

China should learn from the Egyptian uprising that ruthless repression ultimately leads to instability, writes Jerome A. Cohen

When sparks fly

To the extent that they have access to information, thoughtful Chinese, inside and outside the Communist Party, are analysing the implications for China of recent events in Egypt. What lessons should the country's increasingly worried, but outwardly successful, ruling elite take away?

Egypt surely vindicated Mao Zedong's (毛澤東) familiar maxim that "a single spark can start a prairie fire". Based on their record, China's current leaders are likely to conclude that former president Hosni Mubarak's fall confirms the importance of quickly snuffing out the spark, as they believe Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) and his colleagues should have done when students began to gather in Tiananmen Square weeks before the slaughter of June 4, 1989.

A decade later, Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin (江澤民), applied the "lesson of Tiananmen" by cruelly suppressing the Falun Gong immediately after it assembled 10,000 adherents in front of Communist

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Party headquarters without the advance knowledge of the secret police. Tibet (西藏) and Xinjiang (新疆) are more recent examples of the party's use of such measures against minority nationalities.

Even the dominant Han nationality continues to be "harmonised" by the police and their hired thugs. Despite three decades of spectacular national development, there is a rising tide of dissatisfaction among China's working-class citizens. Many feel deprived of the greatest benefits of their country's economic progress, unfairly burdened by the costs of developmental achievements, angry at government corruption and abuses, and lacking in freedoms to express their feelings and affect policy. Increasingly, they share the belief of a growing number of intellectuals, professionals and officials, including many party members, that political and legal reforms are urgently needed. Here we see many similarities to Egypt.

One of the major demands of the crowds in Tahrir Square was to end the frequently exercised power of the police to arrest anyone at will and often inflict torture. More broadly, the protesters, as *The New York Times* correspondent Michael Slackman noted, sought "freedom, democracy, social justice, rule of law and economic equality". The gap between rich and poor had become intolerable. People were no longer seduced by appeals to nationalism or pan-Arab ideology but focused on ordinary demands for improving life, and this required political change, change that did not come.

Egyptian experts said that Mubarak's emphasis on stability "in the end proved the ultimate destabiliser". As Slackman reported: "Facing a police state that choked off competing ideas and ideologies, preventing free elections and manipulating the state media, the public found the only way to achieve its goals was on the streets."

If China's leaders care more about the welfare of their people than maintaining the party's unfettered power, they should understand Egypt in a different way – as confirming the desirability not of rapid repression but of timely reform. This would be in the interest of their own self-preservation as well as social justice and political progress. They could not do better than to heed the admonitions of Chinese human rights activists whom they are viciously suppressing.

They might well start by viewing the hour-long video recently made by the blind "barefoot lawyer", Chen Guangcheng (陳光誠), whom their persecution has made famous outside China. It was secretly recorded by Chen and his wife during the ongoing harsh and illegal house arrest that was imposed on them after Chen's completion of a 51-month prison sentence following a sham conviction. The video was released last week on the website of China Aid, a Texas-based rights group, just as the Egyptian revolution came to a boil. Chen's advice, resonating with the Egyptian experience, is that ruthless repression can eventually produce national instability and even dictatorial downfall.

China's "outdated social system is withering away", Chen says. The government is terrified and has "a sense of crisis". It is afraid that people will learn of its misconduct, which is why it goes to such extremes to hide its actions and isolate him and his family.

"If a society is not built on the foundation of fairness and justice, it will not gain long-lasting stability," he emphasises. "Violence will only maintain



short-term stability." Chen, who learned law through self-study and practice defending victims of official discrimination, maintains that the government's sole long-run option is to abide by its own law, including constitutional and international legal standards, respect universal values, protect human rights, and establish democracy and the rule of law.

Chen's video offers the first opportunity in over five years for the public to hear the views of this man whom *Time* magazine, when he was already in detention, named one of 2006's "Top 100 People Who Shape Our World". Chen was subsequently awarded the Magsaysay Award for Emergent Leadership, often called Asia's Nobel Prize, while imprisoned.

In the video, he recognises that its posting may have dangerous consequences for him. His captors, who have often tried to intimidate and provoke him by calling him a "traitor", "counter-revolutionary" and "enemy of the state", made clear that they were hoping for an excuse to pounce on him again. Because of

the video, Chen says, "it's likely they will handle me the way they treated Gao Zhisheng" (高智晟), once China's most famous human rights lawyer but tortured and now long "disappeared" by China's security police; "after all, no matter how they beat me, the judicial organs will turn a deaf ear since it will be done on the order of the Party Committee".

Indeed, several human rights organisations have reported that, shortly after the video's posting, Chinese police illegally entered Chen's modest farmhouse, severely beat this blind man and his wife and then refused them medical care. Will China's leaders seek to justify such mistreatment as necessary to maintain social stability? Surely others who watched Mubarak resign must be questioning how stable any government built on such abuses can be.

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