How the Chinese Slowly Protest

China’s greatest senior level government purges and its greatest roll-back of freedom of expression since the lunacy of the Maoist Cultural Revolution almost 50 years ago have been occurring for several years and have been relatively passively noticed in the world. Where in earlier times purges were allegedly on ideological lines, the innovation of the recent weeding out of large numbers of senior officials has been billed as an attack on corruption in a series of retributive waves. As the Chinese government is notoriously corrupt, the concept is popular in the country. Huge numbers of officials simply extort money from the citizenry, and the Chinese Navy has even been known to steal the catch of fishing trawlers.

Ideological disputes were practically always just common or garden struggles for power and did not enjoy much public attention or concern until they became mass reigns of terror rooting out and brutalizing vast numbers of the unoffending, in the Stalinist tradition. President Xi Jinping is making a forceful attempt to silence dissent within the Communist Party with disciplinary rules that have led to the firings of a variety of ostensibly powerful and non-political people for “improper discussion” of the regime’s policies. Among those dismissed for this rather arbitrary reason are a senior academic, a chief of police, and the editor of a prominent newspaper.

Beneath the apparent policy issues is Xi’s attempted reversal of decades of gradual liberalization toward collegiality of leadership and what was called “Intraparty democracy” (in the absence of it at any other official level). He is retrieving from decades of disuse the Maoist formula of absolute rule but packaging it as the people’s vengeance on the malefactors of

high office, who the president and his supporters claim are tainting the regime and desecrating the state by their avaricious abuse of office.

This does not entail the tortuosity of reviving a previously discredited former leader, as would be the case in any resurrection of Stalin, after he was violently denounced at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 and evicted from what had become the Lenin and Stalin Tomb in Red Square. Mao was never airbrushed down from the secular worship he received in his 27 years of absolute government and so emphasis of some of his methods now is not a tight-rope act of official history. But Mao does share the Chinese pantheon with Chou En-lai and Deng Xiaoping, long-serving premiers of the People's Republic, and with Liu Shao-chi, party deputy chairman and president of China. (Deng and Liu were both purged by Mao but rehabilitated, and Mao did not allow Chou to be treated for cancer, which was, in effect, a death sentence, but now they are regarded as the four premier figures of the modern era in China.)

Xi's actions have put the senior cadres in mind of some of the less salubrious nostrums of Chairman Mao, but they have also resonated with those who have been the victims, or just the disgusted witnesses, of the self-indulgence of unanswerable senior party and bureaucratic figures. More sinister and intrusive to a much larger portion of the population are the efforts to suppress Google and social media, censor the Internet, and randomly dismiss and arrest prominent people for "insubordination," or "doing things their own way," or "contradicting the spirit" of the Central Committee.

As in all other matters, the scale of China complicates things: disputes within the Chinese Communist Party are not like arguments in a Canadian federal party. In China, the Communists are the only party, and although it is not, in fact, communist at all, it maintains the masquerade of Marxist doctrine and has 88 million members. In such circumstances,

and where prominent people are accused and driven from office for having said something “radical” decades ago (one of Stalin’s flourishes, though he normally executed his designated opponents), disputes of this kind can ramify widely and render tens of millions of people very uneasy. The legislation against imprecise “improper discussion” is a matrix for the pseudo-legal persecution of enemies and no adult Chinese could be unaware of where such a measure could lead.

The millennia-old response of the irritated masses of China to the exercise of central authority is, at least initially, passive resistance. Every time Richard Nixon or Henry Kissinger proposed a formal toast to Mao and Chou En-lai as men who had altered the lives of a quarter of the world’s population for a quarter of a century, the honouree politely contradicted them and said that they may have had some impact around Beijing but that no one altered the lives of the innumerable masses of China. Of course, Mao and Deng, especially, did change China, but the Chinese technique of public sluggishness, a semi-plausible lip-service that is really more or less of a work-to-rule, is the most frequent historic posture of the Chinese opposite their government. There is not a tradition, as there is in many Western countries, of taking the wishes of the government more seriously than the regime’s practical powers of enforcement justify. The Chinese resort to revolt more frequently than the Russians, but not at the drop of a red flag as some of the more volatile Latin countries have done. (France had eight revolutions or revolutionary regime changes between 1789 and 1871.)

There is certainly no sign of any general violence now, and the government of Deng and his successors in the last 35 years have generated an electrifying elevation of national income in absolute terms and spread it fairly steadily through the population. But there are undoubtedly an immense number of

Chinese who are thoroughly annoyed by the slowing economy, the constant intrusions in the media and social communication, and the heavy-handedness of all the enforcement apparatus of the government. Though it is unfashionable in the West to notice it, there are approximately 70 million Christians and 25 million Muslims in China who are severely disaffected by the systematic suppression of their religions. St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI refused to recognize the so-called "Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association" (in an enactment of Napoleon's wishful comment that "Of course the people must have their religion and of course, the State must control it"). In a splendid standoff between ancient authorities, the Holy See continues to recognize the government of Taiwan as the rightful government of China, as it does not seek to influence or restrain the independence of the Roman Catholic or other Churches. The Vatican is certain to win this contest eventually, but Beijing will not be hurried.

There has also been a good deal of muted criticism of China's belligerent and swaggering foreign policy. Beijing identified itself too closely with the decrepit and failed military regime in Myanmar (Burma), provoked a major Japanese arms build-up by claiming a chunk of the East China Sea as territorial waters, and alienated its former Vietnamese allies by establishing an off-shore oil rig in an area Vietnam has long claimed as its territorial waters. As in other countries, this sort of jingoism has its supporters, but more sophisticated citizens, and most of the international community, see such measures for what they are.

China is not in crisis, other than the over-extension of both public and private sector debt, and the limitations of the state's ability to require the population to buy what is produced by what largely remains a command economy. But the rise of political and economic tensions simultaneously is not a process that can continue indefinitely without generating great strain in a country that was almost universally

proclaimed, until about two years ago, to be about to seize the headship of the world’s nations.

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Others have written eloquently, in the National Post and elsewhere, of the sadness of the death and greatness of the character and achievements of George Jonas, poet, writer, and intellectual, who died last weekend. There will be a secular remembrance occasion in due course, at which he asked me to give a eulogy; so I will not pre-empt myself here, but only repeat what I said when his family asked me to say a few words at his burial. Though we met and were brought together because, decades apart, we married the same woman, and that would not normally seem a matrix for close friendship, George became one of the dearest and wisest friends I, and I think anyone, ever had. He was a great man, who can never be forgotten or replaced.

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