

The development of Human Rights in Communist China

Written by Merle Goldman

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MERLE GOLDMAN, JUL 21 2009

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, its Communist Party leadership has repressed dissident political views and organized political opposition. Nevertheless, today's China is not the China during the rule of Mao Zedong (1949-1976), when people were persecuted and imprisoned not only for what they said, but for who they were. In the early 1950s, Mao launched a campaign against landlords and entrepreneurs whom he called the remnants of feudalism and capitalism. In 1957, he persecuted China's intellectuals, because he did not trust them and believed they were conspiring against him. In the late 1950s, he launched a massive campaign in the countryside, called the Great Leap Forward, in an effort to transform China into a true Communist utopia in his life time. This campaign led to the death of thirty million Chinese peasants. And in 1966-76, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution against his own Communist Party and any person in authority, who he believed was conspiring against him. In the process, he catapulted China into anarchy and chaos.

After Mao's death in 1976, China was led by Mao's Long March colleague, Deng Xiaoping. He moved China to a market economy and into the international arena, resulting in the growth of China's economy by 9/10% a year for over thirty years. Though China continued to be a one-party state led by the Communist Party, it moved from a totalitarian to an authoritarian political system. The Communist Party continued to rule, but China's economic reforms made it possible for individuals to support themselves without the state's permission, which allowed for more freedom in the personal, economic, artistic, and intellectual lives of the Chinese people. In this freer atmosphere, it was possible for individuals and groups to try to assert their political rights.

Such efforts began in the late 1970s, led by former Red Guards, the educated youth, whom Mao had mobilized to rebel against authority during the Cultural Revolution. But they had caused so much havoc that Mao then sent them to the countryside to learn from the peasants. In the countryside, far away from teachers and families, they began to form their own groups, think for themselves and question authority. Consequently, when they returned to the cities after Mao's death in 1976, they started a movement in Beijing, called the Democracy Wall movement. They used methods that they had learned in the Cultural Revolution, such as putting up wall posters, engaging in political debates and printing pamphlets, except that this time they called for political as well as economic reforms. Deng Xiaoping allowed the Democracy Wall movement, which spread to virtually every major Chinese city, to continue for several months because it buttressed his campaign against the Maoists still in government. But once the Maoists had been purged, he then crushed the Democracy Wall movement and imprisoned their leaders.

The next attempt to assert political rights in China began with the 1989 student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. On April 15, thousands of students marched from their university campuses to the Square demanding political rights as well as calling for an end of corruption and rising inflation. When urban workers tried to join the movement, the students initially tried to block their participation because they knew that the greatest fear of the Chinese leadership was a Solidarity-like movement as occurred in Poland in 1980 that had spelled the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union and the Communist states of Eastern Europe. The students, however, could not control the movement as it spread to China's major cities and was joined by ordinary urban citizens. When Deng began to hear shouts from the streets of "Down with Deng Xiaoping" and "Down with the Communist Party," he feared another Cultural Revolution. He then sent in the troops on June 4, six weeks after the movement began, to crush the demonstration. The troops violently repressed the movement and imprisoned its leaders.

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Despite the violent crack-down on the 1989 demonstrators, another new political development occurred in its aftermath. With the continuing dynamic growth of China's economy, a rising new entrepreneurial class began to develop in the 1990s. Members of this class were not a bourgeoisie in the Western sense of an independent entrepreneurial class, because in order to start and sustain their economic endeavors they had to have connections with local party officials. In fact, China's most successful entrepreneurs were inducted into the party. Nevertheless, there were other members of China's rising middle class, such as defense lawyers, journalists and public intellectuals, who attempted to assert their political rights. Journalists wrote about peasant protests against local officials' confiscation of their land for modernization projects. Lawyers defended the journalists and others who criticized the political system. And public intellectuals wrote articles and engaged in debates calling for political reforms. They were sometimes detained and arrested, but still continued to criticize publicly the party's policies and call for political rights. Most important, for the first time in the Communist period, intellectuals joined with ordinary people in efforts to achieve political and economic rights.

In June 1998, another new political phenomenon occurred—an effort to establish an opposition political party, called the China Democracy Party. It was led by the leaders of the Democracy Wall and 1989 demonstrations. They first registered the China Democracy Party as an NGO in several cities. Despite government censorship and filtering, with the help of the Internet and cell phones, they were able to coordinate their actions and in just six months the China Democracy Party had become a nation-wide political party. This effort was different from other attempts to establish alternative political groups in that its members were not just intellectuals; they included workers, farmers and small entrepreneurs. The China Democracy Party existed for almost six months until the party sharply cracked down and imprisoned its leaders in late 1998. Nevertheless, despite its suppression, a precedent had been set for the establishment of an opposition party.

The make-up of the China Democracy Party's leadership also revealed another important change in the post-Mao era. Its leaders, veterans of past political movements, had been released from prison due to pressure from the international community. Whereas it had little impact on Mao, international pressure does influence the decisions of China's post-Mao leaders. They want to be accepted as respected members of the international community. Also due to international pressure, China has signed the UN Covenant on Social and Economic Rights in 1997 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1998. The Covenant on Social and Economic Rights has been passed by China's rubber-stamp legislature, the National People's Congress; but the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights has not been passed. Nevertheless, like the dissidents in the former Soviet Union, China's human rights activists cite the latter covenant as justification for demanding political rights.

Thus, though China's government is authoritarian and those demanding human rights continue to be imprisoned and abused, there have been changes in the post-Mao era, making it possible periodically to launch efforts to achieve such rights. Despite repeated government crack-downs on any unauthorized political activities, individuals and small groups continue to seek political rights and for the first time in the People's Republic, intellectuals are joining together with ordinary people in such endeavors. So far, they not been successful, but neither have they been defeated.

Merle Goldman, is Professor Emerita of Boston University and an Associate of the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard. Her most recent book is "From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China" She is also the author of a booklet, published by the Association of Asian Studies in 2007, "Political Rights in Post-Mao China," designed to be used by high school teachers and students and undergraduates.