

Barack Obama faces a tough task to achieve any progress on human rights during his visit to China, writes Jerome A. Cohen

Flame of conscience

Sunday will mark US President Barack Obama's first visit to China. Will he be stricken by Marco Polo-itis? The Great Wall and the Forbidden City can be mesmerising. But so, too, can Obama, especially if allowed to speak freely on Chinese television. Obama will confront some tough choices, not only between meetings and sightseeing but also in choosing among the unprecedented number of difficult issues on his potential agenda. Climate change? World financial crisis? Tariff war and currency revaluation? North Korean nuclear weapons? US arms sales to Taiwan? Sino-US military co-operation? Afghanistan and Iraq pullbacks? Iran and Pakistan dilemmas?

No previous Sino-American summit has confronted so many issues. This testifies to China's increasing prominence.

How much room will the agenda have for "human rights"? After diplomatic relations were normalised in 1979, and especially after the Tiananmen slaughter of June 4, 1989, human rights became an important issue in Sino-American

society has a huge stake in any cross-strait military arrangements. Yet none of those items addresses "human rights" in the sense of the political and civil rights of 1.3 billion Chinese. During the past three years, the mainland has again tightened restrictions on its own citizens' most basic freedoms of expression – speech, publication, assembly, organisation and religion. Those who challenge these restrictions have been arbitrarily and harshly punished through a comprehensive array of informal, administrative and criminal sanctions.

The cruelty to which many courageous people have been subjected for attempting to experiment with democracy, implement a genuine rule of law or practise their religion is unworthy of a government that has made great social and economic progress in recent years. Despite such progress, the regime is facing a rising tide of popular protests against a broad range of grievances in many areas, not only Tibet (西藏) and Xinjiang. Instead of establishing democratic institutions to provide satisfactory outlets for processing these grievances, Beijing's response is unremitting repression.

Rights defenders and lawyers who seek to utilise existing weak legal institutions are themselves often harassed, beaten, deprived of their livelihood, detained and prosecuted. Many of them who fall ill in prison are denied the necessary medical care in an apparent effort to permanently incapacitate them and deter others. Probably millions of Chinese hope Obama will condemn such abuses and press their leaders for reforms.

Obama's bargaining position is not very strong. Not only does he need Chinese co-operation on many problems, but he also represents a government that has itself been a deserving target for human rights criticism.

The invasion of Iraq and the disgraces at

Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib symbolise America's most shameful international misconduct in decades. Moreover, Obama has been disappointingly slow in undoing some of his predecessor's worst civil liberties violations at home as well as abroad.

Will the able team recently assembled by Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton persuade their Chinese counterparts to undertake systemic reform and co-operate in some substantial human rights initiatives? It won't be easy, even if Obama and Clinton decide to press harder than they have to date. Bland Washington statements and a private talk with President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) are unlikely to bring transparency and fair trials to Chinese justice.

There is a conservative climate among Beijing's leaders and, along with Cuba, Sudan, Egypt and other massive human rights violators, their diplomats at the UN are adept at fending off foreign censure and suggestions.

Reflecting China's heightened influence, the country's new nationalism

and America's own human rights vulnerability, the leadership has apparently decided to tough it out, while throwing the US a face-saving bone or two.

Renewal of the largely ineffectual, on-again, off-again official bilateral "dialogues" that China uses to placate foreign democracies will not impress increasingly sceptical American human rights non-governmental organisations. Nor will a return to the old trick of releasing a few high-profile activists from confinement, while quietly locking up more.

A stirring speech to the Chinese people and a serious meeting with dissidents would at least demonstrate Obama's sincerity, but are not scheduled.

So, will the young president return home with much to show human rights supporters?

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