Why Does China Lack an Opposition Leader Like Navalny

By Yaqiu Wang

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The popular Russian opposition leader has died in prison, but even his tragic career would have been impossible in China.

The recent death of Russian democracy activist Aleksey Navalny shocked and saddened observers around the world. In China, despite government propaganda that portrayed Navalny as a criminal who espoused extremism, many on the country's highly censored internet were deeply touched by his vision, conviction, and courage. “Each nation has such heroes. They are willing to sacrifice their life for the freedom of their people,” wrote one Chinese netizen.

Some also lamented that a similar hero could not exist in China. Under a post on a speech that Navalny gave in a Moscow courtroom, another netizen commented, “at least he could spit out his words,” pointing to the fact that Chinese authorities would never allow dissidents to speak freely during court hearings and share their uncensored remarks with the public.
China does lack some of the conditions that enabled Navalny to become such a larger-than-life, popular figure in Russia. It would of course be a mistake to downplay Navalny’s extraordinary ingenuity, ability, and bravery as a political activist, or the utter cruelty, vengefulness, and shamelessness of his adversary, Russian president Vladimir Putin. But there are significant differences between the two regimes’ systems of repression.

Freedom House rated both Russia and China as Not Free in its 2023 global assessments. In the Freedom in the World report, which analyzes political rights and civil liberties in a given country, Russia received a total of 16 points, while China received 9, near the bottom of the report’s 100-point scale. Conditions in both countries have deteriorated in recent years. In the 2015 edition, for example, Russia and China earned 23 and 17 points, respectively. In the most recent edition of Freedom on the Net, which assesses global internet freedom, Russia scored 21, while China received 9, again on a 100-point scale.

In Russia, Navalny rose to national prominence after he became a leader of antigovernment protests in the 2010s. He set up an anticorruption foundation supported by private donations, through which he published investigations into alleged graft by high-ranking Russian officials. Navalny ran unsuccessfully for Moscow mayor in 2013 and for president in 2018, though he was excluded from the 2018 ballot due to a trumped-up criminal conviction. In his early days, he appealed to Russian nationalism to gain popularity. He was always charismatic and witty, gathering millions of followers on his YouTube and Telegram channels. Even during his final years behind bars under worsening physical conditions, Navalny continued to project his unbreakable spirit to the public by communicating through his lawyers, who were granted some access.

None of the above activities are as viable in China, given, among other factors, the total penetration of societal institutions by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the vast and pervasive security apparatus, the presence of informants in communities and workplaces, the ban on unauthorized private donations, the utterly opaque nature of the criminal justice system, and the lack of even a façade of multiparty elections. Most importantly, the CCP prioritizes the suppression of any form of association that could build capacity for a protest movement.

Anything approaching Navalny’s robust internet presence would also be unthinkable in China’s political context. Despite early hopes that the arrival of the world wide web would liberate the country, the CCP managed to “nail jell-O to the wall” and create a tame version of the internet. Antigovernment content is suppressed almost as soon as it appears. Major international social media and messaging platforms are all banned in the country. The domestic platforms, while highly convenient and entertaining, are stringently censored.
In recent years, ever-evolving digital surveillance has made it even more difficult to escape the CCP’s watchful eyes. Citizens are monitored through the mobile phones in their pockets, facial-recognition cameras and vehicle number-plate readers on the street, or enforced real-name registration for every service they use. Police across China are deploying technology that purportedly harnesses this massive trove of surveillance data to predict unwelcome acts and thwart them before they happen.

Perhaps the closest Chinese analog to Navalny was Liu Xiaobo, the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate who died from liver cancer while in state custody in 2017. Liu was a literary critic and leader in the prodemocracy Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, imprisoned three times for his peaceful opposition to the CCP’s authoritarian rule. While Liu was widely known in Chinese intellectual circles, and was recognized internationally after winning the Nobel, most people inside China likely had—and still have—no idea who he was. In terms of mass mobilization, the best Liu was able to muster was Charter 08, a prodemocracy manifesto that he coauthored in 2008 and was signed by thousands of supporters online. And all of this happened before current CCP leader Xi Jinping took power in 2012 and began to tighten controls on dissent even further.

Because of the CCP’s relentless suppression of any political organizing, awe-inspiring acts of defiance now emerge mostly as complete surprises carried out by individuals with no previous public profile. In October 2022, when China was still under its draconian COVID-19 lockdown, a man unfurled two banners on a bridge in central Beijing, calling for an end to the “zero COVID” policy and for “despotic traitor” Xi to step down. The authorities quickly took the protester, whose name netizens believe to be Peng Lifang, into custody, and moved to censor all references to the incident. Peng’s whereabouts remain unknown.

Nevertheless, some images of Peng’s heroic action escaped censorship for a time, and a month later they helped to inspire many protesters across the country to denounce the COVID-19 restrictions. This nationwide protest movement is thought to have been the largest since the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations.

The CCP regime may have prevented the rise of a Chinese Navalny for now, but the lack of a well-known leader will not extinguish ordinary people’s innate yearning for freedom. So long as that freedom is denied, the Chinese public will remain frustrated and hungry for unlikely heroes.

IN THE NEWS

Censorship and Surveillance
• **Economic censorship continues:** In February, WeChat removed a popular article that reported on survey findings from the Guangzhou-based Canton Public Opinion Research Center. The survey, sampling 1,000 residents in Guangzhou, revealed a prevailing sense of pessimism concerning the country's economic well-being. According to the results of the survey, people's satisfaction rate with the overall economic conditions dropped to 55 percent in 2023, the lowest since 2016. Respondents’ overall satisfaction with the development of the private sector also fell, hitting 29 percent, the lowest rate recorded since the indicator's inception in 2008.

• **Propaganda backfires, state-sponsored hashtag censored:** On February 2, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) mouthpiece People's Daily published an article titled “The Whole Country is Filled with Optimism,” attempting to project positivity online despite the palpable gloominess resulting from the country's continuing economic downturn. Upon publication, netizens immediately flooded Weibo with posts ridiculing the article. Within hours, censors made the hashtag being used to discuss the article inaccessible to public view. On the same day, over 50,000 investors congregated under the United States (US) Embassy's Weibo account to express their frustration over the plummeting stock market, a sentiment that has been heavily censored elsewhere.

• **Official details on internet crackdowns released:** The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) shared a detailed account of its actions during its 2023 national internet cleanup campaign. Throughout the year, the CAC eliminated 259 applications and 119 mini apps, shut down 14,624 websites, and instructed service providers to close 127,878 accounts. Prominent social media and search engines, including Douyin, WeChat, and Baidu, were given administrative penalties over their failures to proscribe the dissemination of information prohibited by law.

• **Surveillance on Tibetans intensified:** In a February report, rights groups Tibet Watch and Turquoise Roof found that Beijing has escalated its digital surveillance in Tibet, using a big-data policing system built on technology from the US–based company Oracle. According to the report, Chinese authorities have ordered the mandatory installation of a government-linked antifraud app on cell phones. The app was developed by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and has been found to track users’ personal information.

• **Literary awards excluded authors critical of Beijing:** It recently emerged that certain authors were arbitrarily marked as ineligible for the Hugo Awards for science fiction and fantasy writing in 2023 despite meeting the official requirements for nomination. The writers never received an official explanation, but some suspected their exclusion was linked to the fact that voting was held in China. Emails from the award’s administration team, leaked in February, indicated that staff members were directed to vet the nominees, flagging any mentions of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, or other topics that may be perceived as negative in China, in order to inform the final ballot decision.
Arrests and Detentions

- **Activist Li Qiaochu sentenced:** On February 5, a court in Shandong province sentenced Li Qiaochu, a prominent labor rights activist and feminist, to three years and eight months in jail for “inciting subversion of state power.” Li had been held in pretrial detention and repeatedly denied bail since her arrest in February 2021 for disclosing the authorities’ mistreatment of her partner, jailed activist Xu Zhiyong. One of Li’s lawyers was barred from entering the courtroom during the trial after refusing to undergo a frisk. Li suffers from a number of health conditions, including chronic depression, and has been denied proper medical treatment while in custody.

- **Chinese-Australian writer handed suspended death sentence:** On February 5, a court in Beijing convicted writer Yang Hengjun (also known as Yang Jun), an Australian citizen, on espionage charges and issued him a suspended death sentence. The verdict will likely see Yang’s death sentence converted to life imprisonment following two years of probation, during which he will remain in prison. Yang, who has been detained since 2019, was reportedly tortured while in custody, and has been denied access to his lawyer. The authorities rejected requests from his family and Australian diplomats to attend his trial in May 2021.

- **Nanjing dissident arrested over Xinjiang petition:** On February 8, Xinjiang authorities informed activist Shi Tingfu’s family of his formal arrest. The police took Shi from his home in Nanjing—over 2,000 miles away—on January 14, and charged him with “colluding with foreign forces” and “leaking state secrets.” His actual offense, however, was reportedly assisting a Xinjiang human rights activist in drafting petition materials.

- **Officials expelled from the CCP over banned publications, other charges:** Lin Gang, deputy mayor of Guilin in Guizhou Province, was expelled from the CCP and dismissed from his position for alleged bribery, “belief in gods and ghosts instead of Marxism-Leninism,” and “long-term exposure to politically tainted publications.” In a similar case in 2021, the CCP’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) announced the expulsion of a party member, accusing him of “avidly reading foreign publications with political problems,” among other things.

Hong Kong

- **Public consultation period for Article 23 begins:** The public consultation period for new national security legislation, Article 23 of the Hong Kong Basic Law, on January 30. Article 23, an addition to a legal framework that already criminalizes dissent, will outlaw five national security–related offenses: treason, insurrection, espionage, sabotage endangering national security, and external interference. The consultation period is set to last only 30 days, in contrast to the 3-month public consultation period provided during the government’s previous attempt.
to enact the article in 2003, which sparked massive protests. In a February joint statement, over 80 human rights organizations condemned the legislation and called for governments to sanction Hong Kong officials involved in the bill’s introduction.

- **New TV series depicting pro-democracy protests unavailable:** Amazon Prime Video’s latest TV series, Expats, released globally on January 26, is not available for viewing in Hong Kong. The series, set and filmed in Hong Kong, includes a scene showing demonstrators chanting, “I want real general elections,” and a trailer featuring a crowd carrying umbrellas, referencing the 2014 Umbrella Movement. The reason for the show’s unavailability in Hong Kong remains unclear.

- **Government announces new surveillance plan:** Hong Kong’s government plans to install surveillance cameras on a large scale, according to Radio Free Asia. Beginning in March, 2,000 cameras will be placed in areas with high population density and crime rates, with the possibility of incorporating facial recognition systems in the future.

- **Exiled Hong Kong activist wanted by police, another bankrupt:** In February, Hong Kong police announced that pro-democracy activist Agnes Chow, now in self-exile in Canada, is wanted for bail jumping last year, stressing that Chow will be “pursued for the rest of her life” unless she surrenders voluntarily. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong High Court declared former pro-democracy lawmaker Ted Hui Chi-fung bankrupt, citing his absence at the hearing and outstanding legal costs related to court proceedings and criminal offenses. Hui, who fled Hong Kong in 2020, was given a three-year sentence in 2022 for contempt related to a bail violation and his nonattendance at legal proceedings. In 2023, Hui, along with seven others, faced a HK$1 million (approximately $127,600) bounty for alleged national security offenses.

**Beyond China**

- **Increased repression against Tibetan diaspora:** The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) in a new report detailed Beijing’s escalated surveillance and intimidation campaigns against Tibetans in exile. The authorities gathered personal information of members of the diaspora, waged cyberattacks to hack their phones, and harassed their Tibet-based relatives in attempts to suppress dissent overseas.

- **New report finds Chinese sites disguised as local news sources:** A February 7 report by Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto uncovered a network of 123 websites originating in China but masquerading as local news sources in 30 countries. These sites, linked to Shenzhen’s Hai Mai Yun Xiang Media, have disseminated pro-Beijing disinformation through disguised commercial press releases. Active since mid-2020, they blend local news with content from Chinese state media, including anti-US conspiracy theories. Despite low exposure, the sites’ rapid growth and localization could amplify their propaganda effect.
China-linked hackers strike worldwide: In February, the Philippine government detected China-based hackers’ unsuccessful attempts to infiltrate its digital infrastructure, and the US government claimed to have thwarted a Beijing-backed hacking effort intended to attack public infrastructure. Reports also emerged in other parts of the world, linking cyberattacks against the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch armed forces to Beijing. Additionally, Microsoft caught Chinese state-backed hackers using its artificial intelligence (AI) tools to enhance their technical operations.

Documents detailing Beijing’s global hacking activities come to light: Leaked internal documents from China-based cybersecurity contractor I-Soon, a company with close ties to the MPS, were published in February and offered evidence of Beijing-backed hacking attempts in over 20 countries. A variety of cyberattack services were reportedly available on demand, including the infiltration, surveillance, and remote control of identified email and Twitter accounts. The targets of these attacks included foreign governmental entities; public infrastructures; and groups working on issues perceived as sensitive by Beijing, like those on Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong.

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