

Asia

Too Marxist for China? Radical students rattle Communist leaders



Chinese authorities are facing an unlikely challenge spawned from their own efforts to indoctrinate the population with the ideology of the party: young Marxists. (Photo: AFP/Greg Baker)

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BEIJING: The Chinese Communist Party has faced and crushed a myriad of dissidents over its decades-long rule, from pro-democracy reformers to human rights advocates and outspoken religious leaders.

But Chinese authorities are now facing an unlikely challenge spawned from their own efforts to indoctrinate the population with the ideology of the party: young Marxists.

"After I started university, I became very sensitive to the treatment, rights and interests of workers," a student activist at Peking University told AFP, requesting anonymity.

As the son of migrant farm workers, the 21-year-old had a sense of social responsibility for China's underclass, he said.

In exploring ways to help them, he read the work of Karl Marx.

Reacting against the increasing consumerism in Chinese society and the growing inequality between the rich and poor, students at elite universities are turning to Marxism – the ideological bedrock of any Communist Party.

On campus, students organised movie nights and socials for the school's janitorial and cafeteria staff. They gathered to sing socialist anthems.

But when students tried to apply theory to practise by joining efforts to organise a labour union for factory workers in southern Guangdong province, Chinese authorities flew into action.



Several members of activist organisation the Jasic Workers Solidarity group say they were beaten by police and their phones confiscated. (Photo: AFP/Handout)

In August, a police raid swept up the student activists, beating several of them and confiscating their phones, according to the Jasic Workers Solidarity group, a labour rights organisation that the students joined.

Several of them, including Yue Xin, a Peking University graduate who became known after co-authoring a petition demanding details of a sexual abuse case at the school, have not been heard from since.

"We, the academics, are really concerned about the students' freedom and their safety," said Jenny Chan, an assistant professor at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University who studies labour movements.

A VIOLENT PAST

The crackdown continued this month, with around five graduates detained in various cities, according to activists.

Among them was a Peking University graduate who was beaten and taken by men in dark clothing on campus, an eyewitness told AFP.

The school issued a statement on the university's internal online forum, calling the Peking University alumnus a "suspected criminal".

At one university, students who participated in Jasic Workers Solidarity activities are tightly monitored by teachers and are questioned if they leave campus for an extended period of time, according to an activist who asked that her school not be named for fear of retribution.

Students say their Marxist societies have struggled to register with their universities.

"These incidents will only make me feel more angry and further arouse my will to fight," a Nanjing University student involved in the Jasic group told AFP, requesting anonymity. "It will not make me yield."

Though the activists make up a small portion of the student body, Chinese authorities are taking no chances.



The Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 are commemorated in Hong Kong but seen as a warning to Beijing of student activism. (Photo: AFP/Isaac Lawrence)

In 1989, thousands of university students joined workers in pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square that eventually provoked a bloody crackdown.

Since those protests, authorities have moved "swiftly and harshly against anything that seems capable of linking people in different occupations and different places," explained Jeffrey Wasserstrom, a Chinese history professor at the University of California, Irvine.

"In one sense, it is certainly ironic to find a government that claims to adhere to Marxism cracking down on a Marxism group," he said.

With the upcoming 100th anniversary of the May 4th movement, another historical mass demonstration led by students in Beijing, the Chinese Communist Party will be on "high alert," he told AFP.

DIVIDED CAMPUS?

So far, police and school authorities seem to have succeeded in containing the burst of activism.

Online censors have scrubbed posts about police detentions and Jasic workers. Chat groups circulating information about student activists have also been shut down.

At Peking University student views on the school's Marxist society and the activism of their fellow classmates run the gamut. Some were sympathetic, while others criticised the group as militant and extremist.

"I strongly support them because they dare to put others before themselves," wrote one student on Peking University's internal online forum.

"Forget it," scoffed another. "I'm a left-leaning Maoist and I don't even like them."

The ideological clash also comes as Chinese leader Xi Jinping calls for a refocusing on Communist roots - including a May speech which called for Marxism to be promoted in campuses and classrooms.

For most students, many of whom are liberal-minded or influenced by Western ideas, Maoism and worker rights are very distant concepts, explained Li, a fourth-year Peking University student who only gave his surname.

"As a political science student, I'm not very leftist in how I view labour," he told AFP.

He criticised the activists for their lack of "objectiveness and impartiality", but said that doesn't mean they should be suppressed.

Even if the government tries to clamp down on students, the labour disputes that sparked the protests in the first place won't vanish, added Chan.

"It is the government now who has to come up and resolve the problems," she said. Otherwise, "all these grievances and discontent" will simply increase.

"Obviously," she added, "the students are not going to be silent."

Source: AFP/zt

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