

Beneath the Olympic glitter, massive police presence highlights China's social tensions

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Beijing has gone to considerable expense and effort at the Olympics to present a shiny, modern image of the new China. The reality is not too far below the surface, however. The security measures employed during the Games point to the police-state methods routinely used to suppress any political opposition as the regime manages the world's largest cheap labour platform.

A 100,000-strong security force of paramilitary police and troops, in addition to an even larger number of ordinary police, plainclothes agents and security guards, has been deployed in Beijing and other cities hosting events. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is determined to prevent protests by workers, housing right activists or separatists from Tibet or Xinjiang, which would disrupt their efforts to showcase China to the world.

The millions of urban poor and migrant workers living in shoddy dormitories were not compatible with the picture that the CCP wanted to present. Many were driven out of the capital prior to the Games by shutting down factories, construction sites and cheap accommodation. One million construction workers, who earned less than \$3 a day and built the Olympic venues, are unable to watch the Games. Thousands of "undesirables," including the homeless, prostitutes and alleged drug users, were locked up in labour camps on the outskirts of Beijing in order to hide the dismal social reality of modern China.

Amnesty International reported that China had used its notorious "re-education through labour" camps—a police power to detain people for up to four years without trial—for a "clean up" drive starting in May 2006. The targets included unlicensed taxi drivers and small businesses, many of them run by laid-off workers, as well as those involved in illegal leafleting, vagrancy and begging. In February 2007, anti-drug detention was extended from six months to a year to ensure that the streets were free of drug users during the Olympics.

Amnesty International received information in September 2007 that the authorities had built secret detention centres on the outskirts of Beijing to detain petitioners from all over the country before forcibly returning them to their hometowns. The human rights body wrote: "Petitioners were crowded into these facilities with poor food and no proper sanitation facilities or

health care. Some sources also reported that guards often beat detainees."

From the beginning of 2008, Chinese police stepped up efforts to eradicate the homeless, beggars and unlicensed taxi drivers from Tiananmen Square and Chang'An Avenue. The campaign was aimed at "uprooting illegal activities that tarnish the city's image and affect the social order". Other cities and provinces also implemented tough measures to prevent activists and petitioners from going to Beijing to voice their grievances.

To demonstrate their tolerance of dissidents, Chinese authorities formally set aside three zones in Beijing parks during the Games, where protesters could supposedly voice their opinions. It was all for show. In reality, no one was permitted to use the protest zones.

Zhang Wei applied to hold a protest in one of the zones but was rejected. After he held a demonstration with fellow residents of Qianmen district, he was arrested by police on August 6. The group was protesting against the illegal destruction of their homes to make way for construction by a major real estate developer, Soho China.

Ji Sizun, a political activist, applied to hold a protest to call for more democratic rights and a curb on official corruption. He was also arrested. Other applicants have been harassed or expelled from Beijing.

Hua Huiqi, an activist for an underground Christian church, was arrested by the country's notorious political police when he attempted to attend a church service on August 10 with US President Bush. Other dissidents were placed under house arrest or forced to take a "holiday" in other provinces in order to ensure their silence during the Olympics.

To justify its draconian security measures, Beijing used threats to attack the Games by Muslim separatists from the province of Xinjiang. Since August 4, three attacks have taken place on Chinese police and government buildings in Xinjiang, allegedly by East Turkistan Islamists, resulting in more than 30 deaths, including policemen and assailants. The latest occurred on August 12, when attackers fatally stabbed three border guards at a road checkpoint in Kashgar.

While making a show of press freedom for foreign journalists, the CCP was determined to keep the local media under tight control. The extent of the restrictions was exposed

last week when a 21-point edict for Chinese journalists was leaked to the international media.

Media outlets were instructed not to report on any emergency at the Games without first obtaining permission from the propaganda authorities. To meet its Olympic obligations, the CCP temporarily unblocked access to a series of web sites. However, Chinese reporters were told not to publicise the fact or provide URLs to any of the sites, to ensure that as few people as possible tried to access the sites.

Other instructions covered politically sensitive issues such as Tibet. Point seven stated: “As for the pro-Tibetan independence and East Turkistan movements, no coverage is allowed. There is also no need to make any fuss about our anti-terrorism efforts.” Food safety was proclaimed to be “off-limits”.

Chinese reporters were instructed to “play down as much as possible” China’s controversial relations with countries such as Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Myanmar and Zimbabwe. China’s role at the Doha round of trade negotiations was declared out of bounds.

To reinforce the message, an armored vehicle and police with submachine guns were stationed outside the Main Press Centre for the Olympics on August 12, provoking angry reactions from reporters. After realising that the move could become a public relations disaster, authorities quickly removed the vehicle and denied that armed police had been there at all, even as photos of their presence were published around the world.

On August 13, security guards assaulted and briefly detained a British journalist John Ray, who was filming a small group of pro-Tibetan independence activists not far from the main Olympic stadium. He told the media that police confiscated his backpack and pinned him down. “The plain clothes officer made Free Tibet signs with his hands. He asked me what my opinion on Tibet was,” Ray said.

Five members of Students for a Free Tibet were arrested last Friday after draping a “Free Tibet” banner over an advertising billboard near the CCTV building. Security officers tried to stop foreign journalists from filming the demonstration.

The sensitivity of Chinese authorities to even small protests on any issue is a sign of the country’s sharp social tensions, which will only worsen under conditions of economic slump. On August 3, a senior official from the National Development and Reform Commission admitted at a forum in Guangdong that the slowdown in China’s main export markets in US and Europe had resulted in the bankruptcy of 67,000 small and medium firms throughout China in the first half of this year, throwing 20 million people out of work.

To prevent social unrest, the CCP regime relies on a huge security force of police, paramilitary and military personnel directed against the working class in particular. It has broad powers and extensive means of surveillance. The concern at the Olympics was to ensure that none of the broad range of proscribed groups, from religious and political organisations to independent workers’ groups and those who expose corruption

and social ills, should receive even limited coverage or make any contact with foreigners, particularly the media.

The *South China Morning Post* warned on August 7 that “it would be wise for visitors to assume that their movements in public, increasingly monitored by hi-tech equipment bought from American and other foreign companies, as well as by China’s more traditional human networks, are closely followed. They should also realise that activities that are usually deemed ‘private’ in democratic countries receive official scrutiny in China. Although censorship of web sites is well known, foreign media have not highlighted surveillance of landlines, mobile phones, faxes, email and other electronic communications. And microphones and cameras hidden in hotel rooms, as well as offices, can record life’s most intimate moments.”

One final point needs to be made. US President Bush and other Western leaders as well as various media commentators have made a point of highlighting China’s anti-democratic measures. The criticisms are utterly hypocritical. Many of the draconian security measures put in place at the Beijing Olympics have become standard operating procedure at major international events around the world—from gatherings of the G-8 to the Davos economic forums. Under the bogus banner of “the war on terrorism”, there is a universal trend in ruling circles toward police-state measures in response to deepening social inequality and tensions.

Far from damaging Beijing’s image in the eyes of the corporate elite, China’s massive police dragnet at the Olympic Games will no doubt be seen by many in global business circles as a guarantee that their huge economic interests and investments in China are in safe hands.



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