

China's Complacent Generation

Thirty years after Tiananmen, the CCP has largely triumphed over history. But its failure to recognize that could spell trouble.

BY **MICHAEL AUSLIN** | JUNE 3, 2019, 4:52 PM

China hasn't seen a major democracy movement in a generation. Thirty years ago, when Chinese tanks brutally crushed such protests in Tiananmen Square, many observers wondered if the Chinese Communist Party could survive massacring its own citizens. But not only did the CCP survive, it flourished, even as it has become more alienated from the Chinese people.

The CCP's strength has been made clear most recently by its ability to control a string of sensitive anniversaries this spring. Last month marked the 100th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, a student uprising in republican China that shaped China's 20th-century history. As told in CCP mythology, the May Fourth Movement ignited the revolutionary fervor that led to the party's founding two years later, in 1921, and the eventual rise to power of Mao Zedong.

Thirty years after the May Fourth protests erupted, Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China from the gate of Tiananmen. But history has failed to repeat itself; three decades after 1989's Tiananmen Square protests, which intensified on the 70th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, the prospects for a democratic China seem more remote than ever.

This year, President Xi Jinping and the CCP successfully buried any celebration of May Fourth. For decades, China had marked the anniversary as a day of liberation, celebrated by Communists as much as by democrats. But with the date of one of the darkest days in modern Chinese history hard on its heels, today's CCP is wary of unleashing any fervor. Worried about growing dissatisfaction among young people, Chinese security services even arrested a group of six Peking University students who had apparently planned to join workers for some sort of solidarity labor. More than a dozen others from their group have since been detained, and over the past year, many other students have been taken in for similarly threatening behavior.

It only underscores the magnitude of the CCP's victory over history to note that its fears of

revolution today are likely unfounded. It is true that dissatisfaction with official corruption and the slowing economy is widespread, as **evidenced** by online posts, reports from visitors from China, and even some quickly suppressed protests. But people in China, especially young people, appear to have little interest in, let alone knowledge of what happened on June 4, 1989. To this day, no one is exactly sure how many students and protesters were shot to death or crushed under People's Liberation Army armored personnel carriers. Beijing buried most photos and reports of the massacre with the bodies of the student protesters.

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The lack of knowledge, combined with an increased focus on securing one's material well-being, has created an apathy about the possibility of large-scale, fundamental reform. That's especially true given that the regime still gets credit for China's extraordinary growth over the past generation, a sentiment fueled in part by a nationalism that pits China against the world.

Yet as public dissatisfaction over current trends and concern for the future grow, the increasingly authoritarian government is not prepared to let the two landmark dates pass unmanaged. In overturning the post-Mao model of leadership largely based on consensus, Xi has assiduously promoted his vision of society while squeezing any independent civil-society movements. His Han nationalism and repeated references to the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" allow for no skepticism, let alone alternative views on the appropriate path for Chinese development.

The **silencing** of Tsinghua University professor Xu Zhangrun after he published a widely read critique of Xi's rule last year was only one of the more public manifestations of the CCP's tightening control. Just a few weeks ago, three leaders of Hong Kong's pro-democracy Umbrella Movement were **sentenced** to up to 16 months in prison after being convicted under an obscure law for organizing the city's 2014 democracy protests.

Only outside of China will there be any public commemoration of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, and yet the world long ago made its peace with what what happened that year. China's human rights abuses since 1989 have barely registered with nations eager for trade and investment. Inside China, a government and party dealing with slowing economic growth rates and an ongoing trade war with the United States are

battening down the hatches.

While Beijing will always fear the possibility of a black swan of popular unrest emerging, the arrest of nearly two dozen Peking University students was a preemptive strike against any solidarity movement among students and workers, precisely the volatile mix that set off the May Fourth Movement and the Tiananmen Square democracy protests in the first place.

A wiser and more confident regime would let its citizens feel that their voices were being heard, and perhaps figure out ways to let them blow off steam through some form of protest. Instead, Xi is increasingly squeezing his subjects, for now redirecting their nationalism into anti-foreign channels, taking advantage of current tensions with the United States or long-standing grievances with Japan to manufacture crises that may spin out of control as much as the Tiananmen Square demonstrations did a generation ago.

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