

Protests by former Chinese soldiers: another source of political instability

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A series of riots by demobilised Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers and associated farming units in September is another sign of deepening social tensions within Chinese society.

The Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy reported that on September 3, about 2,000 former troops at railway training centres in three separate cities—Baotou (Inner Mongolia), Wuhan (Hubei Province) and Baoji (Shaanxi Province)—staged coordinated demonstrations that turned into riots.

In July, the railway ministry recruited 6,000 former PLA troops and placed them into 12 railway schools for two years of training. However, when the soldiers arrived at the schools on August 30, anger erupted over the run-down dormitories, expensive food and lack of study materials. There were no power outlets in the dormitories. Students had to pay to recharge their mobile phones.

The former troops in different schools some 1,250 kilometres apart probably held discussions via mobile phone and the Internet. Their coordinated protests included smashing classrooms, overturning cars and damaging statues at the schools. Hundreds of police were sent to the three locations to suppress the demonstrations, resulting in clashes in which 20 people were injured and five arrested.

The Associated Press noted: “Reports posted on the Internet along with video clips appearing to show some of the violence said the disturbances were even more widespread, but gave few details.” Classes were suspended and police moved in to patrol the schools.

The railway ministry issued an emergency order expelling all 6,000 former soldiers without any alternative job offers. The decision provoked further anger.

On September 13, 1,000 former PLA troops at a railway school in Qiqihar city (northeastern Heilongjiang Province) staged a demonstration and smashed windows at the school’s main building. Clashes erupted after hundreds of police were sent to suppress the protest. More former soldiers arrived from other areas after rumours spread that two students had been killed. In all, 10 people were injured,

five arrested and three police cars destroyed.

The underlying cause of the protests is the fact that Beijing is incapable of providing decent jobs for hundreds of thousands of demobilised PLA troops. Wu Zhanqun, a former soldier in Qiqihar, told the Hong Kong-based *Ming Pao* newspaper that the authorities treated those from rural backgrounds particularly badly. They were only paid 10,000-20,000 yuan (\$US1,330-\$2,660) as a demobilisation payout and received no support or training, making it hard to find a job.

While protests by ex-soldiers are still rare, collective petitions have become increasingly frequent. In April 2005, for instance, 1,600 demobilised troops from 20 provinces organised a sit-in strike in front of the PLA General Political Department in Beijing. The authorities used police to disperse them. The same police-state measures are being used against laid off workers from state-owned industries or farmers protesting against being expelled from their land by real estate developers.

Ten days after the demonstrations at the railway schools, several thousand cotton workers belonging to the Construction and Production Corps, a paramilitary organisation in Xinjiang region, also staged a protest in the Suxingtian area. The Construction and Production Corps was established in this predominantly Muslim Central Asian province in the 1950s to employ demobilised soldiers in farming and other economic activities. The settlement strategy was aimed at strengthening the central government’s control in this remote and restive area. With “market reform”, however, most of these work regiments have been dissolved or have evolved into business operations over the past two decades.

According to the Hong Kong Information Centre of Democracy and Human Rights, the protest involved workers from the 127th and 123rd regiments of the Seventh Agricultural Division. The two units have 15,000 employees, mainly involved in cotton growing. Cotton production has been outsourced to individual workers, who are responsible for all the input costs. At the same time,

however, the workers are barred from selling the cotton, which is still collected by the military at fixed prices.

This year the division paid cotton growers just 9 yuan per kilogram, well below the market price of 13.4 yuan and not enough to even cover production costs. In response to attempts by cotton growers to sell privately, the military set up checkpoints to prevent smuggling.

At midnight on September 22, the Seventh Agricultural Division sent out 100 police to raid workers' homes and forcibly collect hidden cotton. Clashes erupted in which 30 people were injured, mainly women and the elderly. The next morning, several thousand workers stormed local checkpoints and smashed a police station. Hundreds of police were sent to suppress the protests. At least 25 people were arrested.

A local woman, Cheng, told the *South China Morning Post* that the army was responsible for the revolt. "The main problem is that the purchase price is set too low, while the costs of growing cottons are getting too high. The farmers cannot put up with it anymore," she said. Cheng also complained that the military had failed to pay on time and described the official in charge of the farm as "ill-tempered" and "impatient". Cotton growers sent representatives to Urumqi, the provincial capital, to press their case.

The protests by former soldiers and military-related employees points to the deepening isolation of the Beijing regime. The Stalinist Communist Party led by Mao Zedong came to power in 1949 not through a movement of the working class, but by the occupation of the cities with the peasant-based PLA. In a backward agrarian society with a bureaucratically regulated economy, the Maoist regime rested heavily on a large military, drawn mainly from rural areas.

Military conscription for every person over 18 is still officially in force. But the PLA has been able to fill out its ranks with "volunteers" seeking to escape poverty. For rural youth, the army has been one of the few stepping-stones to a decent education, a guaranteed job in state industry and even a foot into the privileged state bureaucracy. But with market reform and China's emergence as a regional power, the role of the PLA has also changed.

Deng Xiaoping overturned Mao's military doctrine of "People's War", based on large numbers of poorly-trained peasant foot soldiers, and called for the PLA's modernisation. Between 1985 and 1987, he axed one million soldiers. Amid the widening social divisions produced by market reforms, the CCP leadership became increasingly concerned about the loyalty of PLA troops. To carry out the brutal crackdown on the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989, the PLA had to bring in units from remote provinces as those garrisoned in Beijing had displayed

sympathy for the demands of protesting workers and students.

In 1990s, Beijing began to shift the role of domestic repression from the PLA to a vastly expanded paramilitary Peoples Armed Police, which now has 1.1 million personnel. At the same time, the army has been massively downsized. In 1997, the PLA cut half a million troops. Another 200,000 were axed between 2003 and 2005. From 4.5 million in the early 1980s, the PLA's numbers have been reduced to 2.3 million. At the same time, however, due to the extensive restructuring of state-owned enterprises, the PLA can no longer guarantee a job to demobilised soldiers.

The character of the PLA is also changing. Shocked by the US military's rapid annihilation of the Iraqi army in the 1990-91 Gulf War, Beijing also began to refashion the PLA as a more professional and hi-tech military force. Poorly-educated peasant conscripts are not the most suitable personnel for precision-guided bombs, supersonic fighter jets or a blue-water fleet. In recent years, the PLA has sought more highly-educated recruits, taking advantage of the growing pool of unemployed university graduates.

The eruption of protests among demobilised soldiers is a sharp indication of deep discontent among the CCP's traditional rural base. Over the past three decades, the unfettered operation of market forces has created deep social division in rural communities between the wealthy few and the rural poor who number in the hundreds of millions. These tensions must now be reflected inside the PLA itself, which, far from being a secure bastion of support for the regime, is becoming another source of instability.



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