As China celebrates the 40th anniversary of the launch of economic reforms in December 2018, concerns grow about the Chinese government’s commitment to further liberalise the economy. Despite their economic contributions over the last four decades, private firms in China find themselves embroiled in an ever-challenging situation, plagued by slower economic growth, tighter credit lines, tougher regulations, and stronger Party interference. These hardships have resulted in at least ten private firms being nationalised by state-owned enterprises in the first nine months of 2018. Some Chinese intellectuals went as far as to publicly assert that private companies should be eliminated from China’s economy considering that they had completed their job of helping China prosper. Amid these arguments, President Xi Jinping reiterated the government’s support for private firms in October. His assurance was, however, quickly called into question. In early November, authorities in Beijing first banned the executive director of Unirule, a liberal think tank, from travelling to the United States to attend a symposium on China’s economic reforms, and then revoked the business licence of Unirule, forcing it to suspend all its activities. Such occurrences show how the current Chinese leadership has become increasingly intolerant of dissenting views, not only in the political realm, but also on economic matters. This can be seen in the latest attempt at rewriting Chinese history, as evidenced by an exhibition titled ‘The Great Revolution’ that opened at the National Museum in Beijing on 13 November to celebrate the anniversary of economic reforms. While Xi Jinping enjoys numerous displays about his achievements, Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China’s economic reforms, is much less visible at the exhibition, and other key actors of the past decades, such as Zhu Rongji, China’s former reformist premier, are nowhere to be seen. NLiu

Sources: Economic Information Daily; Financial Times; The New York Times; Radio Free Asia; South China Morning Post; Wall Street Journal; Xinhua
China's Human Rights Record in Xinjiang under International Scrutiny

In November 2018, China's human rights record was scrutinised by the United Nations Human Rights Council. In a process known as a ‘universal periodic review’ (UPR), the nation in question must demonstrate its ability to follow previous United Nations (UN) recommendations and answer questions posed by other states, NGOs, and other institutions. On 6 November, China was called to address human rights issues including its treatment of ethnic minorities, specifically Uyghurs in Xinjiang; its crackdown on lawyers and activists; as well as issues regarding civil, religious, and press freedoms in the country. Unsurprisingly, China has responded by defending its human rights record, deeming the UN assessment to be ‘politically driven’ and ‘fraught with biases’. China's worsening human rights record has increasingly drawn international scrutiny. The UN's high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet, has requested direct access to Xinjiang amid growing concerns over China's treatment of the Uyghur minority. In addition, spearheaded by Canada, 15 western ambassadors have issued a letter requesting Xinjiang's Communist Party leader to meet with them and provide an explanation of the alleged human rights abuses. Such actions have been rebuffed by Beijing, with the Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying claiming that the ambassadors have exceeded their diplomatic capacities. While this heated exchange was still in the making, internationally renowned photographer Lu Guang went missing while visiting Xinjiang. He has not been heard from since. Moreover, in early December reports from international media began detailing the emergence of a forced labour regime in factories attached to re-education camps in Xinjiang, prompting new criticisms. TS

(Sources: BBC; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The Independent 1; The Independent 2; Radio Free Asia 1; SBS News; South China Morning Post; The New York Times; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner)

As One High-level Official Disappears, Nobody is Safe from Repression

In the last quarter of 2018, China's human rights record continued to deteriorate. October began with the disappearance of a high-level official—Meng Hongwei, then President of Interpol and Deputy Minister of Public Security in China, who was reported missing after travelling from France to China on 5 October. The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection has since stated that Meng is being investigated on allegations of taking bribes. On 5 November, rights groups released a statement urging the Chinese government to release ‘cyber-dissident’ Huang Qi who was arrested in 2016 on charges of ‘leaking state secrets’. His condition has drastically declined during his time in custody. It is reported that Huang suffers from chronic kidney disease, hydrocephalus, and heart disease. In the same month, Fengrui, the Chinese law firm raided at the start of the 709 campaign in July 2015, was officially shut down. On 29 November, Li Wenzu, a 709 campaigner and the wife of detained human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang, was barred from leaving China. She was on her way to Sweden, where she was to receive the Edelstam Prize for outstanding contributions to advancing human rights. At the end of the month, authorities in Guangdong formally arrested two individuals who witnessed the beating and stripping of human rights lawyer Sun Shihua. Since September, Sun has pursued a complaint after being beaten, illegally detained, strip-searched, and drug-tested for seven hours in the provincial capital. Lawyers are not the only victims of state repression: in mid-November, a Chinese author known by the pen name Tianyi, was sentenced to over 10 years in jail for writing and selling a ‘pornographic’ erotic novel that featured gay sex scenes; and in early December, Xu Lin, a musician who sang about the late Nobel peace laureate and political prisoner Liu Xiaobo, was given a three-year jail term. TS

(Sources: ABC News; Radio Free Asia 1; Radio Free Asia 2; Radio Free Asia 3; Reuters; South China Morning Post 1; South China Morning Post 2)
Hong Kong under Siege

The political situation in Hong Kong is increasingly tense, as the former British colony’s special status under the ‘one country, two systems’ arrangement appears to be faltering. The inauguration of a high-speed railway connecting Hong Kong to Guangzhou on 23 September and a new bridge that links Hong Kong to Zhuhai and Macau on 23 October has raised fears among Hong Kongers that closer linkages to the mainland will allow the Chinese government to exert more control over their society. These fears are mainly rooted in the decision to enforce mainland Chinese laws at the West Kowloon Terminus in Hong Kong, which critics argue will eventually undermine the independent judicial system of Hong Kong. The deterioration of Hong Kong’s political situation was also apparent in a string of other incidents. In early October, Victor Mallet, Asia News Editor at the Financial Times, was first denied renewal of his work visa in Hong Kong and then refused entry to the city one month later, a de facto expulsion ostensibly related to his chairing a public meeting with a leader of an independentist party in the city. On 3 November, an exhibition by Badiucao, a Chinese-Australian political artist, was cancelled in Hong Kong over ‘threats’ from Chinese authorities. One week later, Ma Jian, a renowned Chinese writer residing in England, had two scheduled speeches at literary festival in Hong Kong cancelled due to his criticisms of the Chinese government—the events were later rearranged as the hosts changed their mind at the last minute. Adding to these worrisome situations was the trial on 19 November of Chan Kin-man, co-founder of the Occupy Central Movement in 2014, and of his fellow campaigners. Although the trial is still pending, the controversies surrounding the proceedings, along with the other aforementioned contentious events, have already stained Hong Kong’s image as a beacon of freedom in Asia. NLiu

(Sources: ABC; CCTV.com; Financial Times; Hong Kong Free Press; Reuters; South China Morning Post; The Guardian; Washington Post; Xinhua)

Jasic Crackdown Widens

In early November 2018, more than a dozen students and recent college graduates who had expressed their support for the Jasic mobilisation were detained. Staff of a social work organisation in Shenzhen and two employees of a district-level ACFTU branch in the same city were also caught up in the crackdown. Those who were detained earlier—including one NGO staff member and three workers—continue to be held incommunicado. This latest development followed weeks of harassment against those students and activists who had mobilised to demand the release of those detained during the summer. A number of prominent Chinese universities attempted to block Marxism clubs on campus—with which the Jasic student supporters are affiliated—from renewing their registration. In response to the university’s punitive actions against a dozen of its students, Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations took the unprecedented step of suspending an academic labour exchange programme with People’s University in Beijing. This action drew a rebuke from the Global Times, which accused Cornell of echoing Trump’s strategy against China. Following the arrests in November, a number of renowned Marxist and left-wing international scholars, including Noam Chomsky, issued personal statements in support of those detained, and announced their intention to boycott China’s officially-sponsored Marxism conferences. In spite of mounting international solidarity, the situation for labour activism in China remains dire. In another recent instance of state repression, on 7 November, riot police in Shenzhen assaulted and pepper-sprayed former blast workers with silicosis who were protesting to demand compensation for their occupational disease. KL

(Sources: China Daily; Financial Times; Global Times; Guardian; Reuters; Radio Free Asia; The New York Times)