



Capsule Report: China

June 1, 2011

The Jasmine Effect: China's New Clampdown

The scent of revolution drifting from the Middle East and North Africa has seen the Central Government of China begin a renewed attack on freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of association, of proportions not seen since the lead-up to the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008.

In the months since the calls for “jasmine” revolution spread from Tunisia in December 2010, the rule of law in China has effectively been rendered irrelevant, with journalists, lawyers, human rights activists and students illegally incarcerated, harassed and intimidated. A tight net has been cast around information published by journalists or circulated online by citizens.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) considers that there are grave breaches of human rights occurring with increasing frequency and recommends urgent action be taken by international organisations to bring China's authorities to account.

The spread of popular uprisings, known as “jasmine” revolutions, in Tunisia and Egypt through to neighbouring countries in late 2010 and early 2011 received global attention, no less from China's authorities. Media in China barely reported the news of the overthrow of Egypt's regime that came with President Hosni Mubarak's resignation on February 11, with the exception of emphasising that the Central Government had evacuated Chinese nationals from the country for their safety.

However when a Chinese lawyer in Shanghai posted “celebration for Egypt” to her Twitter feed, she was quickly interrogated by a security officer in Shanghai on February 15. The hint of revolution reverberated through the nervous system of China's administration.

Sunday protest call brings rapid response

As “jasmine” sentiments drifted across to China in the days following the overthrow of the Mubarak regime of Egypt, China's Central Government moved quickly to silence any whiff of dissent. Hundreds of people across the country were interrogated and detained by security bureau officers without due process. On Saturday, February 19, anonymous online posts called for “Chinese jasmine revolution” protests to be held every Sunday, the first within 24 hours. These posts were quickly censored, and on February 19, when the website Boxun (<http://news.boxun.com/>) uploaded similar information, it was shut down by hackers.

On the same day, the President of China, Hu Jintao, held a “seminar” for all key leaders of bureaus and departments of all provincial governments. Hu reminded all leaders to “enhance their social management skills” in order to ensure social stability. Among the eight points in his speech, he emphasised that online opinion must remain within the well-established framework of “supervision of public opinion”, that is to control all negative or sensitive reports that might affect the Government's power. The February 19 speech was widely interpreted as instructions for all authorities to come to grips with “virtual society” online.

Zhou Yongkang, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee with oversight of public security, followed this call on February 20, saying that all Communist leaders should enhance their social management skills in order to protect the status of the Communist Ruling Party. Zhou also made comments clearly designed to coincide with the first protests that appeared in China,



which had been flagged in the online calls for demonstrations. “Ensure all social disagreement and conflicts vanish when they are in sprout,” Zhou said, according to reports.

The same day, numerous uniformed and plain-clothes law enforcement officers, regardless of their designated bureau or department, rushed into the mooted protest areas to supervise the crowds. Many posed as pedestrians, students or street cleaners to take photos and collect information of protest participants and journalists covering the events.

Despite the large police presence on the streets and the censorship of online messages, more than 1000 people reportedly gathered at a public square in Wangfujing, Beijing, one of the suggested protest areas. A few young people were immediately removed by police without reason. One was manhandled by officers when they saw him holding a few stalks of jasmine. Similar cases occurred in Shanghai. On this first Sunday protest, police focused only on participants in the protests.

Spotlight shifts to journalists

Journalists had been blocked, harassed and manhandled by uniformed and plain-clothes officers on February 20, but there were no reports of physical violence. However, the strategy changed at protests on the following Sunday, February 27 – journalists became the targets. At least 16 foreign media professionals suffered various forms of physical violence at the hands of the authorities. One video journalist was pushed to the ground by a uniformed officer and then was kicked and punched by a man believed to be from the security bureau. While on the ground the journalist was also hit on the head by a street cleaner with his broom. In other incidents, plain-clothes officers pretended to be students and approached journalists, attempting to elicit information from them on their attitudes toward the Central Government.

Scores detained on questionable charges

On the first two Sundays, police removed some of those who gathered at the protest areas in a very short period of time, but the actual number of people who were taken away by police was much higher. In the three weeks that followed the first Sunday protest, it is believed that more than 100 people including journalists, artists, bloggers, dissidents, human rights activists and lawyers were interrogated, detained or placed under house arrest without explanation.

Those targeted included writer Ran Yunfei and human rights activists Ding Mao, Chen Wei and Zhu Yufu, who were charged with inciting subversion of state power after they were detained by police on February 19 and 20. Renowned contemporary artist Ai Weiwei remains in detention after being taken by police from Beijing International Airport on April 3, 2011. Prompted by calls from domestic and international organisations questioning the legality of Ai’s arrest, police now allege Ai was involved in tax evasion. Wen Tao, a journalist and associate of Ai, also disappeared on April 3. There is no information available on his whereabouts.

Although there was little evidence that these individuals were involved in China’s so-called “jasmine revolution”, they were charged either because they allegedly passed around information on the protests, or possibly because they posted the single word, “support” in their microblog or Twitter streams. Ren, Chen, Ding and Ai already had a history of criticising the authorities, having spoken out against the Sichuan provincial government following the devastating 2008 earthquake, in which at least 70,000 people were killed.



Meanwhile, the IFJ learned that *Southern Metropolis Daily* newspaper journalist Song Zhibiao is facing losing his job after he penned a May 12 editorial that obliquely endorsed the actions of Ai Weiwei, in a piece which made several references to the artist's work.

Many of the scores of known detainees neither expressed their points of view nor were involved in the protests. But they were imprisoned, often on trumped-up charges such as illegal assembly, inciting social disorder and endangering social security.

Some of those detained have been released, but they have refused to accept any media interviews and have not made any disclosures on social networks, which is unusual. This time, responses are quite different, with one frequent Twitter user saying that many of those detained and then released were not mentioning the "jasmine" issue because the security bureau is tightly monitoring information.

At least two detainees, Hua Chunhui and Wei Qiang, were sent to labour re-education camps. Wei was charged with illegal assembly after he took photographs of the protest at Wangfujing on February 20.

Some journalists and citizen journalists were interrogated or detained by security officers after they reported local news or wrote about Ai Weiwei on their microblogs or in local newspapers to pay tribute to him.

New rules for foreign journalists

The clampdown has seen a dramatic change in the regulations that apply to foreign journalists working in China. According to the regulations for foreign correspondents, which remain in place after they were installed for 2008 Olympics, journalists are permitted to interview any person as long as the interviewee gives consent. In a significant backward step, authorities now demand that journalists seek approval from officials before conducting any interviews. At the same time, several potential interviewees have refused to accept interviews after being pressured by local government authorities.

Students, religious and cultural events restricted

All universities and boarding schools were issued with a notice from authorities ordering that students must not meet in groups on campus. Students were also instructed to report to teachers if they leave school during commemorations for the national day of remembrance, Tomb Sweeping Day, from April 3 to 5. The notice stated that students were not allowed to join any assembly in groups.

Events that see gatherings of groups of people have been banned, including Christian worship, concerts, arts exhibitions, cultural events and even a conference to mark the 100-year anniversary of the 1911 revolution in China. Flower farmers and florists are banned from selling jasmine and all product advertisements of the plant are banned.

Communication under the spotlight

Daily communication between people has become heavily censored. When people say "jasmine" on the phone, the conversation will immediately disconnect. The use of the word is also banned online. Gmail users complained that they had many difficulties accessing their accounts, although Google claimed that thorough checks had revealed the system had no problems. Citizen journalists informed the IFJ that internet services were unexpectedly disconnected by



their local providers because they had visited some “illegal” websites. Some netizens also complained that they had difficulties accessing some overseas websites even when using a VPN to get around China’s so-called Great Firewall.

People are also unable to send any SMS containing the word “jasmine”. Even a famous cultural song, “Jasmine”, was totally banned from video-sharing websites, despite President Hu appearing in one of the videos singing the song on his official visit to Kenya in 2006.

Monopoly facilitates communications censorship

The breakdown in myriad communications is chiefly due to the monopoly communication market that exists in mainland China. The current communication companies are owned by the state, and all internet service providers have to sign a self-regulatory agreement which prevents them from allowing the uploading of “unlawful” messages including, for example, pornography, inciting social unrest, and separatism.

Local governments and some ISPs retain a large number of “online commentators”, some of who are journalists. These online commentators have a lot of responsibilities including the checking of “sensitive” messages and then reporting to online administrators who delete the relevant information. They also have to engage in online forums and chat rooms in order to divert the focus of online comments if people are discussing hot topics such as inflation or property values.

A new body, the State Internet Information Office, was established under the State Council on May 4. Authorities claim that the new office will help improve coordination among government ministries and agencies that have oversight of the internet, but in fact it is clearly aimed at further tightening censorship on the internet. The Vice-minister of Police Bureau, Zhang Xinfeng, is one of the key appointees to the new office. Its head, Wang Chen, is also the deputy head of the Central Propaganda Department and a member of the National Committee of China.

Conclusion and recommendations

The IFJ has serious concerns regarding the heavy-handed reaction by China’s authorities to journalists and human rights defenders in the wake of calls for “jasmine” protests. It is imperative that action be taken now by civil society and human rights organisations in order to bring China’s authorities to account.

The IFJ calls on the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, to appoint a Special Rapporteur to investigate and report to the UN Human Rights Council on human rights violations in China, with special reference to violations of the right of journalists to report freely and independently and the rights of all to freedom of expression and access to information.

The IFJ recommends that human rights and civil society organisations from around the world jointly urge President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao do the following:

- Unconditionally release all people who have been arbitrarily detained in the clampdown since February 2011 and earlier for expressing their opinions or reporting the news.
- Direct law enforcement officers at all level of government to end harassment and obstruction of media personnel and those on whom they report.



**International
Federation
of Journalists**

JACQUELINE PARK
IFJ Asia-Pacific Director
ELISABETH COSTA
General Secretary

- Recognise Article 35 of China's Constitution, which underlines freedom of expression, by removing barriers to the circulation of information through the media and by individuals in print, broadcast or online.
- Protect the fundamental rights of all peoples in China, including their rights to freedom of expression, freedom of the press, access to information and freedom of assembly.

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