

Protests in China over the one child policy

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A fortnight ago, a series of riots and protests erupted in towns and villages in Bobai County in China's southwestern province of Guangxi against the imposition of fines for breaching the country's birth control policies. Urban families are permitted one child and rural families two, if the first was a girl or disabled. Ethnic minorities are allowed more children.

In the largest riot in the town of Shapi on May 19, some 10,000 protesters clashed with hundreds of anti-riot police armed with guns and electric cattle prods. The police were bussed in after demonstrators had pulled down a wall, chased and beat officials from the family planning department, smashed cars and lit fires. Some 28 people were reportedly detained.

In the previous few days, protests took place in at least seven other villages as family planning officers throughout Bobai County used heavy-handed methods to collect outstanding fines from families with more than one child. One villager told the press that one riot broke out after the authorities bulldozed the home of a poor farmer who said he could not afford to pay the fine. When he complained to municipal officials, his fingers were broken.

According to the *Washington Post*: "The disorder, which rolled from village to village, caused a number of injuries to police and protesters... Townspeople and villagers said an unknown number of people were killed, but this was not confirmed. Several people reported seeing police carrying pistols and rifles, but there were no first hand reports of gunfire."

A witness in the town of Dunbu told the newspaper that two dozen uniformed officials carrying electric cattle prods barged into a nearby store and threatened to confiscate goods if the owner did not pay his fine. Locals quickly gathered and police were brought in. Several thousand protesters clashed with police who broke up the demonstration and imposed a curfew.

Chinese reporters were barred from the area and news

of the protests in the state-owned media was heavily censored. The official Xinhua newsagency blamed villagers, saying: "Violations of the family planning policies are common in Bobai as local residents still hold to the traditional idea that having more children brings more happiness."

Responsibility for the riots, however, rests squarely with the Chinese government and the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Liu Qibao, the provincial party boss in Guangxi, is a rising political star, closely associated with President Hu Jintao's party faction. Since his appointment six years ago, he has become well known for aggressive policies aimed at making the province "economically competitive". At a family planning conference in February, he gave a "yellow card" warning to the Bobai authorities for falling behind in meeting the quotas of the one child policy.

In order to clear the "yellow card" by August, officials in Bobai County and their superiors in the regional centre of Yulin city implemented a repressive campaign of forced sterilisation of women and property confiscation in lieu of fines. Between February 6 and April 10, Yulin carried out 48,554 sterilisations and collected some 27.6 million yuan (about \$US3.5 million) in fines. The local *Guangxi Daily* praised the Yulin city government and hailed the one child policy as positive factor for "social harmony".

Previously, the enforcement of fines in Bobai County had been lax because the vast majority of people are poor rice and pineapple farmers. It is not uncommon for families to have three or more children. Some families have children born in the 1980s and the fines accumulated each year. People with five children faced the choice of paying 15 times their annual income on the spot or having their possessions seized. If the possessions did not cover the fine, the homes would be damaged or demolished.

One villager with the surname Wu told the media:

“The family planning officials were just like the Japanese invaders during the war. They took everything away and destroyed or tore down the houses if people could not pay the fines. In some families, even the gate and the bowls were taken away, leaving them with an empty house.”

The one child policy, imposed by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, was a bureaucratic response to China’s expanding population. Mao’s encouragement of large rural families as part of his policy of rural self-sufficiency, combined with improved health care and increased life expectancy, led to a sharp jump in the population. Between 1949 and 1979, it increased from 540 million to 800 million.

Deng blamed China’s economic backwardness on overpopulation and imposed a strict policy of allowing each couple to have just one child. Today, the Beijing leadership continues to blame the rising population for the lack of sufficient teachers, hospital beds and growing unemployment. In fact, the social insecurity produced by widespread poverty and lack of basic services is one of the main motivations, particularly in rural areas, for large families.

Chen Hua told the *Washington Post* that she and her husband, a farmer, had been forced to pay a substantial fine after the birth of their second child—a son. Under government policy, he had been born too soon after their daughter. “It’s worth it,” she said. “We finally got a son. In our area, if you don’t have a son, you haven’t made it. In the countryside, if we don’t have a son, who will take care of us when we are old?”

The preference for a boy rather than a girl, especially in rural areas, has also led to a serious gender imbalance in China. According to official statistics, 119 boys are born for 100 girls. By 2020, it is estimated that about 40 million Chinese males may have to live as bachelors.

Far from overcoming social inequality, the Chinese leadership’s policies of unbridled market reforms have deepened the divide between rich and poor. Widespread rural poverty is essential for driving millions into the cities to provide a vast pool of cheap labour for global corporations and local companies.

Like every other aspect of social policy, the Chinese government responds to the growing population with a police state mentality. Although it has long abandoned the regulation of economic activities, Beijing has

tightened its “family planning” regime and, under the current five-year plan, aims to keep the population below 1.37 billion by 2010.

The one child policy does not apply equally to all families. The wealthy elite, party bureaucrats and emerging urban middle class have no difficulty in paying what for them are relatively small fines to have extra children. For the urban and rural poor, a second pregnancy carries the prospect of financially crippling penalties.

It is little wonder that the policy has produced widespread resentment and erupted in violent protests.



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