

Don't Look for Jasmine in China

Contributed by Frank Ching
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Either tea or revolution

If you're looking for good jasmine tea on Baidu, China's biggest search engine, you may be in for a surprise. As soon as you type in "good jasmine tea," Baidu flashes a message: "In accordance with relevant laws, regulations and policies, part of the search results are not shown."

It's not that the government discourages the tea, but the word "jasmine" has become toxic — even a song about the beautiful jasmine flower sung by Kenyan students along with President Hu Jintao is censored.

All this stems from the "Jasmine Revolution," which began in Tunisia last December, leapt to Egypt and now spreads across North Africa and the Middle East. Beijing finds the fall of authoritarian governments in distant Africa embarrassing, recalling scenes of student-led protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989, crushed by the Chinese military.

Even worse, there are attempts to launch "jasmine rallies" in China itself, although the organizers, who are anonymous and send messages online, have little to show for their efforts after three weeks. This may well be because China is more economically secure than the countries in the Arab world that are experiencing unrest. After all, it has gone through more than 30 years of rapid economic growth in which hundreds of millions of people have been lifted from poverty and people's lives have improved dramatically.

In fact, a 22-nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey made public last June showed that while most people were unhappy with the direction of their country, China was an exception. "Only in China," the survey reported, "does an overwhelming portion of the population (87 percent) express satisfaction with national conditions."

So, on the face of it at least, China does not seem ripe for a Jasmine Revolution.

Those organizing "jasmine rallies" in China evidently think otherwise. In an open letter published on overseas website Boxun.com, the organizers called on people to gather every Sunday at 2 pm to demand an independent judiciary, a government supervised by the people and an end to corruption.

On February 20, the first Sunday, it was difficult to tell protesters from ordinary shoppers since the designated sites in Beijing and Shanghai are busy shopping areas, but the police were out in force, overwhelming foreign journalists out to cover the event, or non-event as it turned out to be. Before that day, the police had preempted any protest by rounding up more than 100 activists. Despite no signs of protest outside MacDonald's on the busy Wangfujing shopping street, designated as the site for a rally in Beijing, police and security agents tried to stop the journalists from reporting.

Since the first protest was pretty much of a fizzle, one might have assumed that the Chinese authorities would relax. But the next Sunday there was an even bigger turnout of police and security agents who declared war on foreign journalists.

In one case, the Wall Street Journal reported, a Bloomberg television journalist was grabbed by five plainclothes officers, "dragged along the ground by his leg, punched in the head and beaten with a broomstick." BBC footage showed plainclothes men roughing up the reporter and his colleague, throwing them into a van.

The police removed foreign news staff from the Associated Press, the BBC, Voice of American, German state broadcasters ARD and ZDF, and others from the scene.

The New York Times reported that at least half a dozen journalists and photographers were visited in their homes, repeatedly warned not to cause trouble or, as one officer put it, try to "topple the party."

Reporting rules were tightened. "No reporting" zones were established in Shanghai and Beijing. The Los Angeles Times reported that journalists were privately told that they could be expelled if caught reporting on protests without permission.

These moves constitute a big step backwards from the more moderate regulations for foreign correspondents introduced before the Beijing Olympics in 2008, which are theoretically still in force. The police ferocity was in sharp contrast to the behavior of protesters, told by rally organizers to participate by "strolling, watching or pretending to pass by" without shouting slogans or displaying placards.

The organizers, who remain anonymous, originally stipulated 13 cities for the rallies, which they quickly raised to 27 cities and, on March 6, claimed that their movement had spread to more than 100 cities. Since

the only cities with a substantial presence of foreign journalists are Beijing and Shanghai, it's impossible to verify such claims.

Moreover, because posts are typically immediately deleted on online message boards and forums within China, it's likely that few people in the country actually know about the call for defiance of the Communist authorities.

On March 6, the third Sunday, Beijing was quiet. But uniformed and plainclothes policemen were out in force in Wangfujing, Xidan and other crowded commercial areas.

Mobile phone service was shut down in parts of the city during the three Sundays.

The Chinese leadership evidently feels confronted with a dilemma: If they allow "strolling" to take place unhindered, then such gatherings will likely expand over time. If they clamp down hard, they may be seen as an illegitimate government able to stay in power only through force.

Clearly, China decided to crack down hard early so that a feeble movement does not gain strength.

In fact, budget figures disclosed on Saturday during the annual session of the National People's Congress showed a sharp increase in funding for domestic security. For the first time, such expenditures exceed the amount spent on national defense.

Total budgeted spending for police, state security, armed civil militia, courts and jails amounted to 624 billion yuan, or US\$95 billion, compared to 601.1 billion yuan, or \$91.5 billion, for defense. Apparently, the government sees the domestic threat as being graver than any external threat despite the findings of the Pew Survey.

In fact, the government admits that people are unhappy. The China Daily, the official English-language daily, reported last week that a survey conducted by Gallup World Poll ranked China 125th among 155 countries when measuring people's overall satisfaction with their lives. The newspaper pointed out that "only 6 percent of Chinese people see themselves as happy" even though 36 percent of respondents said their lives had improved during the past five years.

Moreover, according to the government's own statistics, unrest is widespread with the number of "mass incidents" rising in recent years and may now exceed 100,000 a year.

By all

accounts, most people still have confidence in the central government, with which they rarely come into contact. But many have little confidence in officials at the local level, the people who seize their land, evict them from their homes to make deals with land developers and lock them up if they lodge petitions.

The way to respond to public dissatisfaction is to deal with legitimate grievances. Reacting in such a disproportionate manner to what's at most a mild form of civil protest exposes a government that does not enjoy the trust of its people. And browbeating — actually beating — foreign reporters will result in that message being magnified rather than muffled.

Political

stability maintained through coercive means may well result in political instability. China's leaders should recall the saying of their founding father, Mao Zedong, "Where there is oppression there is resistance."

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