

# China and human rights--rhetoric and reality

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In a series of well-publicized events--his televised exchange with Chinese President Jiang Zemin, a speech at Beijing University and the question-and-answer session which followed, an appearance on a radio talk show in Shanghai--President Clinton sought to make 'human rights' the focus of his trip to China.

There are, of course, ample grounds for criticizing the anti-democratic record of the Beijing dictatorship. The Chinese Stalinists preside over a police state, which directs its repression against ethnic minorities in Mongolia, Sinkiang and Tibet, against political dissidents of all persuasions, and, above all, against any organized opposition from the working class.

On the eve of Clinton's arrival, as though to assert their prerogative to suppress domestic criticism, the regime rounded up many prominent dissidents in the cities he was scheduled to visit--Xian, Beijing, Shanghai and Guelin. These were added to the hundreds who remain jailed from the time of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, and the hundreds of thousands imprisoned in forced labor camps.

These facts notwithstanding, there is an enormous element of hypocrisy in the US government's criticism of China's record on human rights. When it was deemed necessary to defend the interests of American investors, or further its Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union, the US government endorsed and helped organize bloody acts of repression: military coups in Indonesia, Chile, Greece, South Korea, Turkey; death squad rule in Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador; police torture in Iran, South Vietnam, Haiti.

Today the Clinton administration backs the regime of Laurent Kabila in Congo, which has slaughtered tens of thousands of Rwandan Hutu refugees, and the US embraces Saudi Arabia, a semi-feudal absolute monarchy. It had the closest relations with the Suharto regime in Indonesia until the longtime dictator stepped down last month.

As for China itself, while Washington officially deplored the massacre of students and workers outside Tiananmen Square in 1989, its policy has been predicated on making use of the Stalinist dictatorship in Beijing, both as an ally in foreign policy and a reliable supplier of cheap labor to American corporations investing in China. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the architect of US rapprochement with Beijing, spoke for the most powerful sections of the US business and government establishment when he wrote that 'no

government in the world would have tolerated indefinite occupation of the central square in its capital.'

But even if one ignores the hypocrisy of Clinton's human rights rhetoric, his use of this phrase as a political slogan raises fundamental political and historical issues. What exactly is meant by this term? In his discussion at Beijing University--where he clearly appeared on the defensive under questioning from students--Clinton cited the following, taken from the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights: 'the right to be treated with dignity; the right to express one's opinions; to choose one's own leaders; to associate freely with others; and to worship, or not, freely, however one chooses.'

This definition limits democratic rights to *political* rights--the right to vote, free speech, freedom of coercion from the state based on religion, ethnicity, etc. It excludes entirely the issue of *social* rights--the right to health care, education, a job at a living wage.

#### Some historical considerations

The conception of democratic rights was developed in the course of the bourgeois revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries, in England, France and America. In the struggle against the feudal order, the demand for political freedom played an enormous and progressive role. The rising capitalist class was able to mobilize the vast majority of the people under the banner of liberty.

In this period some of the finest representatives of the revolutionary bourgeoisie associated legal and political rights with questions of a social character. The revolutionary democrat Tom Paine, in *The Rights of Man*, considered it quite logical and necessary, after making his case against monarchy and for democracy, to argue for the establishment (in 1791!) of a system of social security, including old-age pensions and provisions for widows, orphans and the poor, as well as for state-supported schools and other social services. He wrote:

'When it shall be said in any country in the world my poor are happy: neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want; the taxes are not oppressive; the rational world is my friend, because I am the friend of its happiness: When these things can be said, then may that country boast its Constitution and its Government.'

But once the bourgeoisie had consolidated itself as a ruling class and began to confront opposition from below, from the working class, the limitations of bourgeois liberalism quickly came to the fore. Both Paine's emphasis on social equality and his scathing attack on religion (by then considered necessary as a means of ideological control over the masses) became anathema. The great revolutionary propagandist died in isolation and was buried in a pauper's grave.

Even in its most revolutionary period, during the Jacobin dictatorship, the French bourgeoisie enacted the *Loi La Chapelle* outlawing strikes and trade unionism. In the revolution of 1848, the demands of the working class for jobs and guaranteed wages were denounced as infringements on the liberty of French business owners.

By the end of the 19th century the divorce between democratic rights and social rights was complete. Spokesmen for big business denounced all demands for higher wages, shorter hours, trade union organization and social services such as public education as infringements on 'individual' rights, i.e., the rights of the capitalist property owners to pursue their interests as they saw fit.

Human rights--or the right to exploit?

When he invokes human rights in China, the US president does so in this restricted and purely bourgeois sense, hailing the 'progress' made in the 20 years since Deng Xiaoping began the turn to market relations: the establishment of a substantial framework of legal protection for private property, guarantees to foreign investors, courts to adjudicate business disputes and so on. All these represent an increase in the 'rights' of capital, and of those possessing capital, but not of the Chinese people as a whole.

On the contrary, as Clinton acknowledged in his address at Beijing University, Chinese workers are being compelled to give up the social rights which they once enjoyed as a byproduct of the 1949 revolution: the guarantees of employment, subsidized housing, state-paid medical care and other benefits. He did not address the obvious question: what are the prospects for democracy in a society whose rulers are systematically stripping the vast majority of people of these rights?

Clinton speaks of 'economic freedom'--freedom for Chinese and foreign capitalists to pursue their profit interests without interference by the state--as though there was some necessary connection between this and genuine political freedom for the masses. There is no such connection.

Foreign investment in China has been fueled by the drive of giant transnational corporations to find the cheapest possible labor. They have poured hundreds of billions into China precisely because the Beijing dictatorship offered what an observer once described as a regime of 'free market totalitarianism.' The Chinese working class is deprived of all

rights: there are no genuine trade unions, all public protest is outlawed, all open opposition to conditions of exploitation is suppressed.

Under the impact of global competition and the mounting economic crisis in Asia, the Stalinist bureaucracy is driven to intensify, not relax, its anti-democratic policies. The economic policies pursued by Beijing--with the enthusiastic endorsement of Clinton and Wall Street--cannot be imposed without widespread violence and repression directed at the resistance which such measures will inevitably provoke.

And not only in China. Throughout the world, in every country, the ruling classes are driven by the imperatives of the global market to slash public services and social benefits, privatize state-run industries and destroy good-paying jobs. This cannot be done democratically.

For all Clinton's talk of human rights, he comes to China as the representative of a ruling class in the United States which is undermining and attacking whatever democratic freedoms still remain in America. The United States leads the industrialized world in executing and jailing its own citizens, and is exceeded in some indices of repression only by China itself.

Neither in China nor in the United States can democratic rights be defended or extended through appeals to the ruling elite. Neither the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy nor the American plutocracy will voluntarily relax its grip on power and privilege. The defense of political freedoms, and the establishment of genuine economic security for the masses--good-paying jobs, decent living conditions, guaranteed access to health care and education--require the building of a mass political movement based on the working class.

See Also:

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