China Dissent Monitor
Issue 4: April – June 2023

DISSENT EVENTS: 2,803

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, including 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

• More than 2,800 dissent events over a one-year period. CDM has collected 2,803 dissent events since June 2022, of which 1,594 are fully coded and available on the CDM public website. At least 30,000 people cumulatively have participated in the events that have been coded. The forms of dissent include demonstrations (78 percent); obstruction, occupation, and noncooperation (5 percent); contentious petitioning (4 percent); strikes (3 percent); and artistic expression (1 percent). During the quarter from April to June 2023, CDM logged 535 events, led by labor (59 percent) and housing (22 percent) protest, with the remainder linked to issues like education and school safety, LGBT+ rights, ethnic and cultural rights, and religious freedom.

• LGBT+ community speaks out during Pride Month. CDM documented at least 16 cases of people invoking Pride Month during June 2023 in activities including an online photography contest, viral videos, an offline Pride Run, flyer distribution, and in-person gatherings. Repression was documented in 5 of the 9 offline events, including arrest, intimidation, and police closure of an event.

• Protest among ethnic minority groups. CDM has collected 70 cases of dissent by Tibetans and Mongolians. Largely driven by the need for preservation of culture and identity, much of this resistance appears online. Two-thirds of offline dissent was met with repression, demonstrating the high risks faced by these communities.

• Prevalence of censorship. Freedom House analysis of 4,000 Sina Weibo posts indicated that 22 percent of posts that expressed dissent were censored, and the prevalence of censorship has risen in recent months. The factors that can best predict censorship are whether the post challenged or was critical of authorities and whether the account was verified.

• Labor protest more than doubled over one year, reflecting economic headwinds. Labor dissent has remained heightened since December 2022. CDM data indicates there were at least 93 offline labor protests in June 2023, 2.35 times the number of labor events documented in June 2022.
FEATURED ANALYSIS

LGBT+ COMMUNITY MARKS PRIDE MONTH DESPITE RESTRICTIONS

Speaking out despite restricted space. Drawing in part from documentation by the NGO Outright International, CDM has recorded at least 16 cases of people invoking Pride Month to increase visibility of the LGBT+ community or speak out in support of LGBT+ rights. These efforts are particularly notable given Chinese authorities’ efforts to restrict space for LGBT+ advocacy organizations and voices. In recent years, many NGOs serving this population have been forced to shut down—most recently the Beijing LGBT Center—while a number of popular LGBT+ social media accounts have been deactivated. Shanghai Pride, which was China’s most well-known Pride Month celebration since 2009 and often attracted thousands of attendees, has not taken place since 2020 as a result of government restrictions.

Pride activities and gatherings. There were at least nine offline cases of LGBT+ individuals participating in Pride-related activities. One man handed out educational flyers about the LGBT+ community on a street in Beijing. A few dozen people in Shanghai participated in a Pride Run in that city. Other Pride-related gatherings, including parties and storytelling, were organized in Shanghai, Shenyang, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou. One club in Shanghai, whose drag performance event was initially canceled by authorities, managed to hold a large celebration where people performed without drag, and posted a video of the event online.
Pride in cyberspace. Even as censorship of LGBT+ voices has increased, people posted pro-Pride messages in June on China’s internet, sometimes reaching thousands. One Weibo post and video about the Pride party in Shanghai mentioned above was viewed 360,000 times. Two posts of videos showing the rainbow flag flying together with the American flag at the US consulate in Guangzhou were together viewed more than 400,000 times. A Weibo post and video depicting Chinese representation in the San Francisco Pride Parade went viral, garnering 2,700 shares and 1.2 million views. CDM also counted more than one hundred post by average users on Weibo referencing “Pride Month” to celebrate the occasion—which we categorized as one “cyber protest” event.

Repression documented in more than half of offline cases. These efforts to celebrate Pride were not without risks. Among the eight offline events CDM recorded, some form of repression occurred in four cases. As mentioned above, the Pride party organizers in Shanghai faced intimidation by authorities, which ultimately forced them to change the time and nature of the event. In Shenyang, police intimidated an LBGT+ group for organizing a Pride gathering and prohibited them from arranging others. The man who handed out flyers in Beijing was arrested and given seven days of administrative detention, and police in Shenzhen shut down a Pride party the day before it was scheduled to be convened.

Dissent among Tibetans and Mongolians

CDM has collected 70 cases of dissent by Tibetans and Mongolians since June 2022. Due to severe repression and stringent information controls, it is a challenge to document dissent in these communities, and these cases should only be considered a sample. Yet they provide a window into how these groups speak out, what matters to them, and how their protests differ from those among ethnic Han.

Finding space online. Among these two ethnic minority communities, there is greater reliance on social media and online messaging platforms to voice grievances compared to Han Chinese. Nearly two-thirds of the cases collected by CDM involve online expression. This is likely a reflection of the severe restrictions on Tibetans and Mongolians, as collective protest in public for these groups carries a higher likelihood of arrest and violence than similar events would for most Han Chinese. Many documented cases of dissent by ethnic minority communities are videos on platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou, such as five Tibetan men performing a song that celebrates the Dalai Lama for a music contest on Kuaishou. In some cases, dissent slips past censors on WeChat or Weibo. For example, a Tibetan man in Qinghai used coded language in August 2022 on WeChat to let
others know that he had been threatened by police for trying to share information about a flash flood. In the Mongolian community, online dissent often appears in posts on the Mongolian-language Bainu app, such as one in May 2023 in which a user posted the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) press freedom map with a comment criticizing China’s lack of media freedom.

**Real-world resistance.** CDM has also documented 25 offline acts of dissent by Tibetans and Mongolians. Some of these are not demonstrations, but rather prohibited cultural gatherings or other practices that Chinese authorities have deemed threatening. For example, on March 7, Tibetan organizers of an International Women’s Day event in Sichuan hung Tibetan prayer flags on the main stage, but were forced by authorities to remove them. When demonstrations are conducted in these communities, they tend to be smaller in scale than many witnessed frequently in the Han community. However, they are notable given the high risks to protesters’ safety. For instance, CDM has collected several cases of Mongolian herders protesting the Chinese government for encroaching on their land or confiscating livestock. Tibetan Gonpo Kyi has conducted two solo demonstrations in Lhasa to protest a life prison sentence given to her brother, entrepreneur Dorje Tashi, leading to her detention in both instances.

**Preserving identity and culture.** More than three quarters of dissent in these communities logged by CDM is driven by the desire to uphold cultural rights and preserve unique ethnic identities in the face of Chinese government policies that aim to sinicize or suppress those identities. Tibetans keep or share images of the Dalai Lama, send him financial offerings, or perform Tibetan songs to preserve their culture and resist prohibitions against these practices. Mongolians often post online directly criticizing Chinese government efforts to erode Mongolian culture and language. This stands in contrast with the Han community—for whom the majority of documented dissent is linked, at least immediately, to economic grievances such as labor-rights violations or stalled housing projects.

**Frequent reprisals.** With increasingly tight restrictions on even the cultural expression of ethnic minority groups, dissent is often met with repression. Among offline dissent events collected by CDM, there is direct evidence of state repression in two-thirds of cases. The risks are highlighted by an incident in August 2022 in which five Tibetans in Sichuan Province lit incense and prayed for the Dalai Lama’s health. This led to Seda county authorities arresting and torturing the Tibetans, resulting in the death of one person (case 601).
THE PREVALENCE AND PREDICTORS OF CENSORSHIP OVER ONE YEAR

One-fifth of posts censored. Examining a set of 4,170 Sina Weibo posts with dissent-oriented language from July 2022 through May 2023, CDM found that nearly 20 percent had subsequently been censored. This particular dataset were posts captured by a machine-learning tool developed by the organization Doublethink Lab, which was trained to identify posts that might contain dissent language. The CDM team further analyzed whether the content of each post did in fact express dissent or contain evidence of offline protest activities.

Censorship during important events. The data indicates that the greatest amount of censorship occurred in November 2022, mainly linked to the anti-lockdown and “white paper” protest movements that occurred that month. The proportion of censored posts among the CDM sample rose to 25 percent in November, compared to 16 percent in July 2022. There was a similar proportion of censorship in October 2022, when the Communist Party convened its 20th Party Congress. Beginning in March 2023, the percentage of censored posts began to rise again, without the occurrence of a particularly sensitive event, which suggests greater generalized censorship. One potential explanation is that a slow economy and its resulting social problems may be motivating authorities and social media companies to proactively raise the level of censorship. The trend also corresponded with the period of a “clean-up campaign” by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) that resulted in deletion of 1.4 million social media posts.

Expressing dissent and account verification predict censorship. CDM’s analysis, in part employing logistic regression, found that two factors can most accurately predict the likelihood of censorship. First is whether the post actually expresses dissent, meaning it is critical of powerful actors or systemic inequities. Twenty-two percent of such posts were censored, compared with only 12 percent of posts that did not express dissent. This confirms that whether a post is critical of authorities raises the likelihood of it being deleted. The nuanced differences in language between deleted and non-deleted posts also implies that censorship decisions are not solely automated and emphasizes the role that human censors play in the process. The second finding is that verified accounts, whose users have authenticated personal or organizational information, are less likely to experience censorship. Only 8 percent of their posts were censored, while nearly 23 percent of posts by unverified accounts were censored. A possible explanation for this is that owners of verified accounts may be more likely to avoid posting content that could challenge authorities or cross red lines, which enables them to keep their account alive and verified. In other words, long-term systematic censorship has led to an internet ecosystem in which the accounts with the greatest reach engage in the most self-censorship and are less likely to express or share information about dissent.
SUSTAINED HIGH LEVELS OF LABOR PROTEST

CDM provided in-depth analysis of surging labor dissent in Issue 3, which covered the first quarter of 2023. Three additional months of data indicates that the elevated level of protest has continued. The 93 labor protests collected in June 2023 are 2.35 times the number of comparable events in June 2022. This pattern may reflect the impact of China’s sluggish economy. While the economy is still growing, the rate has slowed, and manufacturing activity has contracted for four straight months. This may explain why much of the latest protest activity is carried out by factory workers, as explained in analysis by the China Labour Bulletin. Recent data indicates that worker dissent in Guangdong Province has seen an especially steep rise. In recent months, 35 to 50 percent of labor protest events each month have occurred in Guangdong, a proportion that is much higher than previous months. As a manufacturing hub in China, Guangdong is especially impacted by contraction in this sector. Its economy also has strong links to exports and international companies as foreign investment hit an 18-year low in China. These trends coincide with the Guangdong government facing a 4.8 percent drop in revenue compared to 2021.