

China Dissent Monitor

Issue 2: October-December 2022

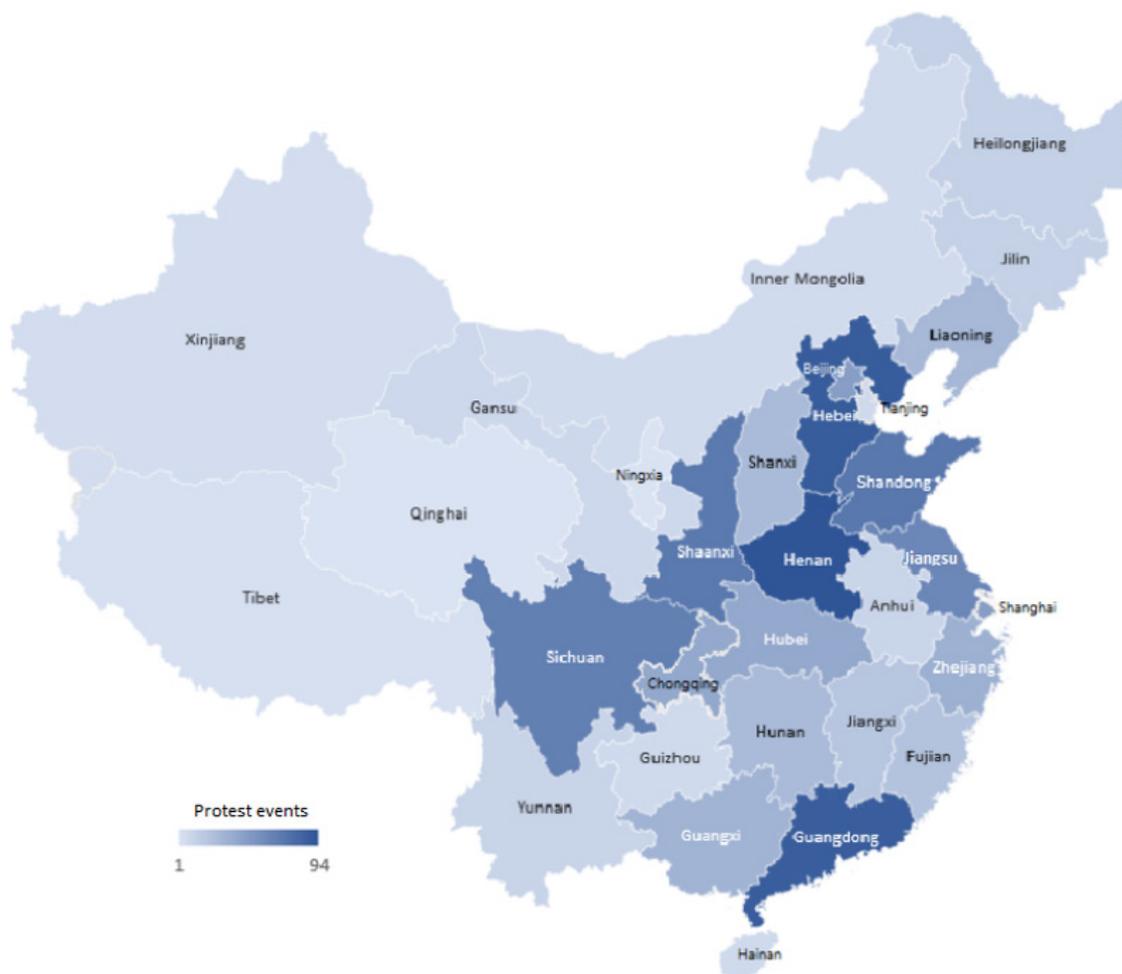
DISSENT EVENTS: 1,080

WHAT IS THE CHINA DISSENT MONITOR?

The China Dissent Monitor (CDM) collects and shares information about the frequency and diversity of dissent in the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was created in response to the information gap resulting from media restrictions in the PRC and risks associated with collecting information from within the country about dissent and protest. The project prioritizes capturing offline collective action in public spaces, though cases of less public and online dissent are also included to illustrate diversity among dissent actions. Sources for the CDM database include news reports, civil society organizations, and PRC-based social media, as well as the application of a machine-learning algorithm developed by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Doublethink Lab. See the full dataset and methodology at chinadissent.net

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Over one thousand real-world protests since June:** CDM has documented 1,080 dissent events since June 2022, 96 percent of which were offline acts, such as demonstrations, sign protests, and strikes. At least 23,000 people cumulatively have participated in protest events. So far, 253 events were documented for the period from October 1 to December 5, 2022.
- **Anti-lockdown protests:** CDM documented 173 cases of dissent against COVID-19 pandemic rules between June 1 and December 5, with 48 protests in September and October and 89 in November—reflecting a rising wave throughout the autumn. Analysis indicates that relative to other dissent, lockdown protests were larger, more likely to challenge the government, and more likely to result in arrests. This movement contributed to a greater amount of student-led and political dissent during the fourth quarter of 2022 compared to the third.
- **Protest dip during Party Congress:** CDM data suggests a relative decrease in protests around the period of the 20th Party Congress in October, when Xi Jinping began his third term as Chinese Communist Party (CCP) head. This could be the result of tightened security or greater censorship of information about protests. Despite the temporary lull, dissent actions remained frequent before and after that period.
- **Protests by diverse groups:** While property buyers (395 events) and workers (168) constitute the top groups engaged in dissent since June, a wide range of others groups launched protest actions including urban residents (153), students (56), rural residents (33), and faith groups (25). CDM has documented dissent in every province and region of the PRC.
- **Arrest of protesters is common:** In 8.5 percent of cases (92 events), there is direct evidence of authorities detaining or arresting protesters, reflecting the significant risks faced by people who engage in public dissent. The risk is higher for certain groups that face targeted persecution; for example, 72 percent of documented dissent actions among faith groups resulted in arrests.
- **Government concessions:** State authorities have made some level of concession in 51 cases—for instance, by revising a policy or addressing protesters' grievances. Concessions were more frequently documented in response to anti-lockdown protests.

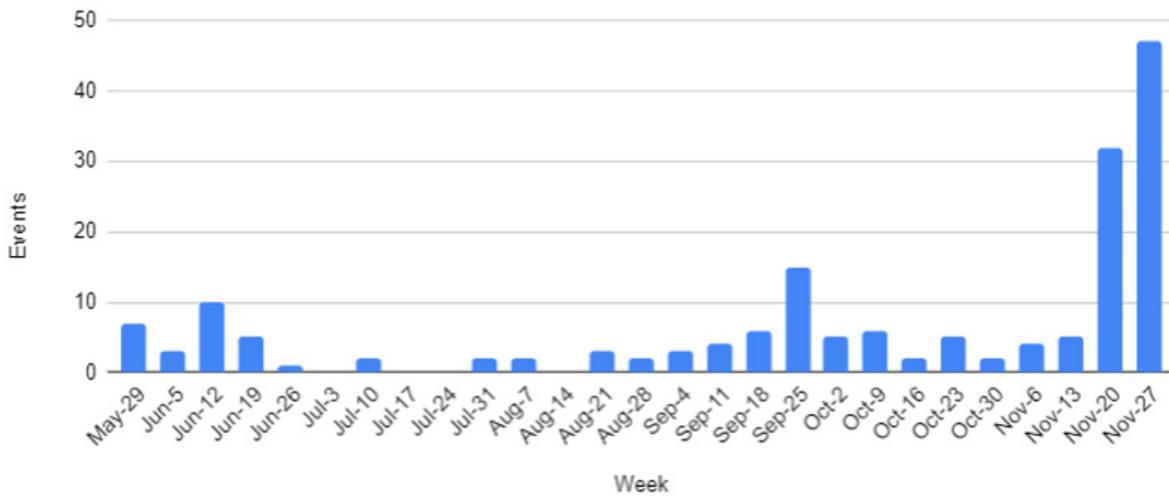


Distribution of protest events. (June to December 2022)

FEATURED ANALYSIS: AN ANTI-LOCKDOWN PROTEST MOVEMENT MONTHS IN THE MAKING

After rigid pandemic lockdown measures contributed to the deaths of at least 10 people in [a residential building fire](#) in Urumqi on November 24, China witnessed several days of protests across the country that captured the world’s attention. Many news reports characterized the movement as a sudden explosion of popular dissent and noted in particular the more politically contentious grievances expressed by some protesters, including demands for political reform. However, a CDM analysis found that this movement built over a period of months through decentralized protests against zero-COVID policies.

Months of dissent against pandemic controls. CDM’s data indicates that protests against stringent zero-COVID measures had bubbled for several months before escalating in the autumn. Of the 173 related dissent events identified by CDM, 35 occurred between June and August, 48 during September and October, and 90 during November and the first days of December. The 99 events before November 24 (57 percent) emerged across 23 provinces and regions. These events included community protests against sudden or long-term neighborhood lockdowns, often involving hundreds of people demonstrating



Protests against pandemic policies in 2022.



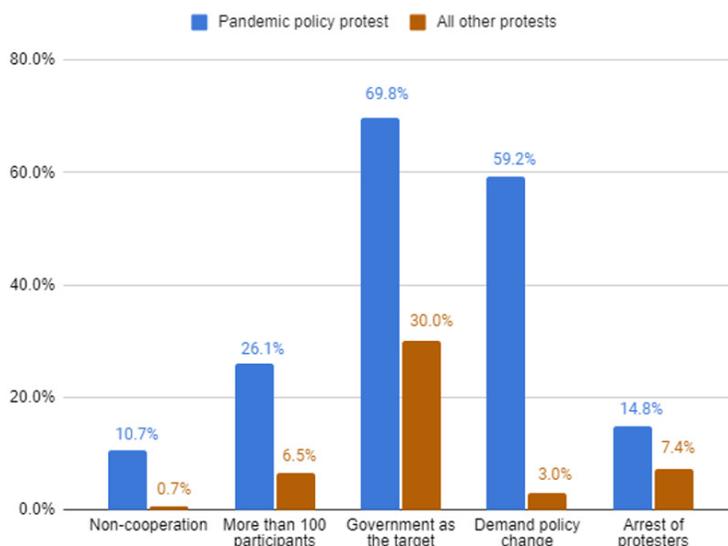
Students at Wuhan Textile University protested the school’s lockdown measures on Sept. 19, 2022. (Source: Weibo)

on the street or defying lockdown rules. Cases during September and October also involved university students demonstrating against draconian restrictions on their campuses. Not only did the frequency of these protests increase in the autumn, but so did their scale, most notably represented by the massive, multiday worker uprising in the Zhengzhou Foxconn factory campus days before the Urumqi fire.

Analysis of these events demonstrates several important ways anti-lockdown protests since June have been different from typical cases of dissent in China. As illustrated in the chart below, protests against pandemic controls have tended to be larger in scale, a reflection of the broad resonance of grievances against zero-COVID policies. The protests are also more likely to directly challenge government diktats through noncooperation or demands for policy change. These characteristics likely contribute to

the high prevalence of arrests of anti-lockdown protesters, double the rate of other protests. Despite this, CDM also documented evidence of government concessions in 26 cases (15 percent) of anti-lockdown protests.

Our analysis indicates that decentralized protests against zero-COVID policies gained traction across the country over a period of months, making possible the more concentrated social movement in late November. We could imagine the decentralized movement as dispersed horns sounding off throughout mid-2022 before coalescing into a loud crescendo in late November. This merging of dissent was achieved as more protesters mobilized within the same time period and utilized shared symbolism, especially university students.



Characteristics of pandemic policy protests vs all other protests.

Student protests. CDM has documented 41 protests initiated by students in 17 cities and 10 provinces, accounting for 56 percent of the 73 events associated with the late-November movement. Among the student dissent, 27 were sign protests (in which students left signs in public spaces), 7 were group demonstrations, 4 were installation or performance art, and 3 were solo protests. University students in 5 protest events held up blank sheets of paper, a tactic used in part to evade censorship or arrest while simultaneously criticizing censorship. This led many media outlets to name the movement the White Paper Protests or the A4 Movement, but CDM analysis indicates students also frequently held up other slogans during demonstrations or posted them on campus buildings, including “This content cannot be viewed due to violations” (5 events); “Do not become indifferent, do not stay silent, do not ignore, do not forget” (5); a Chinese translation of the American revolutionary slogan “Give me liberty or give me death” (4); “Scientific rather than imaginary” (4), a reference from the [1915 New Culture Movement](#); and “I broke my leg, and the doctor rushed to sew my mouth” (2). Artistic dissent by students included an installation piece titled “Blowing in the Wind,” which featured medical masks bound to a wooden structure, and another display in which masks stained with red liquid were tied to stair railings.



Residents in the Jinghu community of Zhengzhou protests a sudden lockdown on Oct. 1, 2022. (Source: Weibo)

A movement linked through symbols.

The use of diverse symbols was common among students, but it was not exclusive to them. Among the 31 protests by urban



“Freedom of speech, democracy, rule of law” and slogans from the Sitong Bridge protest written on the bathroom of Northwestern Polytechnic University. (Source: Weibo)

residents in the late-November movement, participants held up blank sheets of paper in six events. In four large demonstrations in Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu, urban residents invoked language from the Sitong Bridge protest in October, in which Beijing resident [Peng Lifa](#) hung a banner criticizing zero-COVID policies and demanding political reform. For example, protesters in Chengdu chanted lines from the Sitong Bridge banner, including “we don’t want lockdowns, we want to eat,” and “we don’t want Cultural Revolution, we want reform.” Sitong Bridge slogans also appeared in three student protests in Beijing, Chengdu, and Xi’an.

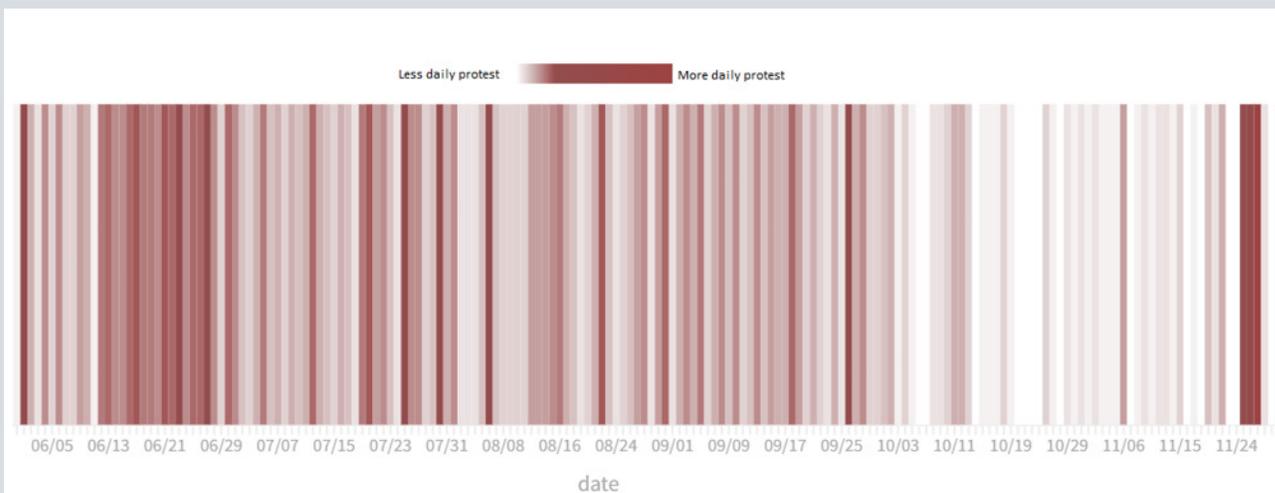
The symbolism, which reached across time and locations, linked the protesters to one another to form a decentralized movement in which participants communicated abstractly through signs and slogans rather than explicit organizing. The use of these symbols also aided people in circumventing censorship, as posting images or videos of slogans online is difficult for censors to quickly identify and block.

Of course, the most frequent slogan among the 73 protests in the late-November movement was to “end the lockdown,” reflecting the grievance that unified most events in this movement. Political grievances, such as criticizing censorship or demanding political reform, appeared in 38 cases, including 29 led by students and 13 demonstrations. This suggests the merging in late November of different symbolic movements—one focused on lockdown policies and another on political reform—that had existed at varying intensities well before the fire in Urumqi.



Urban residents protest on Wuyuan Road in Shanghai on Nov. 27, 2022, some holding blank paper. (Source: Weibo)

Winning a major policy reversal. On December 7, a week after the protest movement reached a crescendo, the National Health Commission effectively ended zero COVID. As a policy championed by Xi Jinping himself, the reversal was a remarkable example of the power of popular dissent in China. However, CDM found evidence of arrests in 20 percent of demonstrations that occurred in the late-November movement, and this does not include significant efforts by the government to [track down and detain](#) participants days or weeks after the protests ended. In this way, the 2022 anti-lockdown movement reflects the larger story of public dissent in China in that citizens, left with few institutional options, often utilize public protest with some success, yet they do so in the face of considerable risks.



Temperature chart indicating the daily frequency of protest.

THE PARTY CONGRESS AND DISSENT

The CCP held its 20th National Congress from October 16 to October 22, 2022, marking the start of Xi Jinping’s third term as general secretary and signifying the consolidation of his dictatorship. CDM data shows a notable dip in the frequency of dissent events during the period around the congress, as illustrated in the chart. There are at least two possibilities that can explain this relative dip. First, dissent may have actually declined due to increased government measures to prevent protests during this period. Second, ramped-up censorship of online posts during this period may have impacted the amount of information that CDM could find about protest events that did occur. [A recent empirical study](#) showed that the party-state often increases generalized censorship during important political events.

BY THE DATA: DISSENT AND CONCESSIONS

Relationship between groups and targets of dissent. The Sankey diagram on the next page visualizes the top groups and targets associated with dissent events since June 2022 and the relationships between them. The top groups engaged in protest are property buyers, workers, and urban residents. Property buyers and property owners together almost equal the remaining groups combined, indicating the prevalence of housing-related protest among all dissent events. The financial woes of property developers and associated building delays have made them a frequent target of protest for property buyers and owners, as well as by workers who turn out to demand wages when the developers are unable to pay.

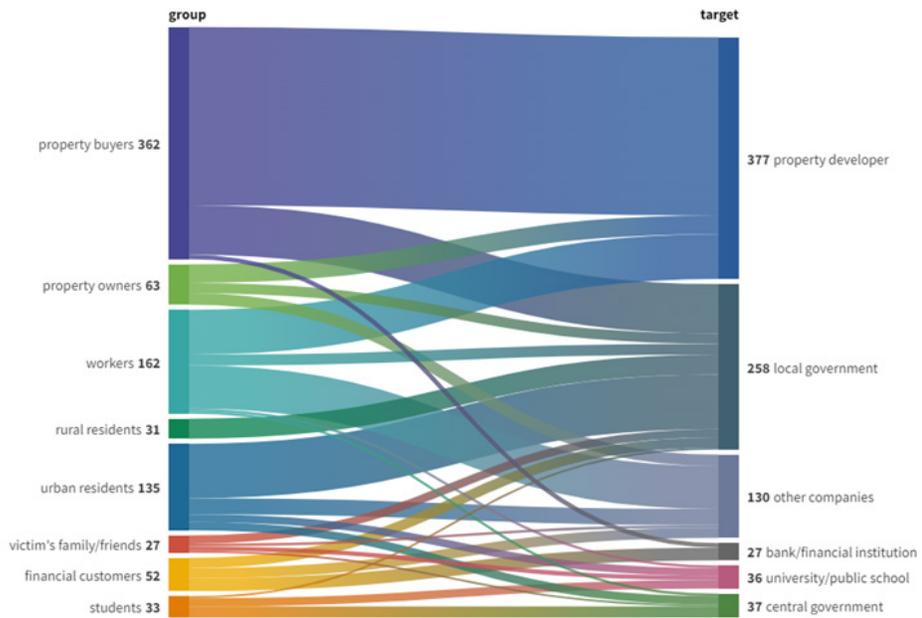
The groups lodging grievances with local governments are more diverse than other targets. Sometimes the government is blamed for contributing to injustice, such as when property buyers accuse local regulatory agencies of failing to hold developers accountable, or when residents express discontent with lockdown rules. In contrast, sometimes demonstrators seek out the government to resolve wrongdoing by other actors, such as when workers protest at local government offices as part of an effort to push companies to pay wage arrears.

The central government made the list of top targets of dissent due to the wave of anti-lockdown protests in November, with students and urban residents aiming their discontent with zero-COVID policies or other political grievances at central authorities.

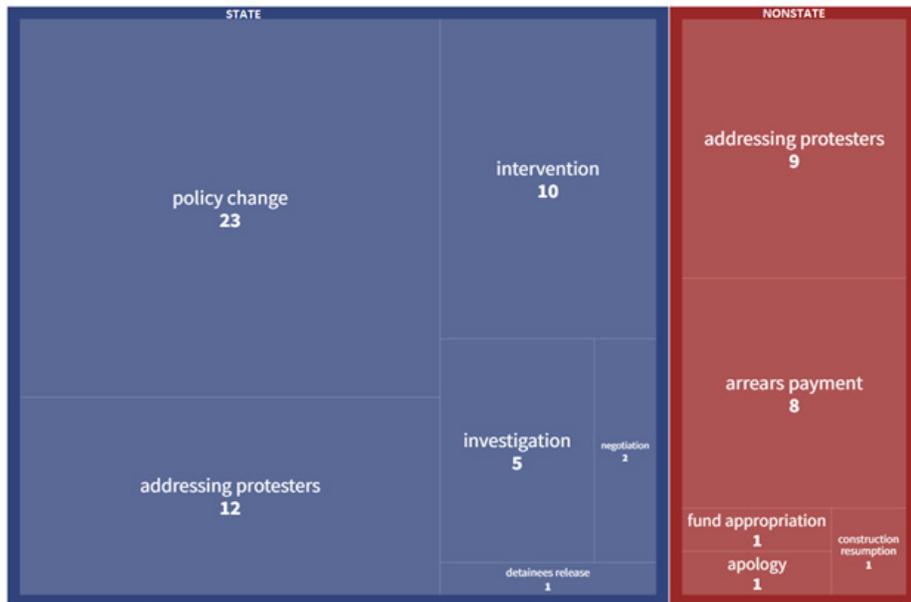
Tracking evidence of

concessions. CDM has documented evidence of concessions to protesters by political or social authorities in 70 cases since June 2022. As the tree map depicts, compromise can vary significantly: they range from minor acts, like directly addressing protesters, to major acts like material compensation or changing a local policy. While the figure 70 (out of 1,080 cases) is relatively small, this is likely an undercount. CDM often only has access to snapshots of dissent, such as photos or a short video, and it is difficult to capture direct evidence of concessions because these typically occur well after the end of a protest. Moreover, concessions that are made as a result of cumulative protest do not appear in this data, such as the central government ending zero-COVID policies after nationwide anti-lockdown protests.

The data should consequently be treated as an illustrative sample rather than being interpreted as representing the prevalence of concessions. Even with such a limitation, it is important to note the ways that state and nonstate actors make compromises when facing public dissent. For example, after dozens of parents in Chengdu demonstrated in front of the private Elephant Art Institute on November 1 and 2 to protest the school's owner absconding with tuition fees, the police found the owner and coordinated negotiations about restitution with the protesters.



Sankey diagram showing the relationship between the top groups and targets associated with dissent events since June 2022.



Tracking evidence of concessions among state and nonstate actors.