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Watching Taiwan’s Free Elections, Chinese Internet Users Lament Their Own Oppression

Quickly censored comments reveal a bitter rejection of Beijing’s official line on the Taiwanese balloting.

Shortly after Lai Ching-te, the candidate of Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), won the country’s widely watched presidential election on January 13, the spokesperson for Beijing’s Taiwan Affairs Office said in a statement, “The results of this election in the Taiwan region show that the DPP does not represent mainstream public opinion.”

Lai had captured 40 percent of the vote in a three-way race, finishing about seven points ahead of his nearest rival.

The official statement was posted by Toutiao, a popular news outlet on the Chinese social media platform Weibo, and quickly attracted mockery from numerous Chinese netizens.

“Oh my god…. Can you stop lying to yourself?”

“So getting elected by one-person, one-vote doesn’t represent mainstream public opinion. Is what comes out of your mouth still human language?”

“Understood, as long as it is not 100 percent, it doesn’t represent the mainstream.”

Within minutes, the comments section of the post was closed.

Such swift and massive censorship on Chinese social media was to be expected, as Taiwan-related politics is one of the most sensitive topics in China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime claims Taiwan as part of its territory—a dubious assertion in terms of both historical fact and international law—while residents of the self-governing island increasingly see themselves as a distinct people. What was surprising was the number of dissenting comments that Chinese netizens still chose and managed to post.

Criticizing the Chinese government on the internet can have dire consequences. Potential penalties include account suspension, police harassment, or even years of imprisonment. Freedom House’s Freedom on the Net 2023 report ranked China as having the world’s worst environment for internet freedom for the ninth straight year. In 2020, a man in Jiangsu Province was sentenced to two years in prison for “supporting Taiwan independence” and making other critical comments in online chat groups.
“Elections by one-person, one-vote don’t represent mainstream public opinion, but the hand-raising machines in the People's Congress do,” a netizen quipped. The term “hand-raising machines” refers to members of China’s rubber-stamp parliament who elected Xi Jinping to the state presidency by a vote of 2,952 to 0 in 2023. A moment after this comment was posted, a click on the user’s account prompted the message “User does not exist.”

“Let today be the last day of this Weibo account,” another netizen wrote after re-posting a group of comments mocking the statement from the Taiwan Affairs Office, clearly anticipating the consequences of such a daring action.

It is very hard—and getting harder—to gauge public opinion by observing the Chinese internet. Censorship is enforced with great efficiency. Content that runs counter to official narratives can be scrubbed away in the blink of an eye. News that spreads far and wide can seem like it never happened just hours later. The severe punishment of expression that is critical of the CCP compels people to engage in equally severe self-censorship.

Most Taiwan-related online comments on the night of the election appeared to back the official goal of absorbing the island into the People's Republic of China, but the amount of content that commended the free and fair election in Taiwan and criticized the lack thereof in China—and was noticed before being deleted—suggests that there could in fact be many in China who support democratic principles or even take a moderate view on Taiwanese autonomy.

Such democratic sentiments may have been strengthened by the grueling experience of Xi's three-year-long “zero-COVID” policy. The policy's extremely abusive enforcement measures awakened many Chinese citizens to the disastrous consequences of having no say in how and by whom they are governed.

At a time when the CCP’s influence abroad is one of the most urgent policy challenges in Washington and other democratic capitals, it is important to remember the depth of grievance and dissent against CCP rule inside China, and that given the chance, many people in the country would choose democracy. Democratic states should take this into account by crafting long-term policies that treat the Chinese people and the CCP as separate entities, and include support for prodemocracy movements in China and the diaspora as a key priority.

Democracy in China needs all the help it can get. On the same day Taiwan elected its next president, Weibo hosted Weibo Night, an annual entertainment award ceremony. The social media platform selected pop stars Zhu Yilong and Yang Zi as its “Weibo King” and “Weibo Queen” of the year.

“Each side does its own election,” one netizen wrote. The comment had an air of helpless resignation. And to no one's surprise, it later disappeared.
IN THE NEWS
Censorship and Surveillance

• **Migrant worker documentary censored:** In January, the video sharing platform BiliBili removed a documentary spotlighting the lives of migrant workers. The documentary, “Laboring Like This for 30 Years,” featured workers gathering at an intersection as early as 4am, hoping in vain to secure work for the day. Cameras caught them vying for the opportunity to earn a small paycheck as work opportunities dwindle due to the rising number of stalled construction projects. Hashtags referencing the video yield no results on Weibo; censors also removed online reports by the Shanghai-based news outlet Yicai on the same subject.

• **Police brutality report removed:** Eight police officers in Xinjiang were found guilty of extracting confessions with torture resulting in a suspect's death in custody, according to a report by the news cite Caixin. The report, with an in-depth account of the brutality afflicted on the deceased suspect, was briefly accessible before being scrubbed from the Chinese internet.

• **Censorship expected to intensify in 2024:** Censorship may intensify further in the coming year, as the Ministry of Public Security has declared 2024 a year of “special operations” against online rumors. Additionally, the newly enacted Patriotic Education Law mandates that internet service providers escalate the production and circulation of patriotic content.

• **Government-linked institution claims it can decipher Apple’s encrypted Airdrop service:** The Beijing Municipal Bureau of Justice published an article on January 8 detailing a technological advancement for decoding the transmission of data through Apple’s encrypted Airdrop service, which allows wireless sharing between devices. The development allows the government to trace items deemed “malicious content” back to the original sender, and has been used to successfully identify multiple such suspects. In November 2022, Apple restricted the Airdrop function in China amid rising protests against the zero-covid policy; some users speculated that the move was meant to curb the spread of antigovernment memes that were being shared through the service.

• **Authors excluded from literary awards, triggering censorship concerns:** After the Hugo Awards for science fiction and fantasy writing published its full nomination statistics for the 2023 prize, it emerged that certain authors had been marked as “not eligible” for nomination despite receiving enough nominations to be on the final ballot. Excluded authors never received an explanation. Some suspected it was due to their past critical comments of the Chinese government, and connected the exclusion to the fact that voting was held this year at the World Science Fiction Convention in Chengdu, China.
Harassment and Detentions

- **Clampdown on journalism continues:** A court in Ezhou, Hubei Province, sentenced journalist Shangguan Yunkai to 15 years in prison for “selling counterfeit drugs,” “picking quarrels” and three other offences. Shangguan was arrested two days after publishing online an exposé on corruption within the Ezhou judiciary system.

- **Research groups find China top incarcerator of journalists:** Press freedom organizations the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) released their 2023 annual reports, both listing China as the biggest jailer of journalists. CPJ documented 44 journalists behind bars in China. A total of 121 media professionals, including 12 in Hong Kong and 42 in Xinjiang, are in prisons across China, according to RSF.

- **Crackdown on rights defenders ahead of Two Sessions:** On January 2, the mayor of Wugang City in Hunan Province led a meeting to outline a coming crackdown on petitioners in preparation for the opening of the Two Sessions, the annual parliamentary meeting in China. He vowed to maintain stability and demanded the “five-on-one” approach on identified petitioners—individuals who file complaints with local offices—to ensure no one will bring their cases to Beijing. Under that strategy, five people are assigned monitor one person, a surveillance tactic widely used during COVID-19 lockdowns to corral potential troublemakers. Similar campaigns were launched across the country. For example, prominent environmental activist Wu Lihong was ordered to travel away from his home during the annual plenary meeting in March.

- **Netizens discontent with police face penalties:** Police in Shaanxi Province detained two men for “berating the police,” and forced one of them to record an apology video in front of a detention center. A woman in Human Province was fined 500 renminbi ($70) over two posts “insulting the police,” even after she removed them from Weibo.
HONG KONG

- **Media mogul Jimmy Lai faces sham trial:** The trial of the Hong Kong publisher and owner of the now defunct Apple Daily resumed as the New Year began. Lai, who was charged under provisions of the Beijing-imposed National Security Law (NSL) pleaded not guilty to three charges of sedition and collusion. The Washington Post reported that a key witness against Lai, Andy Li, was mistreated in detention by the police. Li, a prodemocracy activist, had been detained by mainland police in 2020 after he attempted to flee from Hong Kong to Taiwan by boat. While in detention, police subjected Li to physical abuses that made him “consistently” scream, according to the report. He is currently being held in a psychiatric center in Hong Kong. The report set off global concerns about Li’s condition in detention and the reliability of his testimony.

- **NSL repression grows:** Hong Kong police arrested a man wearing a shirt that read “Free Hong Kong” at the airport and later charged him with sedition, after discovering more items bearing symbols of independence and liberation in his possession. In January, the man, Chu Kai-Pong, was sentenced to three months in prison on two counts of sedition. Another man, Tsang Kwok-Hei, faced sedition charges on January 19 over his online posts that allegedly incited hatred towards Beijing and Hong Kong authorities.

- **Justice department removes database:** The Department of Justice deleted an online database of 106 cases where people were convicted under the NSL, Hong Kong media reported in January.

- **Police harass dissidents’ families:** Hong Kong police questioned relatives of the exiled prodemocracy activists Simon Cheng and Francis Hui, after both issued with arrest warrants and placed under bounties last December, according to Nikkei’s report.
**BEYOND CHINA**

- **TikTok imposes restrictions in response to censorship allegation:** TikTok limited users’ access to its Creative Center, according to research by the Network Contagion Research Institute at Rutgers University. The feature provides insights into post volumes and user analytics related to trending hashtags. Creative Center tools are viewed by researchers as an effective means of monitoring TikTok’s content-moderation activities. The tech company removed the “search” function from the Creative Center interface and concealed data about political content after researchers found topics deemed sensitive by Beijing “unusually underrepresented” on TikTok, compared to Instagram.

- **Chinese authorities accused of manipulating Universal Periodic Review process:** China faced review of its human rights records on January 23 during the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Beijing’s allies flooded the session with praise of poverty alleviation and development progress, while democratic countries used the allotted 45-second response time to call for the end of enforced disappearance of dissidents, better rights protection in Tibet and Xinjiang, and the repeal of the NSL in Hong Kong. Ahead of the session, Reuters reported that Beijing had lobbied countries for commendatory remarks in their review. Reports also emerged that Chinese officials had urged the UN to block Chinese dissidents’ attendance.

- **Chinese music student convicted of threatening activist:** A court in Boston convicted Berklee College of Music student Wu Xiaolei of stalking and threatening a fellow Berklee student, referred to only as Zooey in court documents. After Zooey posted leaflets with slogans such as “we want freedom” and “we want democracy” on Instagram in October 2022, Wu began to make threats online, claiming he would sever her hands, inform Chinese authorities about her activities, and confront her family in China.
TAKE ACTION

- **Follow FH China on X:** Receive daily updates in the Chinese language about media freedom related to China.

- **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.

- **Access uncensored content:** Find an overview comparing popular circumvention tools and information on how to access them via GreatFire.org, here or here. Learn more about how to reach uncensored content and enhance digital security here.

- **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 policymakers, media outlets, educators and donors can help advance free expression in China and beyond via a new resource section on the Freedom House website.

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- For archives, go to: www.freedomhouse.org/China-media


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