

Chinese police round up protesters in Tiananmen Square

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The Beijing regime was caught by surprise when protesters rallied in Tiananmen Square early on July 1—the 83rd anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—to denounce the government and social injustice. Police detained at least 30 people.

With demonstrations taking place almost daily in China, individual protests and petitions in Beijing and even in Tiananmen Square are not new. What is different is that the July 1 protest was organised with demands that went far beyond single grievances and was timed to coincide with mass demonstrations in Hong Kong. According to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*, some 300 to 400 people from northeastern China held banners and handed out anti-government leaflets in the square.

One of the organisers, Li Guozhu, a 48-year-old former police officer from northeastern Heilongjiang province who lost his job after revealing a local corruption scandal, told the newspaper: “Our goal is to warn the central government to listen to people’s problems, to awaken the society, even if it costs our lives, and to echo the huge outpouring seen in Hong Kong...The system for addressing wrongs isn’t working in China today. Many who complain are beaten. For many common people these days, there’s little hope.”

According to Zheng Mingfang, a protest leader who talked to Agence France Press (AFP), the group originally applied for a rally of 10,000 people in Tiananmen Square from the Beijing Public Security Bureau, seeking to exercise “a right protected in the state constitution”.

The police rejected the application for the protest because it was too critical. It listed 15 government “wrongdoings,” including illegal land seizures, forced evictions, police brutality, unemployment, illegal fees,

refusal to take officially-lodged petitions, and persecution of political dissidents and religious groups, such as Falun Gong.

The last thing the Chinese leadership wanted was a demonstration for broad social and political demands in Tiananmen Square on the same day as the July 1 rally of hundreds of thousands in Hong Kong to demand democratic and social rights.

Despite the lack of police approval, many protesters turned out on July 1 in Tiananmen Square. Most were hiding in crowds, and occasionally revealed themselves by shouting anti-government slogans. Many of those arrested were ordinary residents whose homes were demolished by the government, without compensation, to make way for real estate developments.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported: “In one such incident, 10 people—including an older woman with a tall white hat of the type sometimes worn to funerals and a disabled middle-aged man on crutches—were hauled into a police van after attempting to distribute leaflets.

“In another incident, a disabled man climbed over the rope that fences off the Chinese flag, threw his crutches aside and lay down as his wife dropped to her knees near him. Fellow protestors said the couple’s home had been demolished and the man’s legs broken because he refused to pay bribes to local officials.”

Witnesses told AFP that six buses came to the square to drag people away. “Three women from Jilin province attempted to break through the barriers surrounding the national flag and tried to bring the flag down, but they were restrained by police and taken away,” one said.

Two organisers of other small protests in front of the Beijing city government building on the same day were also detained and held in police custody for a day.

Among them was Ni Yulan, who accused the police of beating and crippling her in 2002, when she was jailed for one year for protesting against being forcibly evicted from her house.

The protest organisers are still planning a lawsuit against the police because no written document of refusal was issued. The Chinese constitution formally guarantees freedom of assembly and association, and other supposed “democratic rights,” but these remain nothing more than empty clauses.

In March this year, the Beijing leadership under President Hu Jintao inserted a vague clause in the constitution to “protect human rights”. The amendment, intended to repair the regime’s oppressive and corrupt image, may have been seized upon by discontented Chinese as a pretext to start staging protests in Tiananmen Square—near the central leadership headquarters and traditionally a venue for mass political demonstrations.

But the legal efforts to appeal to the constitution will almost certainly fail. The regime has little tolerance for political protests, but particularly in Tiananmen Square. Fifteen years ago, the Stalinist bureaucracy initially allowed a wave of student protests in the square for “political reform”. However, the authorities quickly turned to military repression when the students were joined by hundreds of thousands of workers and urban poor, demanding social justice and action against official corruption.

The upheavals in Beijing rapidly became a focus for similar demonstrations across the country. In order to end the crisis, party leader Deng Xiaoping sent troops and tanks to massacre hundreds, if not thousands, of unarmed youth and workers on June 4, 1989. Since then the Stalinist bureaucracy has ruthlessly cracked down on any organised political opposition while opening up the country to foreign investment and capitalist exploitation on a grand scale.

Although it is unclear where all the latest protesters were from and how they were organised, it appears that many came from the northeastern provinces, which have been among the hardest hit by so-called market reforms. Large sections of state-owned industry has been restructured or shut down altogether, resulting in the forced retrenchment of million of workers.

In March 2002, relatively well-organised demonstrations of tens of thousands of laid-off workers

broke out in Daqing, Liaoyang and other industrial cities against factory closures and official corruption. The protests revealed not only widespread resentment but the existence of underground organisations of workers and dissidents.

These organisations, though relatively small and loosely formed, have established networks in workplaces, neighborhoods and even cities, often using the Internet to evade police surveillance. They play a significant role in conducting political discussions, organising petitions and holding demonstrations throughout the country.

The discontent is being fueled by growing social inequality. While international financial circles hail China for creating a new “world factory floor” and pour in billions of dollars worth of investment, the vast majority of Chinese people are suffering dislocation, poverty and injustice.

At a poverty reduction conference in Shanghai during May, the World Bank noted that while absolute poverty—a lack of sufficient food or clothing—had lessened in the past two decades, the vast majority of people remained trapped in substandard conditions. Some 400 million Chinese were still struggling on \$2 a day.

The latest protest in Tienanmen Square, while still small and rudimentary, points to a growing consciousness among layers of workers and others of the need to link together in a broad political struggle against a regime that in no way represents their needs and aspirations.



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