make an extra effort," Wu said, playing on well-known phrases Chinese President Xi Jinping often uses to exhort Communist Party officials to improve their work.

Wu was among the first activists and lawyers caught up in an intense crackdown by authorities that began in 2015. His secretive one-day trial was held in August after a detention of more than two years.

Activists like Wu focused on individual cases instead of challenging Communist Party policy at the national level, making them a greater headache for local officials than for Beijing. But their ability to organize and bring people out on the ground apparently made authorities nervous.

Human rights groups have said that the authorities are persecuting Wu and that it is ironic that his fight for justice for others had cost him his own freedom.

"With extraordinary courage and disdainful words, Wu Gan set the tone for this so-called 'trial' against him," said his friend and fellow Chinese activist Wu Yuren. "It will inspire more and more people to stomp on this government that seems powerful yet doesn't have the authority of the people."

The court said Tuesday in an online statement that Wu Gan had made many remarks online that "attacked state power."

It accused him of hyping cases that "discredited state organs" by organizing illegal public gatherings, causing trouble, and making abusive comments online about other people. It said such actions were part of a series of criminal activities seeking to "overthrow state power and the socialist system."

Wu had also worked as an administrative assistant at the Beijing Fengrui Law Firm, which had worked on sensitive cases and became the focus of the authorities' crackdown that began in July 2015. Hundreds of lawyers, activists and others were detained in a coordinated nationwide sweep that sent a chill through China's activist community. Many were later released.

Vaguely defined subversion charges are frequently leveled against human rights activists and perceived political foes of the ruling Communist Party.

Wu had been detained in May 2015, after travelling to the southeastern city of Nanchang to put pressure on a judge. Defense lawyers had been denied access to files in a case in which four men were serving prison time for a double murder despite a later confession from a fifth man. Wu had said on social media that he planned to hold a mock funeral for the judge, and was arrested after unfurling a banner that insulted him.

In a separate case Tuesday, a court in central China convicted the lawyer Xie Yang for inciting subversion of state power but said he was exempted from criminal penalties.

Xie had been detained for two years before he was released on bail in May after he admitted to the charges. Even after his release, his wife said, Xie was followed by security agents everywhere he went.

Four months prior to his release, Xie's family had released a jailhouse statement from him saying he had been tortured in custody with repeated beatings, starvation and dehydration. It said that if he publicly confessed at any point in the future, it would be because he broke down under enormous government pressure and coercion.

In May, Xie pleaded guilty at his trial to inciting subversion of state power and read from a prepared statement denouncing his past activism. He also recanted the allegation of torture, which had gained international attention.

Xie said he accepted the verdict and would not appeal, according to a video of part of the hearing posted on the Changsha City Intermediate People's Court's official microblog site.

Amnesty International's China Researcher Patrick Poon said it was "disgraceful" that the Chinese authorities chose to deal with Wu and Xie's cases the day after Christmas - when diplomats, journalists and the public are less likely to respond.

"By trying to avoid scrutiny from the press and the international community, the Chinese government betrays the fact it knows well these sham trials cannot withstand scrutiny," Poon said.

- AP