

China Democracy Party members face political trials

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Four more members of the banned China Democracy Party (CDP) are expected to be placed on trial soon on charges of subverting the state power. According to the Hong Kong-based Centre for Information on Human Rights and Democracy in China, the four are Wang Zechen and Guo Chengming from the north-east Liaoning province, Tong Shitong from the central province of Hunan and Jiang Qisheng from the Beijing area. With a guilty verdict virtually inevitable, they will join 12 other CDP members sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

On August 2, Zha Jianguo and Gao Hongming, both organisers of the Beijing-Tianjin branch of the CDP, were imprisoned for nine years and eight years respectively. On August 5, She Wanbao received a 12-year sentence and on August 6, Liu Xianbin, a founder of the CDP branch in the south-west Sichuan province, was given 13 years.

Others imprisoned during May were Yue Tianxiang, (10 years), Guo Xinmin, (two years), Wang Fengshan, (two years), Zhang Youju, (four years), and Li Zhiyou, (three years). In December, three CDP leaders were convicted—Qin Yongmin received a 12-year sentence, Wang Youcai, 11 years and Xu Wenli, 13 years. Imprisoned in 1981 for his role in the 1979 “Democracy Wall” movement, Xu was only released in 1993.

In most cases the trials have lasted less than four hours and in at least one case it is alleged the defendant was denied legal representation. At least six more CDP members arrested in the Shanghai-Hangzhou area are also awaiting trial and arrests are continuing in other parts of the country. Last week Chen Wei and Ouyeng Yi, CDP organisers in Suining, Sichuan province, were detained.

The China Democracy Party was established in June last year, shortly before the visit to China by US President Clinton. Its core membership consists of long-standing political dissidents; many previously imprisoned for political crimes. It has close ties with the émigré network of Chinese political exiles and the labour and human

rights groups based in Hong Kong and the United States.

The Chinese Stalinist regime has rejected all attempts to register the CDP. During December, dozens of its members were subjected to house raids and interrogations. In the weeks leading up to the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, up to 200 suspected members were arrested. Most are expected to be tried for subversion.

Both the formation of the China Democracy Party and the rigor with which Beijing is suppressing it reflect the nervousness in China at the rise of social discontent.

Grievances against the government are being expressed among varied social layers. Urban workers are experiencing mass unemployment and the loss of social securities; peasants confront devastating floods and falling commodity prices; and layers of the new middle classes face the end of a decade of relative prosperity as China's economy slows.

The ruling Chinese Communist Party is fearful that any organised opposition could become a political focus for the widespread hostility and alienation of working people. It has crushed all oppositional political, industrial or peasant movements as they have emerged. Now with the official campaign against the quasi-religious Falun Gong sect, the crackdown appears to have been extended to any organisation with an independent base of support.

Ruling circles in China are conscious that the impulses that drove the anti-government upheaval in 1989—anger at the impact of market reforms, hostility to the rampant corruption at all levels of government and outrage at the gap between rich and poor—are not only still present but have intensified. They are also aware that they rest on a thin social layer that continues to benefit materially from the capitalist market and bureaucratic nepotism.

Beijing is determined that there will no repeat of the events of April-May 1989, when student protests were followed by the development of Workers Federations and

the entry into political activity of millions of workers in China's industrial cities. More than any other factor this galvanised the regime to declare martial law and conduct the brutal military assault on Tiananmen Square on June 3-4.

The China Democracy Party is comprised of opponents of the Stalinist bureaucracy, including many who participated in the 1989 movement. But it shares the regime's fear of a movement of the Chinese masses. Animating its formation was the concern expressed in dissident circles that the absence of legally sanctioned opposition parties and trade unions would see unrest assume the form of an elemental, violent and potentially revolutionary confrontation with the regime.

As in 1989, those loosely described as “democrats” are in fact politically conservative. Far from advocating subversion, of which they have been falsely accused, the China Democracy Party aims to divert social discontent behind an officially recognised opposition that works within the existing constitutional and legal framework.

A document submitted last September by the preparatory committee for a CDP branch in the north-east provinces acknowledged the ruling-party status of the Chinese Communist Party and stated that the formation of the CDP would help lessen corruption, monitor the government and maintain social stability.

The principles of the China Democracy Party adopted last June read: “The CDP advocates fair competition in both the economic and political arena, opposes political monopoly and economic monopoly in any forms; the CDP is also committed to promote transparency in political life and administrative efficiency; the CDP calls for social and political institutional transformation in a peaceful and orderly manner, we oppose chaos, we oppose the removal of violence by using violence. We believe that we should achieve our goals through peaceful, rational and non-violent means. We support that political confrontation should be replaced by civilised dialogues...”

In many respects the principles of the CDP embody the social interests of the professional and entrepreneurial middle classes that have blossomed in the urban centres, particularly the coastal provinces. A considerable political shift has taken place in the outlook of this layer. In the 1980s, calls for democracy by dissidents and students aimed at opening up opportunities for the advancement of the middle classes and curbing the monopoly of wealth by the upper echelons of the Stalinist apparatus. The economic and social policies of the regime in the 1990s

have seen such opportunities materialise.

The middle class has benefited substantially and grown dramatically due to the dismantling of state ownership and control of large areas of the economy and the consolidation of capitalist relations throughout China. It now has access to business opportunities, higher incomes, overseas travel, private schools and colleges, the stock market and imported consumer products.

Yet the contradictions of Chinese society are ever present. Within several hours drive from the financial districts and stock market of Shanghai are peasants mired in poverty and backwardness, who earn in a year what middle class teenagers spend on a rock concert ticket. Not far from the wealthy districts of Beijing or Guangzhou are the suburbs where millions labour in some of the world's most oppressive working conditions.

While the middle classes still hold grievances over bureaucratic corruption and their own limited political power, contained in the CDP's references to chaos, violence and confrontation are the anxieties of a relatively privileged strata at the implications of a rebellion by the great mass beneath them. Political reforms and democracy are not being advocated as a means of overcoming the social inequality but as an instrument of maintaining it.

At this point the Chinese regime believes repression is a safer option than allowing the grievances in society to be openly expressed. During April 1989, it allowed a limited political openness and the working class entered into struggle through the cracks in authoritarian rule. The ruling elite has no confidence the China Democracy Party would be any more successful at controlling the masses than the student leaders were in Tiananmen Square.



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