

Chinese media censorship sparks protest

By Will Morrow
14 January 2013

A journalists' strike and protests by supporters last week against blatant government censorship of a newspaper editorial in southern Guangdong province attracted wide attention in China and internationally.

Journalists at the *Southern Weekend* began a strike on January 5 to protest against the re-writing of the paper's New Year's Eve editorial by a local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda official. The original version of the article had called on the CCP to adhere to the supposed guarantees of freedoms in the 1982 Chinese Constitution, saying this was the only way to enable citizens to "speak out loudly in criticism of government power."

The *Southern Weekend* is part of the Nanfang Media Group, which is owned by the local Guangdong government and known for publishing articles exposing incidents of official corruption.

Petitions signed by dozens of staff and former journalists at the newspaper were initially widely circulated online, calling on Guangdong's chief of propaganda, Tuo Zhen, to step down. According to different media reports, between 50 and 200 people then participated in protests alongside the journalists outside the office gates in Guangzhou from last Monday to last Wednesday, calling for greater press freedom.

Most of the original participants were reportedly intellectuals and students. But by Wednesday, the site started to attract other protesters, confronting the authorities with the risk of a widening movement. On Thursday morning uniformed and plainclothes police surrounded the paper's headquarters, and dragged away those who tried to continue the protest.

The government and journalists had reportedly reached an agreement by Wednesday, with the regime agreeing to revert to the previous policy of avoiding overt modifications of articles, in return for careful self-censorship.

Officials in Beijing also stepped up their efforts to suppress widespread expressions of sympathy for the newspaper on the Internet. Searches for *Southern Weekend* were blocked on Twitter-like microblog services.

Newspapers were ordered to reprint an editorial that was first published on Tuesday January 7 by *Global Times*, an often-hardline Beijing daily. It said that the press freedom demanded by *Southern Weekend*'s supporters could not exist under China's "current social and political realities." Even Western newspapers, it argued, would not choose openly to confront their own governments.

The overwhelming majority of the Chinese population is hostile to the government's anti-democratic censorship of publications, including on the Internet. Mostly, media editors agree to self-censor their publications and not report topics considered "sensitive" to the regime. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, every newsroom in China contains at least one CCP secretary to monitor what is published. At the same time, online police monitor web discussions and social media posts, while blocking "illegal" content. A so-called "Great Firewall" filters popular international web sites such as Twitter and YouTube.

It had been relatively rare for CCP officials to publicly modify newspaper articles, but the government appears to be tightening its censorship measures following last November's CCP congress in November. A new law imposed in December seeks to intimidate China's more than 500 million Internet users from criticising the government or organising protests online, by seeking to collect the identity of every Internet connection and social networking user account (see: "Chinese government imposes new Internet censorship law").

Cheng Yizhong, who helped found the *Southern*

Weekend's sister paper, the *Southern Metropolis* told the *Los Angeles Times* that the newspaper was able to publish because of the protection provided by its managers, who were members of a so-called "liberal" section of the CCP. This wing is no more of a defender of the democratic rights of the Chinese masses than the rest of the CCP, but sees the need to build a middle class constituency for the new round of open market economic restructuring, to which the incoming CCP leadership has committed itself.

In keeping with this orientation, some within the CCP are pushing for a limited loosening of the police-state apparatus of censorship and repression of all dissent. The January 10 editorial in the *Southern Weekend* said it agreed with government regulation of the press, but "the method of regulation needs to be advanced to keep pace with the times." In particular, it cited the increase in online media and said the government needed an "updated method of managing public opinion."

Elements within and around the CCP are urging the regime to cultivate a social base of support among middle class layers, including through expanded opportunities for academics, the media and publishing houses. A petition published on December 25 called on the government to adhere to the country's constitution—the same call initially made by the *Southern Weekend*. Titled a "Proposal for a Consensus on Reform," it was signed by 72 lawyers and academics from universities and government think-tanks and published on December 25.

The London-based *Economist* reported that the petition warned that unless reforms were made, public dissatisfaction would reach a "critical point" and the country would "fall into the turmoil and chaos of violent revolution." The *Economist* noted: "Zhang Qianfan, a legal scholar at Peking University who organised the petition, says an Arab-style upheaval is possible, particularly if the economy were to stall. Worries about stability have increased, he says, amid growing numbers of protests around the country."

The dominant elements within the Beijing leadership, however, fear that any liberalisation of the regime can open the door for broader and deeper unrest in the working class, as happened with the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Whatever differences exist within the Chinese elite, they will all back a crackdown on any threatening movement among the working masses.

Driven by the deepening impact of the post-2008 global economic breakdown, November's CCP set out an economic agenda that involves further privatisation of state-owned industries and the creation of new opportunities for foreign corporations. This will inevitably increase the sweatshop exploitation of the working class, exacerbating poverty, homelessness and social inequality, and further inflaming class tensions.

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