

Leading critics detained

Beijing tightens political control over dissent

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The detention of three well-known government critics on December 13 is a further signal that the new leadership in Beijing under President Hu Jintao is tightening its control over dissenting voices.

The dissidents who were detained are Liu Xiaobo, 49, the chairman of the Independent Chinese Pen Centre (ICPC) and a leader of the anti-government movement in May-June 1989, along with two of his associates, Yu Jie, 31 and Zhang Zuhua, 48. All three were released after being interrogated for 24 hours over essays they had published on the Internet.

The three dissidents have repeatedly urged the government to acknowledge that the Tiananmen Square massacre on June 4, 1989 was a “mistake” and to implement “political reforms”. Liu was detained prior to this year’s 15th anniversary of the events in 1989.

Associated Press attempted to interview Liu and Yu after they were released. Both calls were disconnected within seconds, indicating they were being monitored by state security. Police were stationed outside the men’s homes for days and Yu’s lawyer said it was unclear whether the detention was a prelude to a formal arrest or merely a warning.

Yu was interviewed by Agence France Presse (AFP), telling its reporter: “They brought me in to interrogate me on some articles that I had published outside of China. They showed them to me and asked me to confirm that it was I who had written them. They let it be known that they were considered to be attacks against the Communist Party and the Chinese government, including high-level leaders like Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, which was an infringement of the law.”

The targeting of mainland Chinese contributors to the Independent Chinese Pen Centre is not accidental. Formed in 2001, it rapidly emerged as a vehicle for dissidents, both in China and internationally, to criticise the government. In 2003, the ICPC conducted a highly public campaign to win the release of two dissident writers, Liu Di and Du Daobin.

The campaign helped create the political climate for the national outrage vented on the Internet that year over the police killing of a college graduate in Guangdong province. The victim was beaten to death in custody after being detained for not having an urban residential permit—a common occurrence for millions of rural migrant workers. To placate the massive outpouring of anger over the death, the Beijing regime felt compelled to abolish the regulation under which the student was arrested.

Since then discussions on numerous social grievances have taken place on the Internet, while the ICPC has used the medium for further public political activity. In October, the group awarded a prize to Zhang Yihe, the author of a popular, but banned, book on the purge of critics by Mao Zedong in the “anti-rightists” campaign of 1957. Its latest petition was to urge the release of farmers’ rights activist and correspondent for the *New York Times*, Zhao Yan, who was arrested in September 2004.

The Beijing government has grown evermore nervous about the ability of its critics to use the Internet to sidestep China’s strict media censorship. While it is impossible for the Chinese state to track the activity of all of the country’s tens of millions of Internet users, the crackdown on the

leading dissidents is clearly intended as a warning that the regime is watching.

According to a report in the *South China Morning Post* on December 12, Hu used his closing speech to the plenum of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in September 2004 to stress the need for firmer ideological control over society.

Hu’s report was cited by the December issue of the Hong Kong-based *Open* magazine. Hu reportedly reminded the regime of the “lessons” of the collapse of Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, declaring that the CCP could not be “soft” on advocates of “bourgeois liberalisation”—a Stalinist euphemism for parliamentary democracy, press freedoms and adherence to international human rights legislation. Hu accused government and party officials who had advocated major political reforms of “creating confusion”.

Reflecting the fears in the regime, Beijing’s mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily*, declared in a comment on November 23: “Historical experiences have demonstrated that when hostile forces trigger unrest in a society or overthrow a regime, they often firstly make a breakthrough in ideology or by creating confusion in people’s thinking.”

A party newspaper editor cited by the *South China Morning Post* declared the regime was attempting to use the “old ideology”—meaning the pseudo-socialist phraseology common under Mao and Deng Xiaoping—as a means to head off widespread social discontent. “The party expects that veering to the left of the official ideological spectrum can halt the polarisation of the society,” the editor stated.

The call for a return to the past “left” rhetoric was expressed most sharply in an open letter to Hu by a group of long-standing CCP officials. It urged the leadership to back away from free market reforms, while appearing to make some attempt to address the growing inequality in China. Otherwise, they warned, “the end of the party and the state is not something distant”.

The open letter declared: “The basis of the party’s rule, the support of the vast majority of people, especially the workers and peasants, has been severely eroded. Employees of state-owned enterprises have fallen from being master to waged workers. Farmers have been bankrupted under the double oppression of heavy taxation and market competition. Rural migrant workers do not even have basic rights. Brutal abuses by bureaucrats and capitalists against ordinary people frequently occur. The masses see no hope of resolving the difficulties of seeing a doctor, going to school or finding a job. The party’s image among the people has fallen a thousand times. Its ruling position is about to collapse.”

The document urged the leadership to urgently rebuild its credentials as a “Marxist-Leninist revolutionary party”, and to win back the “hearts and minds” of the people by stopping the privatisation of state-owned industries, slowing down foreign investment, purging corrupt officials and taking steps to halt the growing gap between rich and poor.

Such calls have nothing to do with defending socialism, which neither the Chinese state, nor any layer of the Chinese regime represents. It is a

reflection of the concerns within the ruling elite that the pro-capitalist policies pursued by Beijing for the past 25 years have created a far-reaching legitimacy crisis for an unpopular apparatus that still claims falsely to be communist.

Hu's government, however, is acutely conscious that mouthing concern for the plight of workers and rural poor is not going to guarantee its survival. Few take seriously the propaganda that the Chinese Communist Party has anything to do with socialism. Beijing has made clear it will rely, above all, on repression to maintain its grip on power.

On September 29, at a national conference of press held by Central Propaganda Department, Hu's "instructions" on political control was read to the media. "In the management of ideology, we must learn from Cuba and North Korea," China's president declared. Twenty-nine actions related to social unrest were banned, including "deliberate explosions, riots, demonstrations and strikes".

Over the following months, draconian actions against free speech and the media were carried out. In September, the editors of two outspoken newspapers, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* and the *21st Century Business Herald*, were sacked or jailed. The editor of the *China Youth Daily*, a paper close to the president, was removed in December for the papers' role in exposing official corruption. Beijing University's popular internet bulletin board Yita Hutu—a provocative political site in China on current events—was shut down.

A number of prominent political commentators were banned from appearing in media, including Wang Yi, a law professor and deputy secretary of ICPC, Li Rui, Mao Zedong's former personal secretary, and Jiao Guobiao, a Beijing University journalism professor who has called for abolition of the Central Propaganda Department.

The actions of Hu's government over the past months are a shift from the claims of his faction while it was still engaged in a power struggle within the CCP with former president Jiang Zemin and a layer of the party old guard.

Hu took the post of party general secretary from Jiang in 2002 and president in 2003, as arranged in the early 1990s by Deng Xiaoping. Jiang, however, insisted on retaining his position as the chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission, giving him control over the armed forces and potentially overriding Hu's leadership.

The factional struggle over the reins of power saw Hu initially seek the support of the country's growing middle class stratum by holding out the promise of limited democratic reforms which would undermine the power of the traditional state bureaucracy.

A speech he made in December 2002 on the supremacy of the constitution and opposing bureaucratic privileges was hailed by dissident intellectuals. His sacking of high-ranking officials and allowing media coverage on the SARS crisis in early 2003 was also presented as evidence he would rule in a different fashion from Jiang, Deng and Mao before him. Wang Dan, a former student leader of the Tiananmen Square protests, was among those who declared Hu would push forward "political reform" once he consolidated his power.

Against the stance taken by Hu's faction, the so-called hard-liners around Jiang argued that class tensions were so sharp that any loosening of social control could spark a range of demands from below, as had happened in 1989. At that time Beijing's initial concessions to students and liberal intellectuals that year encouraged millions of workers to join the mass protests and raise their own social demands against the initial impact of free market restructuring. The mass protests were only ended by brutal military repression.

Jiang's reluctance to give up control of the military stemmed from concerns that Hu's posturing on reform, if ever implemented, could lead to a situation similar to 1989. According to internal security documents cited in the October issue of the Hong Kong-based *Trend Monthly*, social discontent in China has increased dramatically over the last three years. In

September alone, the same month Jiang handed his military leadership to Hu, an estimated 3.1 million people took part in demonstrations, protests, assemblies and petitions against official corruption and injustice.

In Anhui province, for instance, 100,000 coalminers stage a weeklong struggle against layoffs and to demand compensation for work accidents. In Baoding and Tanshang in Hebei province, 50,000 workers demonstrated against job losses and official corruption. In the most recently reported large-scale incident, 50,000 workers rioted in a township of Dongguan City, Guangdong province, on December 25, over a security guard's killing of a rural migrant youth accused of stealing a bike.

A resolution to the inner-party factional conflict was reached at the Central Committee plenum in September when Jiang finally agreed to retire and transfer command of the military. Hu's subsequent statements and actions make clear that Jiang's decision was bound up with the acceptance by Hu's faction of the old guard position: the new leadership will make no significant attempt to introduce democratic concessions and the government will continue to rely on the military to deal with challenges from below.

Hu's crackdown has come as a surprise to many of the dissidents, who had considerable illusions in his claims to supporting greater freedom of speech and a more independent press. The *Australian* newspaper's China correspondent, Catherine Armitage, summed up their mood: "Early hopes that Hu might be a liberal-minded reformer are all but dead. ... It is now being said Hu walks a harder line than Jiang."

A senior reporter for the *China Youth Daily*, Jeffrey Wang, told *Asia Times* on December 29: "The atmosphere is deadly, and it's certainly very discouraging. Before he came to power, we had a lot of hope for Hu. Since then, we've not been so optimistic." Wang argued that there was no need to use harsh measures against intellectuals: "If these rational voices are suppressed, then an irrational voice could emerge. And this will not be good for the political transformation of China."

Beijing's target is not so much with the intellectual critics and their rather modest proposals for democratic reforms. Its concern is that criticism of the regime will not stop there, but as in 1989, will take more radical and dangerous forms as workers and the rural poor seek the political means for articulating and fighting for their interests. Its greatest fear is that the current widespread but localised unrest will coalesce around a perspective that accepts nothing less an end to all social injustice and inequality and the removal of the current despotic bureaucracy in Beijing.



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