

Martial law declared as unrest deepens in rural China

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15 November 2004

Chinese authorities have imposed martial law in Zhongmou county, in the central Henan province, in response to violent ethnic clashes between thousands of Hui Muslims and Han Chinese on October 27. While the official death toll from the conflict is just seven, the *New York Times* reported that as many as 148 people were killed, including 18 police officers. Several houses were burned and at least 18 people were arrested.

The clashes occurred only six days after a school in Beijing for Chinese Communist Party Politburo members, at which President Hu Jintao emphasised the danger of ethnic divisions destabilising the regime and threatening China's unity.

Thousands of police are patrolling the area and telephone connections have reportedly been disabled. Associated Press (AP) reported: "On Monday [November 1], police officers lined the roads into Langchenggang [the site of the clash] beginning six miles from town. They stopped cars at checkpoints and turned some away. At least four foreign reporters who visited the area were detained."

According to a witness who talked to the Japanese *Kyodo News*, the clash was triggered by a traffic accident in which a Hui taxi driver killed a six-year-old Han girl. The *New York Times* reported on October 31: "Friends and fellow villagers of the young victim, most of them Han, travelled to the taxi driver's village, home mainly to Hui, to demand compensation." The situation escalated, with villagers attacking each other with clubs and other weapons.

Local police called in the paramilitary People's Armed Police, after receiving reports of a 17-truck convoy carrying Hui from other areas to reinforce the villagers already involved in the fighting.

Han Chinese make up 92 percent of China's 1.4 billion population, with 55 ethnic minorities making up the remainder. The 9.8 million Hui Muslims—the fourth largest ethnic group in China—are the descendants of Middle Eastern merchants or ethnic Han Chinese who converted to Islam centuries ago. Large number of Hui lives in the western and central provinces and are generally integrated with the Han population.

The incident in Langchenggang, however, indicates that tensions have been building up. Behind the growth of ethnic conflicts are the deteriorating social conditions of China's 900 million rural population, which includes most of the ethnic minorities. The Stalinist bureaucracy has lost any ability to claim it is "building socialism" in China or bringing into existence an egalitarian society. The 25 years of free market measures has impoverished

hundreds of millions of rural Chinese and forced many off the land.

In the western province of Xingjiang, the failure of the Beijing regime to meet any of the social or democratic aspirations of the population has fueled support for separatism among the province's Uighur Muslim population some of whom are calling for independence from China.

For other Muslim minorities such as the Hui, Beijing's reaction has shattered the promises made following the 1949 revolution that they would be treated as equal members of the Peoples Republic with the Han majority. To galvanise support for the brutal crackdown being carried out against the Uighur population in Xinjiang, the Stalinist regime has promoted Han chauvinism and suspicion of Muslims.

In December 2000, for example, five Hui men were killed by the security forces in the eastern Shangdong province, during a protest against a Han butcher who was provocatively advertising "Muslim pork".

The violence of Hui villagers in the latest incident reflects a community that feels it has no place within the existing political and social order. They face not only the economic difficulties being experienced by rural poor as a whole, but a climate of state-generated prejudice and harassment.

Unrest among ethnic minorities in rural China—generally the most impoverished and oppressed layers of the population—has often been an anticipation of greater upheavals. Hui revolts in the early nineteenth century for example, preceded the massive peasant war, or Taiping Rebellion, against the Manchu dynasty in the 1850s.

In July 1988, a series of demonstrations erupted in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. They were brought to an end by a brutal crackdown, ordered by the current Chinese president Hu Jintao, who was the Communist Party boss of Tibet at the time. Hundreds of Tibetans were killed and some 2,500 imprisoned. A year later, mass anti-government protests erupted in Beijing and other major cities. Hu Jintao was among the first provincial leaders to hail the Chinese military's massacre of hundreds, if not thousands, of workers and youth in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

While the political unrest in 1989 was largely confined to the urban areas, this is no longer the case. Heavy taxation, official corruption and lack of services have compelled millions of farmers to move out of the countryside and looking for jobs in the cities as super-exploited cheap labour. The relentless land requisition to

make way for feverish real estate development or industrial projects has forced many peasants out of their homes, often without proper compensation.

Chinese peasants, alienated from the regime and hostile to its policies, are organising militant protests across the country.

On October 29, an estimated 100,000 farmers demonstrated to demand that the government stop the construction of the Pubugou hydroelectric dam, on the Dadu River in Sichuan province. In order to make way for the dam, the farmers were displaced from their land and relocated to a poorer mountainous area without adequate compensation. The protestors clashed with some 10,000 police. The provincial Communist Party secretary, Zheng Xuezhong, was detained by local farmers for several hours when he visited the area on November 4. The next day, 10,000 troops were deployed to the region to maintain order.

Thousands of farmers continued to surround the township of Hanyuan and the dam until President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and provincial leadership promised higher compensation. The Beijing leaders, however, made clear it would “severely punish” those who led the protest.

The most serious incident in recent weeks was a riot by tens of thousands of people, many of whom had been displaced to make way for the Three Gorges Dam, in the Wanzhou district of Chongqing, in Sichuan province. The eruption was triggered by a brutal assault on a rural migrant worker by a government official.

A professor from the Three Gorges Dam College in Chongqing, Xiong Jianwen, told the *Financial Times* on November 3: “The point is not whether he [the attacker] was really an official or whether the public mistook his identity, but rather the deteriorating relationship between the government and its people.”

The escalating riots and protests in China have provoked alarm in Beijing. The official establishment is engaged in an intensive debate on how to defuse the growing discontent.

The *Washington Post* reported on November 4 that the official estimate of protests—which is believed to be understated—rose 15 percent last year to more than 58,000 separate incidents, involving more than 3 million people. He Zengke, a director of the China Centre for Comparative Politics and Economics, told the *Post* that research institutes such as his, and the government more generally, “are working on this issue day and night.” He said: “We all know the importance and urgency of the problem.”

The Singapore-based *Strait Times* reported on November 6 that political think tanks in Beijing are conducting computer simulations to try to predict what scenarios could produce an outbreak of mass unrest. By using this technique, Professor Niu Wenyuan of the Chinese Academy of Sciences has argued that had the Chinese leadership acted in January 1989, the large-scale protests of May that led to the occupation of Tiananmen Square could have been headed off. He warned that social inequality in China was reaching dimensions that could trigger a major upheaval.

A section of the Chinese ruling elite is arguing that the regime can only control the social tensions by allowing people more channels to express their grievances. Hu Xingdou, a Chinese expert on social inequality, told the *South China Morning Post* on November 4 that China is at a crossroads where issues “like those

of farmers, laid-off workers and ethnic tension all blend together”. He warned China will either “plunge into chaos, or there will be more reform”.

What happened in May-June 1989 is that the Chinese regime did attempt to defuse the growing protests by offering limited concessions to students and middle class intellectuals. The situation continued to escalate, however, as the working class became the dominant force in the movement and raised its own social demands against the inequality being produced by the government’s free market policies. The Beijing regime ultimately turned to the military to protect its position and the interests of the rising capitalist elite.

Due to this experience, the new leadership under Hu Jintao, like the previous leadership, is reluctant to allow any serious expression of opposition, fearing it could rapidly grow into a movement challenging the regime as a whole.

These concerns in Beijing are shared internationally. The US-based thinktank Stratfor, for example, warned on November 1 that the recent incidents are a reminder to Beijing that it has “serious internal problems”. It argued that even though the repercussion could be severe, crackdowns were necessary because allowing unrest in China would have far-reaching implications, “beyond its borders”.

“Beijing is between a rock and a hard place. President Hu’s economic plan is based on the premise that an uncontrolled economy is dangerous and growth must be regulated. Consequently, if China’s economy slows down too much or collapses altogether, violence in the countryside could be expected to increase greatly, further undermining Beijing’s authority. Hu does not want to see a repeat of Tiananmen Square and seems to be committed to a course of moderation, at least for now.... If unrest continues ... however, it will leave Hu with no choice but to use harsher, more direct methods to maintain order and preserve stability.”

Such comments reflect the dependency of the US and international capitalist elite on the Beijing regime and its police-state repression. China has become a crucial source of cheap labour and a manufacturing platform for global corporations. Any mass movement of the Chinese working class for democracy and social equality would directly threaten the stability of world capitalism.



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