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Crackdown in China

by

Nicholas Bequelin

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(Hong Kong) - It has taken the arrest of Ai Weiwei, one of China's best-known contemporary artists and an outspoken critic of the Chinese government, for the world to take notice that Beijing is in the midst of the largest crackdown on dissent in over a decade - one that differs ominously in scope, tactics and aims from previous campaigns.

The authorities are clearly casting a wider net over all advocates of "global values"- the code word in China for human rights, the rule of law and freedom of expression. Everyone from veteran dissidents to lawyers, rights activists, NGO coordinators, journalists, writers, artists and even ordinary netizens are being targeted.

In the past six weeks, Human Rights Watch has logged over a hundred cases of detention for advocacy across the country. Eight of China's top human-rights lawyers were arrested in mid-February and have not been heard from since. Up to 20 people are facing prosecution for the loosely defined crime of "inciting subversion," which includes criticism of the Communist Party. Writers, bloggers and critics have been threatened with arrest.

The authorities' methods are also distinctive this time around. Gone is the reliance on short-term detention and house arrest; instead, the Public Security's Bureau No. 1 branch - the secret police in charge of "Domestic Security" - have opted for a mix of arrests on state security charges and extrajudicial tactics such as disappearances, physical intimidation or beatings by plain-clothes thugs, as well as threats of torture and retaliation against family members and work associates.

This shift to extrajudicial tactics was tacitly acknowledged by the authorities when a government spokesman warned on March 3 that "the law was not a shield" for people "creating trouble for China."

The aims of the current repression also differ from previous campaigns. Rattled by the revolts of North Africa and the Middle East, and yielding to the demands of a security apparatus that has been radically empowered since the staging of the 2008 Olympic Games, the Chinese leadership has launched an assault against all government critics in an attempt to reassert control over an increasingly assertive civil society.

The lesson Beijing has taken from the Middle East uprisings is that the Internet can be the starting point of large-scale popular protests and that it has indeed contributed to the spread of "global values," such as freedom of expression and human rights. In the minds of the leadership, these factors generate an urgent need to reassert control.

Over the past few years nothing short of a communication revolution has taken place in China. Thanks to the Internet, social networks and microblogging, a new generation of Chinese citizens - particularly those courageous enough to try to evade censorship and surveillance - has had the opportunity to access information and experiment with genuine freedom of expression.

When bloggers see their Web site "harmonized" - the euphemism for being shut down by the authorities - they simply open another one elsewhere.

Even the Great Firewall is not entirely effective: Blocked in China, Twitter has been widely used to share information and build a sense of community among previously isolated activists.

The transformative dimension of this revolution on the expectations of China's polity is an enormous challenge to the one-party system. It also highlights the growing divergence between two visions of China's political future.

One is of a society that Chinese citizens want to build now that their country has emerged as a global power and the second-largest economy in the world - a social order that doesn't necessarily preclude the Communist Party, in some leadership role.

The other is the Party's vision of what is necessary to not only secure its leadership, but preclude a split in its own ranks. That view is grounded not in confidence, but in insecurity, distrust of civil society and fear as to the consequences of an embrace of global values.

In this sense, the current crackdown is more than the routine weeding out of critics; it is an effort to redefine the limits of permissible expression and roll back the advances made by Chinese civil society over the past decade.

The voice of the international community at this juncture is crucial because Beijing will weigh that response before deciding on a course of action. The silence in the early weeks of the crackdown has emboldened the authorities and was probably decisive in the decision to go after someone as prominent as Ai Weiwei.

"Quiet diplomacy" was tried when Liu Xiaobo, the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was arrested in December 2008. He is now serving an 11-year sentence in prison; his wife is entering her fourth month of house arrest.

Unambiguous messages to Beijing that its conduct is unacceptable and illegal may not guarantee this new crackdown will stop, but a failure to speak up will ensure it continues.

Nicholas Bequelin is senior researcher on Asia at Human Rights Watch.