

Chinese regime reacts with alarm to ‘Jasmine Revolution’ calls

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For the second Sunday in a row, Chinese authorities responded last weekend with extraordinary nervousness to anonymous calls posted on a US-based Chinese-language web site, Boxun.com, for protests in Beijing, Shanghai and other major cities. Security forces mounted massive shows of force, involving hundreds of uniformed and plainclothes police, in order to prevent any demonstrations.

The unsigned web site notices had called for a “Jasmine Revolution”—the name given to the Tunisian uprising—with the staging of rallies at specified locations every Sunday at 2pm. It urged participants to shout, “We want food, we want work, we want housing, we want fairness”—highlighting common complaints among Chinese workers and young people.

Few people protested, and the political affiliations of those issuing the appeals remain unclear. Nevertheless, the reaction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime revealed its profound anxiety over rising economic and social tensions in China, and the revolutionary upsurge that has swept from Tunisia to Egypt and other countries in the Middle East.

Last Sunday’s designated protest site in Beijing was the prominent Wangfujing shopping street near Tiananmen Square, the epicentre of the 1989 massacre in which the regime mobilised tanks and troops against students and workers. The Internet postings had suggested that people protest silently by “taking a stroll” near a McDonald’s outlet.

No visible protest occurred, but hundreds of police, plainclothes agents, public security officials in red armbands and a SWAT team with automatic rifles and body armour were deployed. Observers estimated the number of uniformed police at between 500 and 1,000, and the number of plainclothes officers close to twice that number.

The *Financial Times* correspondents reported: “Shortly after 2pm, the time of the planned protest, security forces locked down several blocks and evacuated the entire area. Hundreds of tourists and Sunday shoppers were locked up inside the malls lining the pedestrian street. They were

released a little later after squads of People’s Armed Police, China’s main anti-riot force, had marched through.”

To block media coverage, police assaulted and hustled away camera crews and reporters from the Associated Press, the BBC, Voice of America, German state broadcasters ARD and ZDF, and others. The Foreign Correspondents Club of China reported that more than a dozen journalists were “manhandled, pushed, detained and delayed by uniformed police and others,” with one video journalist punched and kicked in the face. Police warned foreign journalists against reporting on the event, threatening some with consequences for their visas.

In Shanghai, several dozen uniformed and plainclothes police blasted whistles continually and jostled pedestrians and journalists to keep them from congregating outside the Peace Cinema at People’s Square, the designated protest venue. Nearly 30 police vehicles were on hand. Sprays of water from two street-cleaning vehicles kept people moving. Some snapped photos of the police operation. At least seven people were seen being bundled into police vans.

There were no reports of demonstrations in the other 25 cities, including Wuhan and Hangzhou, mentioned by the web site call. Telecom companies switched off 3G and GPRS Internet services in the proposed protest areas to ensure that photographs were not uploaded in real time.

Ahead of the planned protests, the authorities had blocked searches for the word “Jasmine” on Twitter-like microblogs and other sites, deleted almost all online discussion of the appeal, and temporarily disabled mass text-messaging services. More than 100 activists across China were taken away, confined to their homes or went missing, according to the Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy. Five individuals were reported to be facing subversion or national security charges.

Chinese leaders publicly sought to dismiss the notion that the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East could spark or inspire similar movements in China. Zhao Qizheng, a senior member of Beijing’s top political advisory body, said a Jasmine Revolution would not happen in China and

the very idea was “ridiculous and unrealistic”, the official Xinhua news agency reported on February 24.

Yet the police-state response told otherwise. The reaction of the Chinese authorities to the protest calls is rooted in the fear that rising prices of food, basic necessities and housing, which have seriously eroded the living standards of the working people, could trigger a broader anti-government movement.

There are numerous signs of mounting social unrest, as well as acute economic contradictions. The Ministry of Public Security has admitted that China has experienced an estimated 90,000 “mass incidents” each year since 2006—often protests against local officials over forced evictions, unpaid wages, factory closures, pollution, police brutality or traffic accidents.

According to various researchers, including from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the protests have taken the form of parades, demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, mass riots and self-immolations. The underlying causes include worsening social inequality, official high-handedness, corruption, land acquisitions leading to forced evictions, unemployment, environmental hazards and the “permanent residency” system that strips rural migrant workers of any basic rights in the cities where they toil.

The past year has also seen the emergence of major strikes. Last April to July, a wave of stoppages was initiated by young workers in Japanese auto giant Honda’s plants in southern China. In order to placate the growing discontent, authorities in Beijing and a number of other cities announced increases in official minimum wages—the salaries paid to China’s 200 million migrant workers. These minor concessions are insufficient, however, to compensate for rising prices. Officially, inflation rose last month to an annual rate of 4.9 percent, with food prices up by more than 10 percent.

Housing prices have also exploded due to an unsustainable, speculation-driven property bubble that has forced the total value of Beijing real estate higher than the US gross domestic product. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences recently warned that 85 percent of households were unable to afford to buy a home.

In two announcements, the Chinese leadership signalled its concern about the potential for a social explosion. On February 19, on the eve of the first planned “Jasmine” protests, Chinese President Hu Jintao warned a seminar at the Central Party School in Beijing that the country was “in a period of magnified social conflicts”. Hu called for even tighter Internet restrictions, speaking of “further strengthening and improving management of the Internet, improving the standard of management of virtual society and establishing mechanisms to guide online public opinion”.

Last Sunday morning, the state-controlled media blanketed Internet, television and radio audiences with two hours of remarks by Premier Wen Jiabao, in response to carefully-screened questions posted by Internet users. The web chat, hosted by Xinhua, was the third time Wen had held such a session ahead of an annual National Peoples Congress, which is due to assemble on March 5. But Wen’s latest chat was announced abruptly late on Saturday and appeared to be timed to coincide with the proposed protests.

Wen said that in an effort to rein in inflation and soaring property prices, China would set its target for average annual economic growth at 7 percent in its next five year plan, down from the previous five-year target, set in 2006, of 7.5 percent. “Rapid inflation affects people’s livelihoods and may affect social stability,” he said. While he did not mention the Middle East, he later added: “I know the impact that prices can cause a country and am deeply aware of its extreme importance.”

In another bid to quell disaffection with the CCP, Wen said investigating and targeting top officials involved in corruption would be a “primary task” for 2011. Wen also spoke of encouraging party officials to address the yawning gap between rich and poor, referring to modern constructions alongside “shabby streets and housing”.

Over the past decade, Chinese economic growth has far outstripped the official targets. Between 2001 and 2005, gross domestic product growth averaged 9.8 percent, and from 2006 to 2010 it rose to 11.1 percent, according to Morgan Stanley calculations cited by the *Wall Street Journal*. Any moves to slow the economy, however, run the risk of triggering mass unemployment and deeper social unrest. Despite the rapid GDP expansion, employment in China grew by just 0.9 percent a year between 2000 and 2009. Already, millions of university graduates are unemployed or underemployed.

China, on which global capitalism has become increasingly dependent over the past two decades as a cheap labour platform and market for raw materials, is now a social and political tinderbox. The regime’s totalitarian security apparatus is sitting atop a society in which the class tensions are no less acute than in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries, intensified by rising prices and the vast gulf between the country’s billionaires and the 400-million-strong working class.



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