

Civil Society Statement on Concern for the “New Citizens’ Movement” in China

July 24, 2013
Taipei, Taiwan

Since earlier this year, many activists involved in the “New Citizens’ Movement” in China have been successively persecuted by the Chinese government. In March and April, at least 15 anti-corruption activists, including Yuan Dong, Chang Baocheng, Ma Xingli, Ho Xin, Ding Jiayi, Zhao Changqing, Sun Hanhui, Wang Yonghong, Li Wei, and Qi Yueying in Beijing, and Liu Ping, Wei Zhongping, Li Sihua, Li Xuemei, and Zou Guiqin in Jiangxi were arrested; Xu Zhiyong, founder of the Beijing-based nongovernmental organization Gongmeng, and three of his colleagues, Li Huanjun, Li Gang, and Song Ze, have been detained or forcibly disappeared since mid-July; dissident Chang Lin was detained in July after waging a nonviolent protest for his daughter’s rights to education. While all these people had been peacefully exercising their rights protected by international laws as well as Chinese domestic laws, the government prosecuted them for crimes including illegal assembly, provoking disorder, disturbing social order, disturbing order at public spaces, and even inciting subversion of state power. In the mean time, many other activists have been under illegal house arrest, such as Liu Xia, the wife of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo; Hu Jia, the Sakharov Prize winner; and Tsering Woeser, a renowned Tibetan writer, to name but a few. Furthermore, in the past months, many nongovernmental organizations have been harassed or clamped down. It appears that these are not only threats to the freedom and personal security of these individuals, but also demonstrates that Chinese civil society is facing a severe and systematic crackdown.

Emerging out of the past decade of increasing rights activism, the Chinese “New Citizens’ Movement” is not a formally organized social movement, but rather an open collaborating platform for the pursuit of democracy, the rule of law, liberty, human rights, and civil society, based on a common identity of “citizens.” According to one of its initiators, Xu Zhiyong, its founding values are “freedom, righteousness, and love,” and it shall “proceed from individual citizen’s actions, and then, through solidarity and collaboration, promote a transition of political civilization towards a fair, righteous, free, and happy civil society in China.” As experiences in various part of the world have proved, a strong civil society is not only a key to redress social conflicts. It is also an important factor in peaceful social transformation as well as a necessary condition of democratic consolidation. The raising of civic awareness and rational political participation are healthy developments in Chinese civil society. However, the healthy social forces have faced relentlessly hostile treatment by the government. The situation appears quite bleak. As long as human rights remain unprotected, we believe that not only will the Chinese people suffer continuously, but the democracy and freedom in Hong Kong cannot be enhanced and the relations between China and Taiwan cannot develop healthily. Moreover, even regional peace and the global human rights regime will be threatened.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of China provides that citizens "enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration" (Article 35), that "[t]he freedom of person of citizens... is inviolable... Unlawful deprivation or restriction of citizens' freedom of person by detention or other means is prohibited; and unlawful search of the person of citizens is prohibited" (Article 37), that "[c]itizens... have the right to criticize and make suggestions to any state organ or functionary. Citizens have the right to make to relevant state organs complaints and charges against, or exposures of, violation of the law or dereliction of duty by any state organ or functionary" (Article 41). China has signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and it is a state party to Convention Against Torture and many other human rights treaties. An article stipulating "[T]he state respects and protects human rights" has been written into the Constitution. Therefore, under both international and domestic laws, the Chinese government is obliged to protect basic rights and liberties. This is indisputable.

As the new Chinese leadership is busy consolidating its authority, we urge the Chinese government to honor its own promise "to rule the country according to the laws" and "to protect human rights." Specifically, it should respect civil rights and expand space for civil society activities and start political reforms, leading the country towards democracy and constitutionalism.

Therefore, we call on the Chinese government to:

1. release immediately and unconditionally all those detained for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, or promptly bring them before open and fair tribunals;
2. ensure all such detainees free from torture and other abuses;
3. end all illegal house arrests which constrain citizens' personal freedom without due process of law;
4. fulfill its legal obligations to protect citizens' rights to freedom of opinion, publication, assembly, and association.

As global citizens who support universal human rights, we appeal to people everywhere to express their concern for the Chinese "New Citizens' Movement"; to support individually or collectively all those been harassed, placed under house arrest, detained, or imprisoned for advocating civic participations; and to call on the Chinese government to uphold the rule of law and human rights.

- **Initiators:**

New School for Democracy, Taiwan Association for Human Rights, Taiwan Democracy Watch, Covenants Watch, Cross-Strait Agreement Watch, Taiwan Association for China Human Rights, Taiwan Society for Democracy