

Washington's human rights hypocrisy and the case of Chen Guangcheng

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The saga of Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng—his flight from house arrest in Shandong to the US Embassy in Beijing, his subsequent transfer to a hospital and the custody of Chinese authorities, followed by his plea for asylum in the US—has largely overshadowed this week's annual Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing.

While the details of the controversy have proven both fluid and murky, it appears that after having promoted the cause of Chen and other dissidents as part of a "human rights" campaign aimed at pressuring the Chinese government, Washington viewed Chen's sudden appearance during the meeting between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Chinese officials as an unwelcome distraction.

Clinton, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and other US officials were in Beijing to negotiate trade, monetary and foreign policy concessions from China. Of particular interest to the US financial elite that they represent was a Chinese government decision to further open the country's financial markets, allowing foreign companies to control 49 percent of domestic security firms, giving Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase and others a bigger cut from the world's second-largest share market.

With such profitable deals at stake, the State Department wanted the issue of Chen to disappear as quickly as possible and, according to some accounts, pressured Chen to leave the embassy.

Instead of fading away, however, the matter became entangled in domestic US politics, with the Republican presumptive presidential nominee Mitt Romney proclaiming the administration's handling of Chen "a day of shame" for the US, and Chen himself phoning in to a US congressional hearing to the delight of Republican congressmen out to pillory the Democratic

White House and embarrass Hillary Clinton.

Had the shoe been on the other foot, there is no question that Democrats would have done the same to a Republican administration, as both parties are experienced practitioners in human rights demagoguery.

On Friday, it appeared that Washington and Beijing had managed to cobble together a face-saving agreement that would allow Chen to leave the country to study at a US university.

There is no reason to doubt Chen's charges that he and his family have been subjected to abuse at the hands of Chinese authorities because of his speaking out against forced abortions and sterilizations of women under the country's one-child policy. Such treatment would be entirely in keeping with the reactionary nature of the Chinese regime.

The question is, how did this become a matter of ostensibly paramount concern to the United States government? And what qualifies Washington to sit in judgment over human rights in China, or for that matter, anywhere else in the world?

First, in relation to China itself, US capitalism is a full partner in the oppression of Chinese working people, with American corporations depending upon the repressive apparatus of the Chinese government to quell worker militancy and maintain conditions of super-exploitation that have coined them huge profits.

While the American government selects one or another individual dissident to turn into an international cause célèbre, using his or her case as an instrument for pressuring China on the world stage, it has nothing but contempt for the basic rights of the hundreds of millions of Chinese working people, who are seen as merely a source of cheap labor.

Secondly, what are Washington's credentials to be indicting other nations for human rights abuses? No

other advanced country in the world has a record of human rights abuses remotely approaching those that exist in America.

The same week that the Chen affair dominated the news saw the following events in the US:

* A US appeals court threw out a case brought by Jose Padilla, an American citizen who was illegally detained by the military and tortured, holding that those responsible for his abusive treatment enjoyed full immunity.

* It was revealed that a 23-year-old San Diego college student, David Chong, picked up and never charged by agents of the Drug Enforcement Agency, was left in a holding cell for nearly five days without food or water, driven to attempt suicide and nearly dying of thirst.

* John Brennan, the president's counter-terrorism advisor, gave a speech in Washington defending the US president's "right" to target anyone, anywhere in the world for assassination by remote-controlled drones, calling it both "legal" and "ethical."

* On April 30, New York City police officers, using dated warrants for minor violations as a pretext, forced their way into the homes of known activists in the Occupy Wall Street movement in the early morning hours to interrogate them about a demonstration planned the next day.

With 2.3 million people in its prisons, America incarcerates people at a rate that no other country on the planet even approaches. At any one time, over 80,000 prisoners are being held in solitary confinement, under conditions that the UN special rapporteur on torture described as "cruel and inhuman" and "indefensible."

Among them is Bradley Manning, the US Army private, who is being tried by a military court for "aiding the enemy" for allegedly seeking to expose US war crimes by leaking documents to WikiLeaks. The UN rapporteur described Manning's imprisonment for 11 months in solitary, before being tried or convicted of any crime, as "at a minimum cruel, inhuman and degrading," adding that they "could constitute torture."

The same government posturing as the guardian of human rights in China is responsible for these crimes. One can only imagine the reaction if Manning had managed to enter the Chinese embassy in Washington—not that they would have let him in—and sought asylum and a university fellowship in China.

The issue is not whether Chen Guangcheng and his family are deserving of sympathy, but rather what are the real motives of those in the US political establishment in making his treatment an international case.

As the Chen Guangcheng incident revealed, the human rights issue is entirely subordinate to US imperialist interests, to be turned on and off at will, with methods of abuse and repression denounced in those countries targeted as Washington's adversaries—China, Iran, Syria, Cuba, while sanctioned and supported in those regarded as its client states—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Uzbekistan, Honduras.

Used to justify wars for regime change, economic blockades and subversion of governments perceived to be rivals of or impediments to US imperialism, the human rights crusade is part racket, part provocation, reeking from head to toe with hypocrisy.



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