

Why is Beijing Afraid of Liu Xiaobo?

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Killing the chicken to scare the monkey may not work this time

You cannot find a more low-key, modest, and moderate dissident than Liu Xiaobo, who was jailed on Christmas day – when presumably the western world was on holiday and not reading the newspapers – for 11 years.

A literary critic by training, all that the former lecturer in Chinese literature has done is write articles that are mildly critical of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. The six pieces that infuriated Beijing – and were cited as evidence of his “crime” of “inciting subversion against state power” were all published in overseas websites, to which Chinese are barred by state-imposed firewalls.

It is true that Liu and a score or so professors and legal experts drafted the Charter '08 Internet petition, which called on the authorities to allow citizens to enjoy civil rights already enshrined in the Chinese Constitution. When the Charter first appeared a year ago, Liu and his friends were attacked by firebrands among the Beijing intelligentsia for not being brave enough to take on the authorities.

The weakness of the CCP's case against Liu perhaps explains why although Liu was hauled in by state-security personnel on the eve of the Charter's publication on December 7, 2008, the authorities waited until last June before “formally arresting” him on subversion charges. Although no “state secrets” were involved in the Liu case, his wife, supporters as well as foreign diplomats were not allowed to attend the two-hour trial which was held on December 23.

And the authorities picked an international holiday when many journalists were off work and when festive revelers were hardly paying attention to the news, to make the shocking announcement of the jail term meted out the 53-year-old intellectual.

There are several reasons why the CCP is so afraid of a gentle and restrained dissident whose demands have never gone beyond incremental, gradualist political reform. First, the leadership under President Hu Jintao was shocked by the potency of the Internet as a galvanizer of the voices of dissent. Within two months of the appearance of Charter '08, more than 10,000 Chinese citizens signed on to the Net-based petition. The signatories included not only intellectuals but workers, retirees and housewives. The past two years have seen hundreds of blogs, chatrooms and Chinese-style Facebook and Twitter sites breaking news that have embarrassed the authorities.

That's why State Councillor Meng Jianzhu, the nation's top cop, warned recently that the Internet had become a “major means through which anti-China forces perpetrate their infiltration and sabotage activities.”

Hitting Liu hard is a warning served on the China's fast-growing and increasingly politicized Internet community to not use the new media against the regime.

Second, while Beijing, which is sitting on \$2.2 trillion worth of foreign-exchange reserves, has spared nothing to build up a police-state apparatus, more and more chinks have appeared in its armor. Take for example, the riots that hit Tibet in the spring of 2008 and in Xinjiang last July and August. Weeks before the outbreak of these disturbances, various state-security units had picked up relevant intelligence – and Beijing had dispatched additional police, anti-terrorism squads, as well as People's Armed Police (PAP) to affected areas.

The unexpectedly large casualties – as well as numbers of alleged “beaters, smashers and looters” – made a big dent on the credibility of the labyrinthine state-control establishment.

Moreover, while the Hu-led Politburo has poured billions of yuan into beefing up the “tools of the dictatorship of the proletariat,” the nationwide count of “mass incidents” – an official euphemism for anti-government activities – this year is estimated at more than 100,000.

That the Politburo itself has started to lose faith in its troops, police, security agents and PAP officers is evidenced by the fact that law-enforcement cadres such as Politburo member Zhou Yongkang have been frenetically reviving Cultural Revolution-vintage mechanisms – and language.

In an effort to launch a “new people's warfare to protect the party,” Zhou and Meng have been recruiting vigilantes and neighborhood spies to inform on “enemies of the state” and “agents of anti-China forces in the West.”

By slapping a heavy sentence on Liu, the Hu leadership seems to be hoping against hope that challenges to the regime – which are expected to mount due to the exacerbation of the rich-poor divide as well as myriad social injustices – may be kept at bay.

Yet the most important reason why CCP honchos are so afraid of – and angry with – Liu is that his criticisms of the regime seem dead on target. The former college professor has noted that there is no way that Beijing's repressive measures can “fundamentally and perpetually sustain this edifice of dictatorship in which uncountable cracks have appeared.”

Liu has also faulted the CCP for trying to use the force of nationalism to extend its tattered mandate of heaven.

“The official patriotism that the CCP dictatorial regime has advocated,” wrote Liu, is tantamount to “asking the people to love a dictatorial regime and a dictatorial party.” The dissident points out that China's future lies not with the “new deal of the rulers” but with “the ceaseless expansion of ‘new forces’ within the people.”

The day Liu was sentenced, thousands of his sympathizers managed to vault over the Great Firewall of China to express support for their hero in those far reaches of the Internet that have escaped official surveillance. After all, the CCP's millions of police and spies pale beside the nation's 330 million Internet users, who are becoming increasingly adept at outwitting the censors.

Moreover, dozens of signatories of Charter '08 have volunteered to go to prison with Liu. After Liu's sentence, his wife, Liu Xia, said he will be 65 upon his expected release in 2020. But then Ms Liu said that “I will hold up faith just as [I am sure] he will.”

As Mao Zedong said, it only took “a spark from heaven to set the whole plain on fire.” The gargantuan, mind-numbing injustice behind the CCP's pogrom against Liu seems to have outraged even a people long cowed into silence and subservience. And Beijing may find that killing the chicken to scare the monkey just may not work this time.

P.S.

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