Police besiege village land protest in China

John Chan
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Thousands of villagers in Guangdong province's Wukan village staged protests this week following the death of a local leader in detention. About 6,000 farmers gathered in the village on Monday and Tuesday, shouting slogans such as "save Wukan" and "return our farmland." Wukan is currently surrounded by thousands of paramilitary police officers.

Demonstrations initially erupted in September over the Wukan Communist Party committee's corrupt deals with one of China's largest developers, Country Garden, to sell collectively-owned lands for commercial development. Farmers overturned police vehicles and besieged government offices. In November, another protest by 4,000 people demanded the return of the lands, the punishment of corrupt officials, and for the village's financial records to be made public. The crowd was dispersed by police using teargas.

A petition originally planned to start on December 12 was postponed due to the death of Xue Jinbo, one of the five people who was detained on suspicion of leading the demonstrations in September (see: "Riots erupt in southern China over land sales to developers").

Xue died last Sunday, after being detained by the police for three days. Although the local Lufeng government insisted he died of heart failure, relatives who saw his body maintained that he was tortured to death.

An unnamed member of a villagers' committee negotiating with the government told the *South China Morning Post*: "There were dark bruises on both his back and chest. One of his thumbs was fractured and there were strangulation marks around the neck." The villagers demanded the return of his body and an independent autopsy, but that was rejected.

The village representative told the newspaper that the authorities had asked for the formation of a temporary committee with which to communicate, only in order to identify the protest leaders. "Xue was the most active and most capable representative," the committee member told the *Post*.

Well aware of mounting anger over Xue's suspicious death, some 100 riot police and police vehicles have blocked the entrance to the village since Monday. Food and water supplies have been cut off. Authorities have put up posters demanding that protesters turn themselves in, declaring: "Confessing to police is your only way out."

Police numbers have since swelled to the thousands. Internet access has been cut off. Water cannons have been deployed to "ensure stability." A resident told Agence France-Presse via phone: "People can't come in and we can't go out… We won't survive if the situation keeps going, as we have no food."

The huge police mobilisation against a community of just 20,000 people is not simply a decision carried out by authorities at the township, municipal or even provincial levels. The propaganda being used to vilify the protesters suggests the direct involvement of Beijing.

Days before Xue's detention, several thousand villagers took to the streets, some carrying banners declaring, "oppose the dictatorship" of the local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary and his allies—a slogan that has provoked concern throughout the state bureaucracy. Responding to the villagers' sit-in, the Lufeng government issued a statement warning that the campaign was "illegal" and was being exploited by "a few people harbouring a hidden agenda."

Significantly, Zhuang Liehong, another village representative, was detained by the State Security Bureau—Beijing's secret police—while attending a wedding in Shenzhen in early December.

For the CCP regime, the scene at Wukan is a small but terrifying reminder of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, which began with demands by students for an end to "one-

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party rule," but ended up unleashing far broader unrest involving the working class.

The CCP is acutely concerned that the country is on the verge of major social upheavals as the economy begins to slow. Zhou YongKang, the CCP Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of state security, last week called on all levels of government to prepare to deal with the possible eruption of social unrest.

Guangdong province, which depends heavily on exports to Europe and America, is facing economic difficulties amid the deepening global turmoil. The province has seen the eruption of strikes in recent weeks, across a range of watch, shoe and electronics factories.

Last week, 4,500 workers and technicians at Hitachi-affiliated Shenzhen Hailiang Storage Products, fearing the loss of jobs and conditions, took strike action against the planned sale of the company to American-owned Western Digital. Another strike last week involved 1,000 Shenzhen workers at Hong Kong-based Topsearch Industries, a circuit-board maker, in opposition to plans to relocate production to Shaoguan, where labour is cheaper.

To defend the interests of business, the Guangdong provincial government has suspended a planned 20 percent minimum wage increase next year—a move that can only provoke further strikes and protests by workers.

The re-emergence of strikes and the growing number of land disputes are interconnected.

Since 2008, China has only avoided a slump by injecting trillions of dollars into the economy via stimulus measures and cheap bank credit. That fuelled a borrowing binge by local governments and real estate developers, and rampant real estate speculation. In 2010 alone, local governments raised 2.9 trillion yuan from land sales. Of the 10.7 trillion yuan ($US1.7 trillion) of local government debt up to June 2010, nearly one quarter depended on further land sales to meet repayments.

The property bubble is now showing signs of cracking. By the end of October, 3.6 billion square metres of property was under construction, compared to sales of just 709 million square metres in the first 10 months of the year. The difference points to a massive glut of property that is about to hit the market and could potentially trigger a price collapse.

These processes are being accelerated by Beijing's decision in recent weeks to loosen bank lending amid a rapid slowing in manufacturing industries. Cheap credit has only encouraged local governments, like that in Lufeng, to accelerate land sales and enter new speculative ventures as a means of alleviating their financial difficulties.

As a result, protests are becoming more frequent as CCP bureaucrats sell the usage of land to private corporate interests, without even consulting the nominal collective owners of the land, the farmers.

Yu Jiangrong of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences told the *Wall Street Journal* that 65 percent of "mass incidents" or protests since 1990 in rural areas involved land disputes. Yu estimated that local governments have seized 16.6 million acres of rural land and deprived farmers of $340 billion in compensation, because local governments often pay much less than the market price. Wukan villagers, for instance, allege that local CCP officials sold the land for one billion yuan and pocketed 70 percent of sum before putting the rest in the village fund.

The Wukan protest is a symptom of the growing class tensions throughout rural areas, as a result of CCP regime's policy of capitalist restoration over the past three decades. While a thin layer of the peasantry has enriched itself and become a new rural bourgeoisie, the vast majority of people have been reduced to poverty, forcing millions into the factories as cheap labour.

The Wukan rebellion is a sign that, like the working class, the oppressed rural masses are being driven into a political confrontation with the CCP police-state. Unlike the protests in 1989, when the peasantry was largely passive, a movement of urban workers now would quickly meet up with mass discontent in the countryside—a situation that terrifies the regime.

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