

JAN/MAR 2018

Members of Student Reading Group Detained and Harassed

In November 2017, the police detained two recent graduates and four students who were attending a reading group at the Guangdong University of Technology in Guangzhou. The self-described Maoist reading group organised critical discussions of social and political issues. While most of the members were soon released, the organisers Zhang Yunfan—a recent graduate of Peking University—and Ye Jianke were detained for ‘gathering crowd to disturb social order’. In early December, more individuals affiliated with the reading groups were either interrogated or detained, but news of their detention was only made public in early January 2018. Starting with Zhang Yunfan, several members issued public statements explaining the personal and political reasons that led them to become involved with the group, disclosing their experience of harassment and torture under detention in order to mobilise public support. A statement signed by hundreds of academics, students, and public intellectuals—many affiliated with Peking University—called on the local authorities to review the case, release Zhang Yunfan from police custody, and protect his rights under residential surveillance. All detained members of the reading group eventually negotiated an end to their detention and have now regained their freedom. While not unprecedented, this kind of harsh treatment of students involved in on-campus activities remains quite rare. *KL*

(Sources: **Chuang**; **Hong Kong Free Press**; **Radio Free Asia**)

Constitutional Amendment Approved by the National People’s Congress

On 11 March, during the annual Two Sessions (*lianghui*), the National People’s Congress passed a number of historical constitutional amendments with 1,958 votes in favour, two against, and three abstentions. Among the 21 changes to the Constitution, the most controversial revision was the removal of term limits for the posts of President and Vice-President, which had been announced by Xinhua as early as 25 February. This amendment potentially paves the way for Xi Jinping to rule indefinitely (see Hurst’s op-ed in the current issue). The legislature also amended the Preamble of the Constitution to include ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ and the sentence ‘the leadership of the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics’—key tenets of what has officially become known as ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’—to promote the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the state. The amendments also pave the way for a major overhaul of the government, a move which will affect more than two dozens ministries and agencies with the aim of reinforcing Party control. Most importantly, the revision enshrines in the Constitution a powerful new watchdog, the National Supervision Commission. This new organ is equal in power to the State Council; it outranks all ministries as it reports directly to the Party centre. It will take charge of a national network of supervision commissions, linked with local anti-corruption offices. This will widen the scope of the Party’s authority over all civil servants, whether they are Party members or not, excluding the protections envisaged by Chinese civil law. *EN*

(Sources: **Financial Times**; **South China Morning Post 1**; **South China Morning Post 2**; **South China Morning Post 3**; **Xinhua**; **The New York Times 1**; **The New York Times 2**; **Xinhua 1**; **Xinhua 2**)

Unrelenting Repression of both Lawyers and Activists

The first quarter of 2018 has seen continuous and unrelenting repression of both lawyers and activists in China. Four days into the new year, 32-year-old Tibetan activist Tashi Wangchuk went on trial for ‘inciting separatism’, a crime that carries a punishment of up to 15 years in jail. He was detained in January 2016, after appearing in a *New York Times* video that documented his efforts to preserve Tibetan culture and language. According to Wangchuk’s lawyer, the video—in which the activist criticised the education policies of the Chinese authorities—constitutes the prosecution’s main piece of evidence. Also in January, prominent *weiquan* lawyer Yu Wensheng had his legal licence revoked, and was subsequently detained while walking his son to school. This was in retaliation for an open letter in which he criticised President Xi and called for political reform. In 2014, Yu had already been detained for 99 days, enduring interrogations lasting 17 hours, as well as physical abuse that resulted in a hernia. He is currently being held under ‘residential surveillance at a designated location’. In February, it was reported that jailed *weiquan* lawyer Jiang Tianyong’s health had severely deteriorated. According to his sister, Jiang is suffering from memory loss, raising concerns that he is being force-fed psychoactive medication—a method commonly employed by Chinese authorities against political prisoners. Likewise, in March, former state prosecutor Shen Liangqing was briefly detained after speaking out against President Xi’s constitutional changes. And things are not looking up for Chinese activists: in March, Fu Zhenghua, previously a deputy head of China’s Ministry of Public Security, who has led several high-profile investigations and crackdowns, was appointed Minister of Justice. *EN & TS*

(Sources: *Amnesty International 1*; *Amnesty International 2*; *BBC*; *Business Insider*; *China Digital Times 1*; *China Digital Times 2*; *The Guardian*; *The New York Times 1*; *The New York Times 2*; *Radio Free Asia*; *Reuters 1*; *Reuters 2*)

Gui Minhai Seized in the Presence of Swedish Diplomats

On 20 January, Swedish bookseller Gui Minhai, who was abducted from Thailand in 2015 and was just granted limited freedom in October 2017, was again detained by authorities while in the presence of Swedish diplomats. Gui was traveling from Shanghai to Beijing with two Swedish consular officials to seek medical attention. However, at Jinan station, in Shandong province, plainclothes security agents forcibly took him away. He reappeared three weeks later in a forced confession filmed in front of a group of reporters from pro-Beijing news media, including the *South China Morning Post* (see Fiskesjö’s op-ed in the current issue). In the forced statement, Gui was coerced into saying that his trip to Beijing was part of a Swedish plot to get him out of China. Chinese authorities have since stated that he is now being held in captivity for leaking state secrets. Gui, a Hong Kong resident and Swedish citizen, was originally abducted from his holiday home in Thailand in October 2015, and brought to China under the pretence of facing charges related to a traffic accident more than a decade ago. In October 2017 he was released under partial house arrest and allowed to communicate with his family using video chat. The Swedish foreign ministry and the European Union have demanded that Beijing release Gui, with Sweden calling the most recent abduction a ‘brutal intervention’. The Chinese government has responded by denouncing Sweden’s ‘irresponsible remarks’ and suggesting that continued protest could threaten bilateral relations. Gui’s case exemplifies the Chinese government’s intensifying crackdown on dissident voices, both in China and globally. China has repatriated thousands of suspected criminals and dissidents from 90 countries, including the US, despite the fact that extradition treaties only exist with 36 nations. The tactics range from abduction to threats aimed at inducing ‘voluntary’ repatriation. *NL*

(Sources: *China Digital Times 1*; *China Digital Times 2*; *Foreign Policy*; *Human Rights Watch*; *Radio Free Asia*; *The Washington Post*)

Surveillance and Repression of Uyghurs Intensifies in Xinjiang and Globally

In recent months the human rights situation in the restive northwestern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has been deteriorating rapidly. Hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs, the Muslim ethnic minority that constitutes the majority of the local population, have been sent to re-education camps. Stories from the camps paint a stark picture, with detainees being held indefinitely as part of a newly normalised predictive policing regime. This follows a continuing crackdown targeting Uyghurs since 2014, which bans religious practices and dress, and is ostensibly aimed at stamping out religious extremism. With this anti-terror rationale, Xinjiang has become a testing ground for a state-of-the-art high-tech surveillance state. Authorities have been collecting biometric data at state-organised medical check ups, and Uyghurs are now required to install surveillance apps on their mobile phones. These actions have been accompanied by the rapid increase in the use of facial recognition software, iris scans at police checkpoints, and a range of other types of data collection that feed into an ‘Integrated Joint Operations Platform’ (*tihua lianhe zuozhan pingtai*) providing real-time analysis of ‘security threats’. Xinjiang residents are also being assigned ‘safety scores’, with those deemed ‘unsafe’ being sent to the re-education camps (see Loubere and Brehm’s essay in the current issue). The Chinese government has also increased pressure on Uyghurs outside of the country. Family members of Uyghur reporters for Radio Free Asia have gone missing in an apparent attempt at intimidation. Uyghurs in other countries, even those with foreign nationalities, have also been pressured to provide personal information—such as addresses, photos, and scans of foreign identity documents—to Chinese security forces. Those who refuse are compelled through threats to their families. The Chinese authorities have not publically acknowledged the existence of re-education camps. *NL*

(Sources: **China Digital Times 1; China Digital Times 2; Foreign Policy; Human Rights Watch; Radio Free Asia; The Washington Post**)

Foreign Companies Bow to Pressure from Beijing

In January, the Chinese authorities blocked the website and app of the Marriott hotel group for one week after the company listed Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan as separate ‘countries’ in an online customer survey. To make things worse, a Marriott employee used a corporate Twitter account to ‘like’ a tweet in which a pro-Tibet group expressed approval for the survey’s identification of Tibet as a country. In the midst of a public relations nightmare, Marriott profusely apologised and fired Roy Jones, 49, the hourly worker at a customer engagement centre in Omaha, Nebraska, who had liked the tweet. A similar incident involved Daimler, when its subsidiary Mercedes-Benz posted on Instagram a photo of a car along with an inspirational quote from the Dalai Lama. Delta Airlines, Qantas Airlines, clothing designer Zara, and medical instruments maker Medtronic were also involved in similar spats over the past few months. Far more consequential is the capitulation of Apple. On 28 February, the Cupertino-based company formally transferred its Chinese iCloud operations to Guizhou-Cloud Big Data, a local firm with close ties to the Chinese authorities. Apple also began hosting its iCloud encryption keys in China. Although Apple has publicly declared that it will not transfer accounts over to the new data centre unless users first agree to the updated terms of service, the move has caused widespread concerns regarding the privacy and data protection of users. Companies are not the only targets of pressure from Beijing. On 30 March, the organisers of the Man Booker International Prize admitted that, after receiving a complaint from the Chinese embassy in London, they had changed the nationality of Professor Wu Ming-yi, one of the writers included on the 2018 longlist, from ‘Taiwan’ to ‘Taiwan, China’. The organisers only backed down after a public uproar, announcing that in the future they would list the ‘country/territory’ of authors, rather than their nationalities. *IF*

(Sources: **ChinaFile; Quartz; Reuters; SupChina; The Guardian; The Telegraph; The Verge**)