

YEN, CHEN-SHEN

Current Events & English Communication

The politics of repression in China

What are they afraid of?

The economy is booming and politics stable. Yet China's leaders seem edgy

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Illustration by Claudio



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“THE forces pulling China toward integration and openness are more powerful today than ever before,” said President Bill Clinton in 1999. China then, though battered by the Asian financial crisis, was busy dismantling state-owned enterprises and pushing for admission to the World Trade Organisation. Today, however, those forces look much weaker.

A spate of recent events, from the heavy jail sentences passed on human-rights activists to an undiplomatic obduracy at the climate-change negotiations in Copenhagen last December, invite questions about the thinking of China's leaders. Has their view of the outside world and dissent at home changed? Or were the forces detected by Mr Clinton and so many others after all not pulling so hard in the direction they were expecting?

The early years of what China calls its "reform and opening" after 1978 were marked by cycles of liberalisation and repression. The turning-points were usually marked by political crisis: dissent on the streets, leadership struggles, or both. Now, however, the only big protest movements are repressed ones among ethnic minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang. China's big cities are hardly roiled by political turmoil. By the time Liu Xiaobo, an academic, was sentenced to 11 years in prison in December, dissident debate surrounding the reform manifesto he had issued a year earlier had long subsided. Yet it was the heaviest-known penalty imposed on any activist for "inciting subversion" since such a crime was written into law in 1997.

China has so far survived the global economic downturn with hardly any of the agitation many once feared it might cause among unemployed workers or jobless university graduates. The economy grew at a very robust-sounding 8.7% last year and is predicted by many to be on course for similar growth in 2010.

Sweeping changes are due in the senior leadership in 2012 and 2013, including the replacement of President Hu Jintao and of the prime minister, Wen Jiabao. But if a struggle is brewing, signs of it are hard to spot. An unusually high-profile campaign against organised crime by the party chief of Chongqing municipality, Bo Xilai, has raised eyebrows. Some speculate that it is part of a bid by Mr Bo, who is a

Politburo member, to whip up popular support for his promotion to the Politburo's all-powerful Standing Committee in 2012. An online poll by an official website chose Mr Bo as the "most inspiring voice" of 2009.

But Andrew Nathan of Columbia University in New York does not see this as a challenge to the expected shoo-in for Xi Jinping, the vice-president, as China's next leader, despite Mr Xi's failure last year to garner the leading military post analysts thought would form part of his grooming. Li Keqiang, a deputy prime minister, still looks set to take over from Mr Wen in 2013.

Against this backdrop of political stability and economic growth, the most credible interpretation of the government's recent hard line is that the forces pushing its leaders towards greater liberalisation at home and sympathetic engagement with the West are weaker than had been hoped. Nor is there any sign that the next generation of leaders see their mission differently. As Russell Leigh Moses, a Beijing-based political analyst, puts it: "The argument in policy-making circles where reform is concerned is 'how much more authoritarian should we be?' not 'how do we embark on Western-style democracy?'"

Tough though the recent sentences of activists have been, they are hardly out of keeping with the leadership's approach to dissent in recent years. This has involved giving a bit of leeway to freethinking individuals, but occasionally punishing those seen as straying too far. Since late last year two activists have been jailed in an apparent attempt to deter people from organising the parents of children killed in shoddily built schools during an earthquake in Sichuan province in 2008. But another critic of the government's handling of the parents' grievances, Ai Weiwei, remains free in Beijing and just as outspoken.

The coming months are unlikely to see much change. Despite boasting of their country's resilience in the face of the global economic crisis, China's leaders still appear jittery. Mr Wen has forecast that 2010 will see "even greater complexity in the domestic and international situation". China's security chief, Zhou Yongkang, in a speech published this week said the task of maintaining social stability "was still extremely onerous".

Some Chinese economists worry out loud that China's massive stimulus-spending might have bought the country only a temporary reprieve. Bubbles, they fret, are forming in property markets, inflationary pressure is building up and reforms needed to promote sustained growth (including measures to promote urbanisation) are not being carried out fast enough. Occasionally, even the government's worst nightmare is mooted as a possibility: stagflation. A combination of fast-rising prices and low growth might indeed be enough to send protesters on to the streets.

Abroad, Chinese leaders are struggling to cope with what they feel to be an accelerated shift in the global balance of power, in China's favour. This has resulted in what Mr Moses describes as behaviour ranging from "strutting to outright stumbling". They reacted with oratorical fury in January, when America announced a \$6.4 billion arms deal with Taiwan. But while pandering to popular nationalism at home, they remain aware of China's limitations. This week China allowed an American aircraft-carrier to pay a port call to Hong Kong, just a day before President Obama was due to defy grim warnings and meet the Dalai Lama in Washington.

Chinese leaders can be confident that the plight of dissidents and the ever-louder grumbles of foreign businessmen over the barriers they face in China will not keep the world away. From May China will be visited by a series of foreign leaders going to the World Expo in Shanghai. Among the first will be France's president, Nicolas Sarkozy, much reviled by Chinese nationalists for his stance on Tibet. China sees the Expo, like the 2008 Beijing Olympics, as a chance to flaunt its strength. But, as Mr Clinton noted of China in 1999, "a tight grip is actually a sign of a weak hand".