

# CHINA MEDIA BULLETIN

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## IMAGE OF THE MONTH

### Hu Jintao removed

This image shows former Chinese leader Hu Jintao being escorted out of the 20th Party Congress. International news agencies like [Agence France-Presse](#) and Singapore's [CNA](#) shot the footage from different angles, which was not broadcast inside China. Chinese state news agency Xinhua posted in English on [Twitter](#) that Hu was ill, though without any accompanying reports in Chinese or posted on any Chinese platform, and debate raged globally over the symbolism of his removal. Inside China, censors on all major tech platforms [blocked](#) search terms for his name and terms like “grandpa Hu” with only a handful of official results appearing. [Comments](#) on nearly all posts containing his name were turned off and some older essays about his life were [deleted](#).



Image: [Screenshot](#)

## ANALYSIS

# Grassroots Protests Are Frequent in Xi Jinping's China

By Kevin Slaten

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***In the streets, on banners, in cyberspace, collectively, and individually—people in China are speaking out.***

How often do protests occur in China? It's indisputable that the one-party state has established an unprecedented system to stop collective action before it starts—featuring [pervasive surveillance](#), [grid-management policing](#), and even a “[targeted population](#)” system to control citizens thought to have a propensity for activism. Xi Jinping has taken social control even further as he has consolidated dictatorship over the past decade, inducting a raft of [new security laws](#) and [closing space](#) for rights advocacy NGOs. Furthermore, the government goes to great lengths to keep citizens from sharing information about dissent.

In this context, someone could be forgiven for believing that protests in China are uncommon. Yet, a new Freedom House initiative, the *China Dissent Monitor* (CDM), has found that people in China frequently challenge those in power, both collectively and individually. CDM documented 668 incidents of protest and other dissent in mainland China from June to September 2022. Of these, 77 percent were demonstrations, marches, and obstructing roads. We documented many other modes of dissent as well, including occupations, strikes, protest banners and graffiti, and notable online dissent such as large-scale hashtag campaigns and viral posts.

Dissent in China looks like this:

- After their children suffered food poisoning, hundreds of parents in Xi'an protested outside the tutoring company Kid Castle. Police violently repressed the demonstration.
- A large group of people, all of whom had purchased apartments in the Zoina Spring property in Hangzhou, demonstrated against wrongdoing by the real estate developer. They shouted “police brutality!” when state security agents began to drag away protesters.
- Unhappy that a newly constructed road bypassed the entrance to their village, residents in Hebei blocked the road with bicycles and motorbikes.
- Construction workers in Shenyang hung banners on a residential building to demand unpaid wages from the developer, Zhongliang.
- Hundreds of thousands of Weibo users criticized authorities over COVID-19 policies, using a hashtag linked to the arrest of a woman and her father in Dandong for resisting pandemic restrictions in order to travel to a hospital for treatment.

Such protests are a daily occurrence in China, and CDM is documenting them. The project categorizes each event across several variables, enabling comparisons and trend analysis, and puts all the information into a regularly updated database at [chinadissent.net](#).

Not only is dissent in China frequent, it's also widespread. Since June, people have protested in nearly every province and directly administered city. Moreover, even as authorities make every effort to prevent protestors from connecting, we found many instances where people manage to form decentralized movements that increase the impact of their dissent. For example, the Henan depositors' movement involved bank customers from at least five provinces protesting Henan-based banks that froze withdrawals. International reporting [focused](#) on one large demonstration in July, but CDM recorded 16 separate events connected to this movement since June. Another was the real-name complaints movement in June, which involved 61 demonstrations against corruption, abuse of power, and corporate fraud across 17 provinces and 35 cities, linked by the use of shared symbolism as protesters held up their ID cards while stating grievances.

While it's not accurate to paint protest as uncommon in Xi's China, it would also not be quite right to describe the typical protest as explicitly challenging the one-party regime. While CDM does record challenges to central leadership—for example, when three long-time Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members published an open letter in August calling on the party to revise its principle that the “party leads everything”—most protest actions target local government (33 percent) and private companies (64 percent). The issues that most often galvanized people included stalled housing, fraud, labor rights violations, COVID-19 policies, corruption, and land rights. And importantly, CDM found evidence of the target responding to citizens' demands in at least 37 cases, such as government opening investigations or making policy changes, or companies paying due wages.

Yet even as citizens aren't usually challenging the political system outright, authorities often treat their actions as a threat. There is evidence of repression in a quarter of all dissent events in the CDM database, including 60 instances of state violence and 48 instances of detention or arrest, each often involving multiple people. And this is likely an undercount. CDM only records repression when there is direct evidence such as photos and videos, but reprisals may occur after these snapshots in time.

Repression is common not because citizens' actions threaten the one-party regime directly, but because the CCP treats the act of collectively, publicly challenging any authority as a potential threat—whether village officials or a powerful company engaged in fraud—particularly when the protesters can win concessions. This is why “social stability” is ingrained in all levels of governance and ability to enforce it is among the top metrics considered for [party cadre promotion](#). It is why Xi has put so much emphasis on choking civic space and securitizing society: the aim is to reduce the ability of citizens to mobilize.

Despite years of concerted efforts to control and silence their voices, people in China are speaking out in the streets, in their communities, on banners, on walls, in cyberspace, collectively, and individually. In small ways and large, they organize to challenge injustices pertinent to them and their communities, to seek redress, and to hold the powerful to account. CDM will continue to document and share their stories.

## IN THE NEWS

# Xi's power affirmed at 20th party congress amid intense internet controls

- Xi Jinping cements power over party and state:** The 20th congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) closed on October 22, having communicated to Chinese citizens and the world a clear message that the party is completely subordinate to Xi Jinping. Xi secured a historic third term as general secretary of the party; promoted into the Politburo Standing Committee loyalists who presided over the [disastrous](#) 2022 Shanghai COVID-19 lockdown and [eviction](#) of migrant workers in Beijing in 2017; and had the party constitution [amended](#) to emphasize the “Four Consciousnesses,” values Xi developed that affirm his central role in political life. Xi [declared](#) the event a “success” as the congress called on the “the whole party, the whole army, all people and all ethnic groups in the country” to unite closely behind him, and equated his own ideology with the essence of Chinese culture and spirit. Unspoken in the propaganda surrounding the party congress were China’s [economic struggles](#), and the [frustration](#) evident among many young people about their future under Xi’s zero-COVID-19 policies. Unemployment for 16 to 24 year-olds reached 19.9 percent in July 2022. Xi has no clear successor within senior CCP leadership.
- Hu Jintao removed from congress:** As Xi took center stage at the party congress, his predecessor Hu Jintao’s surprising public removal from the conference [sparked global discussion](#) about whether the elderly Hu was confused or ill, or if Xi had moved to intentionally humiliate him. State media tried to assuage international commentators with a [message](#) on Twitter—banned in China—that Hu was ill. Censors inside China [limited](#) searches related to the incident to official sources and blocked online discussion of the events.
- Information controls distort narratives on party congress:** As expected, Chinese censors continued to delete and block posts to ensure the Chinese internet is free of criticism of Xi or the party while also flooding the space with propaganda. In one such example, censors [deleted](#) a post on Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin from American car manufacturer Buick that displayed an advertisement for a new car that could be interpreted as a comment on Xi Jinping staying in power. The ad, which was made specifically for the Chinese market, invited viewers to sit in the vehicle’s seats, saying they were so comfortable the occupant may “never want to leave.” Hashtags for the car were also banned.
- China orders tech companies to “improve traceability” of users:** Ahead of the 20th Party Congress, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) [launched a three-month campaign](#) to “crack down on internet rumors and false information.” The campaign’s [objectives](#) included improving the “traceability and accountability” of user behavior by supervising website platforms and encouraging them to improve their technical capacity to find purported violators and “punish” them with warnings or bans. In early November, the government released a [white paper](#) that laid

out the party-state's vision of internet governance in the new era, broadly signaling that the state's [strict regulation](#) of online platforms with “development and regulation in parallel” would continue.

## Surveillance updates: Tibetans, Tor users, Uyghurs targeted with DNA collection and malware

- Mass DNA collection in Tibet:** According to recent reports from Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Citizen Lab, Chinese police have conducted a [mass DNA collection program](#) in Tibet dating back to at least June 2016, and possibly as early as [2013](#). The Tibetan data-collection program resembled a similar mass DNA-collection program in Xinjiang and a national male DNA collection program. Between a quarter and a third of the total population in Tibet may be included in the database. Additionally, in late October, the government [opened](#) a new big-data center in Lhasa. Diaspora activists expressed [concern](#) that the center would help the Chinese government increase surveillance of Tibetans. Meanwhile, state media and government officials, further asserting the Chinese government's control over the territory, have increasingly [referred](#) to Tibet by the pinyin version of the Chinese-language name, “Xizang,” in English reports.
- Spyware bundled inside fake Chinese-language Tor browser:** Researchers from Kapersky Labs [discovered](#) a malicious Tor installer advertised on a popular Chinese-language YouTube channel focused on internet anonymity. Tor is an open-source software that obfuscates internet traffic by encrypting it and routing it through a volunteer network. The researchers said that the malicious Tor installer gathered user-identifying data but not “user passwords, cookies, or wallets”—suggesting the spyware was developed for surveillance rather than theft. The researchers said that infections appeared to be geographically limited to China, with the installer checking that its victims were connecting from a Chinese IP address.
- Spyware campaign, US technology used to target Uyghurs:** A [report](#) by the research group Recorded Future found that Chinese police have acquired a range of technologies produced by US-based companies, including DNA-analysis equipment, thermal imaging, optics, surveillance, network infrastructure, and data storage. Researchers [concluded](#) that surveillance and countersurveillance were among the main focuses of acquiring such technology, which was being used in Xinjiang and Hainan Province. Separately, the cloud security firm Lookout announced its [discovery](#) of a spyware campaign linked to the Chinese state that targeted Uyghurs inside and outside of China. Sophisticated malware disguised as fully functional Android apps, including messaging services, prayer time apps, and dictionaries, appeared designed to track people engaging in “pre-crime” activities—such as the use of a virtual private network (VPN) or sharing religious content—that the Chinese state views as precursors to religious extremism or separatism. The spyware apps were found on unofficial app stores (Google Play is blocked in China) and spread through messaging services like Telegram.

## Censorship updates: Lockdown complaints, foreign media, diplomat's mention of Ukraine invasion

- Lockdown pushback quashed:** As Xi Jinping cemented his rule over China at the 20th Party Congress, censors have continued to delete content and arrest individuals critical of his signature zero-COVID-19 policy. A November 2 Weibo [joke](#) about Xi Jinping, “Beijing Man Causes 1.4 Billion People To Be Quarantined Long-Term,” was deleted by censors and the account banned. In Gansu Province, censors [deleted](#) November 2 Weibo and Baidu posts from a father about the death of his three-year-old son from carbon monoxide poisoning; the boy’s condition had been exacerbated by pandemic workers who prevented them from leaving their compound. In Guangzhou, residents angry about local lockdowns and restrictions have begun [posting](#) complaints in Cantonese, which is harder for the Mandarin-speaking censors to detect, especially its slang terms. A November 7 [satirical essay](#) from a student, “How I learned to stop worrying and love the swab!” reached 100,000 views on WeChat before censors deleted the post. Police have also resorted to detentions to prevent criticism. Two hundred protesters in Lhasa, Tibet, were [detained](#) following a protest against COVID-19 lockdowns on October 26.
- Internal CCP reports censored:** According to a October 31 report from the Associated Press (AP), internal reports from state media journalists or other academics and researchers to the CCP leadership have been [censored](#), despite having long being a means for top leaders to learn about problems around the country. Reportedly, it has become too sensitive to criticize or question the official party line even in secret reports, according to interviews conducted by the AP. The confidential internal reporting system is the “eyes and ears” of the party, according to the CCP’s description, and propaganda is its “throat and tongue.”
- CBC forced to close Beijing bureau:** On November 2, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) announced it was [forced](#) to close its China bureau after its correspondent Philippe Leblanc had unsuccessfully waited over two years for a journalist visa. CBC had previously had a 40-year presence in China, but Leblanc will move to Taiwan while the broadcaster looks for a permanent location in East Asia. [Journalist associations](#) have denounced the Chinese government’s ongoing weaponization of journalist visas to prevent or restrict foreign reporters from entering or staying in the country.
- Foreign film quota reduced:** The Chinese government appears to have [cut](#) the number of foreign films allowed to be shown in the country. According to Radio Free Asia, only 38 foreign films had been released in the first 10 months of 2022, compared to 73 for all of 2021 and 136 for 2019. The vice minister for propaganda has [said](#) foreign films, in particular American films, would be allowed in China if they were “diversified, higher-quality films.”
- EU diplomat speech pulled over references to Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine:** Organizers of the China International Import Expo (CIIE) [pulled](#) a prerecorded speech from

European Union (EU) Council president Charles Michel that was meant to be broadcast to open the event on November 4. Michel's speech [discussed](#) "Russia's illegal war on Ukraine."

## HONG KONG

### Sedition convictions, Stand News trial, new RTHK chief, SCMP kills Uyghur story

- Sedition arrests, convictions continue:** Hong Kongers continue to face prosecution under the colonial-era sedition law, which has been used to restrict freedom of expression. On October 25, Hong Kong police [arrested](#) a mainland Chinese man surnamed Shi on sedition charges for putting up [posters](#) about the [Bridge Man](#) protest in Beijing and sharing them on social media; authorities claimed the content could "provoke hatred or contempt" of Xi. On October 17, Garry Pang Moon-yuen, a pastor, and Chiu Mei-ying, both of whom regularly attended trials of prodemocracy protesters, [received](#) 12 and 3 month sentences, respectively, for clapping in a courtroom and criticizing the verdict against a prodemocracy activist.
- Stand News chief editor bailed as trial against outlet hits procedural problems:** The trial against now-shuttered independent digital news outlet Stand News and two of its editors on charges of conspiring to publish "seditious publications" opened on October 31. Days later, on November 7, Patrick Lam, the former acting editor in chief, was [released](#) on bail after spending [nearly](#) a year in pretrial detention. The judge granted bail after prosecutors submitted 1,500 new pages of documents into evidence in the middle of the trial which the defense had not been allowed to review, including [screenshots](#) of articles taken by national security police starting the day *Apple Daily* shut down. Another editor in the trial, Chung Pui-kuen, remains in custody as he had not applied for bail. The next hearing will take place in December.
- New head of RTHK assumes post, vows close relationship with police:** The [new chief](#) of state broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), Eddie Cheung, took up his post in early October. Cheung, who has no media experience, was previously based in Brussels as a special representative for the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Affairs Office to the European Union. On November 10, Cheung was [interviewed](#) by the security minister Chris Tang on his [Facebook show](#), and [vowed](#) to "collaborate seamlessly" with the police and other government departments when asked about the "tense" relationship between the broadcaster and police in 2020. RTHK previously independently and critically covered events in Hong Kong, leading to a government takeover.
- Journalists resign after SCMP kills Xinjiang story:** In October, a former editor from the South China Morning Post [revealed](#) that he and two other journalists had resigned in 2021 after a senior editor killed their three-part series on birth control

policies in Xinjiang. Evidence around the government's birth control policies are among the many factors that support allegations that the Chinese government has committed acts of genocide and crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Muslims, and was [raised](#) by the United Nation's High Commissioner for Human Rights. There have been ongoing concerns about Alibaba's ownership of the newspaper, though it has also allowed other independent reporting.

## BEYOND CHINA

### Thai publisher pressured; US midterms disinformation; misogynistic attacks; tech firms downgraded

- Chinese businessman tries to shut down Thai prodemocracy press house:** In October, the Thai student publishing house Sam Yan Press [claimed](#) that a local investigative agency working on behalf of a Chinese businessman had offered them 2 million baht (\$56,300) to shut down their operations before the 20th Party Congress. Sam Yan Press, founded in 2017, is a member of the prodemocracy Milk Tea Alliance and has [published](#) books by Chinese political dissidents and human rights activists like Joshua Wong and Ilham Tohti. The executive editor of Sam Yan Press made public this effort despite concerns about security after he and other team members were repeatedly pressured to accept the offer. Sam Yan Press rejected the offer and issued a [public statement](#) about the incident in order to raise awareness about CCP influence efforts in Thailand.
- China-linked disinformation campaigns target US midterm elections:** A number of reports have indicated that Chinese state-backed actors [attempted to](#) influence the US midterm elections. The [Federal Bureau of Investigation \(FBI\)](#), [Meta](#), and cybersecurity firms such as Google's [Mandiant](#), [Recorded Future](#), and [Alethea Group](#) issued warnings about China-based efforts to hack US political parties or influence US political discourse on social media. In late October, Twitter [announced](#) the takedown of three distinct China-linked inauthentic networks that had posted content about the midterms, mostly between April and October 2022. Their impact was limited, spanning around 2,000 accounts on both sides of the political spectrum with [only](#) a few users with high engagement. While the networks included content that both supported and criticized China, some analysts [argued](#) that a number of posts that directly echoed Chinese state actors' aggressive rhetoric on topics like Taiwan represented an "extension" of Xi Jinping's increasingly assertive [messaging](#) at the 20th Party Congress.
- CCP steps up misogynistic targeting of Asian women:** A new report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) [documented](#) how the CCP is increasingly targeting female researchers, journalists, and activists of Asian descent in coordinated information operations across all major social media platforms. Some of the increasingly sophisticated tactics deployed included customized surveillance, intimidation, and disinformation tactics, and have been [highly abusive](#) toward targeted individuals.

- **Chinese technology firms downgraded:** Sustainalytics, the environmental, social, and governance (ESG) unit of the US financial services group Morningstar, [downgraded](#) three Chinese technology companies, Tencent, Baidu, and Weibo, due to their role in the Chinese state’s expanding internet control apparatus. The firm categorized these companies as “noncompliant” with the United Nations Global Compact principles that businesses should not be complicit in human rights abuses.

## FEATURED PUSHBACK

### Anti-Xi protests spread around the world

Following the October 13 “[Bridge Man](#)” protest in Beijing, Chinese people around the world have adopted his words including in a [poster](#) campaign on university campuses, graffiti in public [bathrooms](#), banners in public demonstrations, and online. For many, including those outside of China, these public acts of defiance are risky. But, they have allowed people to find solidarity with others who reject Xi Jinping’s authoritarian policies and have been inspired by Bridge Man’s words and actions. Several individuals who put up posters [shared](#) in [interviews](#) their initial fear of confrontation or being reported by other Chinese students, but also the joy of realizing they were not alone.

In Chinese cities like [Shanghai](#) and [Guangzhou](#), people had reported sharing or receiving protest posters through Apple’s AirDrop function on subways. AirDrop, which uses Bluetooth technology rather than the internet, was a relatively untraceable method of sharing information and was used in the 2019 Hong Kong protests; however following the protest, Apple [announced](#) it had introduced restrictions for Chinese users that placed limits on the amount of material they could receive from noncontacts.

In some cities, protesters have demonstrated publicly. In New York City on November 6, a group of Chinese international students [protested](#) outside of Apple’s Fifth Avenue store; they held posters with Bridge Man’s slogans and called for better conditions for Foxconn employees making iPhones in China under restrictive COVID-19 measures. A overseas Chinese artist, Jiang Shengda released a [guide](#) on October 28 for Chinese protesting overseas based on his experiences attending demonstrations in Paris. It included items on how to navigate laws and what kind of display materials to use, and tips for better ensuring personal security. In London, some [mainlanders](#) also found security and safety tips from Hong Kongers more experienced in protest.



Posters, like this one, were shared on AirDrop by users in Chinese cities.

Credit: [China Digital Times](#)

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR

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- **Increasing state influence over tech platforms:** On October 26, the government-owned Beijing Radio and Television Station [took](#) a 1 percent stake in popular short video app Kuaishou, which has 347 million users, and had one of its director named to the board. The investment and board seat follows similar moves at Douyin in August 2021 and Weibo in April 2020. Watch for increasing influence from government-owned companies on platforms through ownership stakes and board appointments, as the CCP increasingly seeks to exert control over private tech firms.
- **Trial of Hong Kong democrats to open in January:** The trial of 17 Hong Kong prodemocracy activists who took part in an unofficial primary election in 2020 will [open](#) in early January. The group all pled not guilty, while 30 others arrested in the case have pled guilty and await sentencing. Watch for whether the trial, which will not have a jury, respects due process rights or becomes a sham trial.
- **Elon Musk takeover of Twitter:** Musk's recent purchase of Twitter has sparked concern that it may harm the space the platform provided for Chinese people to circumvent the Great Firewall, or the diaspora to express themselves freely and organize. Watch for Twitter under Musk, who has extensive [business dealings in China](#), possibly [removing](#) labels from Chinese state-controlled media outlets, allowing state media to run ads or boost reach as the platform [loses](#) advertisers; [agreeing](#) to government takedown requests without proper vetting; or increased state-run disinformation or [harassment](#) campaigns conducted by unauthorized blue check accounts.

# TAKE ACTION

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- **Subscribe to the *China Media Bulletin*:** Have the bulletin's updates and insights delivered directly to your inbox each month, free of charge. Visit [here](#) or e-mail [cmb@freedomhouse.org](mailto:cmb@freedomhouse.org).
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- **Support a prisoner:** Learn how to take action to help journalists and free expression activists, including those featured in passed issues of the *China Media Bulletin*, [here](#).
- **Visit the *China Media Bulletin Resources* section:** Learn more about how policy-makers, media outlets, educators and donors can help advance free expression in China and beyond via a [new resource section](#) on the Freedom House website.

## For more information

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- For archives, go to: [www.freedomhouse.org/China-media](http://www.freedomhouse.org/China-media)
- For additional information on human rights and free expression related to China, see: *Freedom in the World 2021*, *Freedom on the Net 2020*, *Beijing's Global Megaphone*, and *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*



Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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