

## No Free Media for China

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In the past few weeks the debate surrounding the reform and opening up of the media sector in China has gained further momentum. The most prominent example with this regard was the recent incident of rape and violence in New Delhi. The Chinese government initially used the incident to propagate anti-democracy sentiments. It used the media (which is primarily controlled by the government) to extend its views supporting one party authoritarian rule. *Beijing Youth Daily* argued that, “the current problem of India is fundamentally the problem of Indian democracy, which is reflected on the weak regime and the invalid social management.”

However the situation changed once the reports of protests came in. The Chinese government instantly got back to censorship mode and managed to block all information regarding the growing people’s protests and a relatively tolerant state in India. A similar pattern was followed during the Arab Spring as well. Such fear psychosis highlights the increased insecurity within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and brings forth the fact that the Chinese government is scared about its position in power. The excessive control over the media further highlights this sentiment.

Another important development with respect to media reforms has been the protests building around censorship over an editorial in *Southern Weekly* newspaper. According to reports, “the journalists at the Southern Weekly paper, based in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, claim that an editorial calling for political reform was censored by and re-written as a tribute to Communist Party rule”.

This is the first time that a media house has had the courage to protest against the CCP’s censorship rule. The general perception is that the media houses are highly disgruntled with the ever-increasing censorship that the Party exercises. It also seems that the social media has overtaken as the ‘mouthpiece of the people’, while the media on the other hand is tired of being the ‘mouthpiece of the Party’. Such bold protests with respect to media censorship are happening in China after almost two decades (after the Tiananmen Square Protests by students and journalists). Media reports suggest that almost 100 members from the editorial staff are on strike arguing that the newspaper has been facing great pressure from the Chinese authorities. Some protesters even carried banners that read “We want press freedom, constitutionalism and democracy”.

As a response to the protests *Global Times*, argued that, “China’s media development needs reform. But media reform should be in line with China’s politics. We must actively and bravely promote media reform, but meanwhile, avoid radical reform that is out of step with political development and China’s reforms as a whole”. In other

reports the CCP has went on to say that its control over the media is “unshakable”.<sup>1</sup> In other words media reforms will be within the comfort zone of the CCP and highlights that the Chinese government is not ready to handle a free and critical media.

In the past few years one has witnessed that the social media and the Internet are playing an increasing important role in sharing common concerns and grievances of the people. These actors have overtaken the role of ‘media’ in helping and working towards bridging the gap between the government and the people. In a number of incidents (like the Zhejiang rail accident) the social media had forced the government to undertake desired steps and concede to the demands of the people. Such free and quick reporting prevented the government from blocking the information. Even though the Chinese government spends a huge amount of money on maintaining the ‘great Chinese firewall’, people having access to newer communication technologies are finding ways to circumvent the hurdles.

These developments highlight the paradox which the Chinese government is facing after almost three decades of reform and opening up. When it comes to political debate and discourse the CCP is still not ready to face any discussion and debates. When it comes to economic sphere the government has adopted almost every reform which is necessary to keep the Chinese growth rate. However when it comes to political freedom and reform the CCP has been getting more and more authoritarian.

With the new generation of leadership in power, it was debated that there may be some demands for media reform. However as has been argued by scholars it only appears that the control may become tighter. The Chinese leadership is becoming ever more concerned about the idea of ‘social peace and stability’. Demand for media freedom is generally perceived as a challenge to the CCP’s authority.

The level of discontent among people may also be a factor which prevents the Chinese government from allowing any media freedom. With reform and opening up there has also been a consistent increase in the number of ‘mass incidents’ (based on issue like pollution, corruption, land grabbing) which Chinese society witnesses today. There has been an increase in the events when the social media has raised the question of Party’s accountability. Secondly there has been an increasing level of mistrust within the Chinese people. With increase in reports and incidents related to corruption and abuse of power by the Party officials the people are becoming even more agitated. The only way the CCP feels that it can continue its position in power is by controlling what the people listen and discuss. It is getting ever more worried about the fact that if a ‘free’ media is allowed the first target of discussion and debate will be the CCP and it also believes that this may not be in favour of the Party. Lack of confidence in its position as the ‘Party in power’ is what that makes the CCP increasingly insecure and more and more authoritarian.

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