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Hypocrisy, human rights and the Beijing games

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The Beijing Olympic games, which began on August 8, are shaping up to be a perfect reflection of our times — taking place against a backdrop of human rights abuses, terrorism scares and under a blanket of chemical smog.

Sport, like religion, is a reflection of broader society. In a capitalist world, with its individualism, corporate competition, alienation and competing nationalisms, sport has become a commodified spectacle in which the majority does not participate.

No sporting event reflects global capitalism better than the Olympics: elitist, commercialised and corrupt. A platform for politicians and dictators, but officially “non-political” — meaning in practice that athletes and spectators are forbidden from voicing opinions.

China’s large population and rapid economic growth — becoming the manufacturing workshop of the world in less than two decades of working towards the restoration of capitalism — has heightened two important features of the Olympics.

Firstly, China has an expanding consumer market, making the Olympics’ role as a massive marketing and branding exercise for the corporate sponsors more profitable than usual.

Secondly, while the government of the host nation will inevitably use the opportunity to gain legitimacy and boost nationalism, the legacy of almost two centuries of Western colonialist and imperialist aggression has meant that the Chinese government’s propaganda that the Beijing games represents China finally being accepted as a full member of “the world community” has had a resonance among the people.

For its part, the Western media and politicians, while largely toeing the line that the games are a wonderful, non-political celebration of sporting prowess and global harmony, have also focused on some of their unattractive features but tried to portray these as somehow unique to China.

When the games were awarded to Beijing, Western commentators suggested that this would lead to an improvement in human rights. However, human rights did not improve in any of the other repressive dictatorships that have hosted the Olympics, for example Nazi Germany in 1936, Mexico in 1968 (where a massacre of protesting students and workers took place just 10 days before the games began) or South Korea in 1988 (then under military rule).

Amnesty International has reported that the Olympics have actually increased repression. One reason is that the massive amount of development in Beijing to prepare the city for the games has not only cost US\$40 billion in public money, it has cost 300,000 people their homes.

Not only is rendering people homeless for the sake of commercial development itself a human rights abuse, but those residents who protested against their homes being demolished have suffered imprisonment and torture. Some have simply disappeared.

On August 4, Western journalists came across a protest by about 20 evicted residents in a residential street near Tiananmen Square. “We don’t oppose the Olympics, but it’s wrong for them to demolish our house! It’s wrong!”, protester Liu Fumei yelled to the journalists as she was dragged off by plain-clothes police.

Another protester, Ma Xiulan, told journalists, “Developers shouldn’t use the Olympics to take our homes. And we cannot stop protecting our rights because of the Olympics.”

Using repression to drive out the poor and silence dissent is part of the Olympic tradition. For example, for the 1984 Los Angeles games, the Los Angeles Police Department SWAT team was sent overseas, including to Israel, to learn the finer techniques of mass repression subsequently deployed against African-American youth in the inner city, with thousands arrested.

Homeless people, whose numbers had increased with the demolition of public housing to make way for Olympics-related development, were removed from Atlanta for the 1996 games using specially introduced laws, including prohibiting lying down while not in a home!

Victims were either detained for the duration of the games in a jail built by the Olympic Planning Committee, or given one-way bus tickets.

The New South Wales government legislation for the Sydney 2000 Olympics to stop public displays of dissent increased the powers of the police and ASIO and, for the first time since federation, allowed the deployment of the military against domestic unrest.

These laws, particularly aimed at preventing planned protests by Indigenous people, anticipated many of the draconian legal innovations associated with the “war on terror”.

The NSW ALP government has used the precedent set by the Olympics laws to enact anti-protest laws for other prestigious events: the visit of US President George Bush and other world leaders for the 2007 APEC summit and for the visit last month of the pope for World Youth Day.

On August 6, ahead of the arrival in Beijing of the torch relay, four activists, two from Britain and two from the US, scaled lampposts and unfurled banners calling for freedom for Tibet. They were immediately detained and deported.

The often brutal political and religious persecution and accelerating economic marginalisation that Tibetans suffer under Chinese occupation is an issue that several Western athletes have also threatened to raise.

While Tibetan oppression gets a degree of recognition from Western politicians and media, neighbouring East Turkestan is largely ignored — despite both countries having similar histories since being occupied by China in the 1950s.

When East Turkestan is referred to in the Western media, it is usually under its Chinese name, Xinjiang.

However, on August 4 a dramatic and gruesome act of political violence in the city of Kashgar, in the far south-west of East Turkestan near the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan, put the country’s name in the headlines.

The Chinese government blamed the attack, which killed 16 Chinese border police and injured 16 others, on the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), who they accuse of being linked to al-Qaeda.

According to an October 2007 report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project, since 2001 China has taken advantage of the Islamophobia associated with the “war on terror” to delegitimise any resistance by Uyghurs and other Muslim-majority nationalities in East Turkestan.

The UN and US both listed ETIM as a terrorist organisation in 2002. This has allowed China to intensify oppression to an extent even greater than in Tibet.

But according to the report, the ETIM was only ever a marginal group and has barely existed since its leader was assassinated in Pakistan in 2003. Young people arrested in random sweeps are accused of being foreign-trained ETIM militants. Any political dissent, whether non-violent or violent, is attributed to ETIM and leads to terrorism charges.

Uyghur poets have even been charged with “spiritual terrorism” for their work.

These charges can bring the death sentence. East Turkestan is the only place governed by China where public executions for political offences still occur regularly. The most recent executions occurred on July 9 when two prisoners were shot immediately after being sentenced.

Five Uyghur youths were shot by police in a park in East Turkestan’s capital, Urumqi, on the same day and accused of being an ETIM cell.

As in Tibet, the repression and discrimination, combined with the criminalisation of any expression of dissent, can lead to spontaneous acts of violent opposition to Chinese rule. In March, demonstrations in Tibet for self-determination turned into violent riots with Chinese transmigrants being attacked, about 20 being killed.

The August 4 attack did not resemble the work of an international terrorist network. Two Uyghur friends, a taxi driver and a vegetable seller, drove a truck into the border police on their regulation morning jog, threw molotov cocktails then set upon them with knives before being overpowered.

Curiously, while blaming this attack on al-Qaeda linked terrorists, Chinese authorities were dismissive of two videos released by a previously unknown Uyghur group the Turkestan Islamic Party, which claimed responsibility for a series of bombings of busses which took place in the Chinese cities Shanghai and Kunming in July.

The videos also threatened to attack the Olympics with suicide bombings and biological weapons.

No amount of corporate and media spin can cover the reality of human rights abuses in China, however neither can these abuses be separated out and placed above the horrendous abuses carried out day in and day out by Western powers — not least of all in the brutal US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, where more than a million have died.

The Beijing games are a perfect metaphor for our times — where hypocrisy in pursuit of profits is the only guiding principle for those in power.

,A “dissidents’ guide to the Olympics” can be found at socialist e-journal Links, <http://links.org.au/node/566/a>>.]

P.S.

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