

JUSTICE FOR JUNE 4TH MEANS JUSTICE FOR ALL

BY XU JIANXIN

The overseas democracy movement continues its calls for justice for those killed, injured and imprisoned as a result of the June 4th crackdown 16 years ago. But a domestic activist argues that justice for June 4th will only be accomplished if the overseas democracy movement can take a more effective role in transforming China into a society where justice is available for everyone.

Justice over June 4th is a matter of time, but justice delayed is justice denied. Sixteen years have passed since June 4th, and justice has still not been done. Justice has been denied repeatedly throughout the history Chinese Communist rule. Many members of the former gentry were murdered during the land reform in the mid-1950s, though most were guilty of no crime; large numbers of people were persecuted during the Anti-Rightists Movement of 1957; tens of millions were killed during the Great Leap Forward of 1958–1960; and countless innocent people were senselessly sacrificed during the violent upheavals of the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. But June 4th is a chapter in China's history that has created a problem of a different order.

The Tiananmen Massacre of June 4, 1989, was a tragedy for the whole Chinese nation. Communist rule lost its legitimacy, and the crucial constraint that Chinese intellectuals had exercised over government officials was eliminated. Intellectuals lost their courage, vitality and self-confidence. A large portion of China's intellectual elite fled to the West—an exodus that contributed to a decline in China's educational and scientific standards, rampant corruption, a growth in military spending and a decrease in public spending on education and health care. To make matters worse, the number of government officials has multiplied rapidly, with the ratio of officials to ordinary citizens now standing at 1 to 28. All this has plunged China into a vicious political-economic circle in which a steady upsurge in mass disturbances and violent protest has become the order of the day.

When Jiang Zemin, the biggest beneficiary of June 4th,

finally retired and surrendered his Party, government and military supremacy to Hu Jintao, a resolution of the June 4th question became a real possibility. As a new generation of rulers largely unconnected to June 4th, Hu Jintao and his fellow leaders desperately need a “harmonious society.” Even if they succeed in reducing or dissipating the destabilizing factors of violent confrontation and widespread dissatisfaction, these leaders still need to establish trust within the Party and win respect and popularity among the population at large. Because resolving the June 4th question could help China's leadership achieve these ends, the main challenge today is how to turn the possibility into a reality and render justice with respect to June 4th, promote liberal democracy, establish and guarantee a stable and enduring mechanism for redress and ensure that no more major human rights disasters occur in China.

June 4th left another unresolved problem: it radically transformed the overseas Chinese democracy movement. It is still unclear where this movement is headed. The fact is that the Tiananmen Massacre was an utterly unnecessary crime perpetrated because of Deng Xiaoping's obsession with preserving Party rule. On the other hand, by their foolishness and lack of political sophistication, the students who went hunger strike squandered an opportunity for compromise. As a result, many of the intellectuals who fled to the United States and Europe were unwilling to admit that they had made a big tactical error. They deceived themselves as well as others by saying that June 4th had triggered a tremendous change much like the one that brought down communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and that they would soon be able to return to an utterly transformed China. What they failed to realize was that Deng Xiaoping's regime had committed a single and very shrewd politically motivated crime that was not to be repeated apart from the unlawful prosecution of some key leaders and participants of the June 4th democracy movement. In this way, the Communist regime managed to keep the number of disaffected too small to pose any real threat to the Communist regime. At the same time, the CCP made some concessions to public indignation over official privileges and corruption.

As for the overseas democracy movement, its apparent strategy has been to criticize the CCP, to encourage people in mainland China to engage in acts of resistance, to think of ways to



Pro-democracy activists demonstrate in Hong Kong on June 3, 2004.

Photo: Reuters

trigger a major event that will bring about radical change, or to simply await such an event. Members of the movement seem to think that opposition to the Communist regime is the true measure of liberalism and democracy. Quite a few exiled democracy activists were previously tried on trumped-up charges and spent time in prison, so I can understand their feelings, but I can't understand their actions. Politics requires the ability to adapt to changing circumstances rather than obstinately clinging to rigid opinions held in the past. Today, there is little prospect of an earth-shattering event such as a world war that might result in the fall of the Chinese communist regime. The Chinese Communists are not comparable to the Manchus of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), who suffered repeated crushing defeat at the hands of the Western powers, led the nation into humiliating forfeiture of sovereignty, and whose corruption and incompetence made them universally despised by the mass of the people. Nor are the Chinese Communists foreign conquerors lacking all political legitimacy, who can be toppled by nationalist uprisings. For that reason, the overseas democracy movement's desire for triumph through a violent revolution such as that of Sun Yat-sen's Alliance Society or the Russian Bolsheviks seems highly unlikely, and in any case, the price of violent revolution is too high.

It's easy for exiled Chinese activists to criticize the Communist regime on moral grounds, and railing against the party may feel good, but it is largely ineffective. The truth is that the main role of the overseas democracy movement is as a principal backup force for China's domestic human rights movement, and as a vortex for transmitting information into and out of China. Exiled Chinese democracy activists opened the way for the democratization of China, but they have not

become leaders of the democracy and human rights movement within China.

Given that the chances of a violent revolution are slim—at least within the next 20 years—why should the overseas democracy movement not let some or most of its members become an exile opposition party that assumes responsibility for the nation and works for its welfare? The overseas democracy movement ought to carefully consider how to influence and encourage the CCP to steadily turn toward liberal democracy, a goal that is truly worth fighting for. Perhaps members of the movement think they are doing what is best for the nation, but what really matters is the perceptions of the public, including independent intellectuals with similar liberal democratic goals. The overseas democracy movement ought to speak the truth and, just as important, it ought to help the Chinese people find realistic ways to expand freedom of speech and publication and to protect other rights such as personal freedom and property rights.

Proposing fair and concrete political and economic policies and impartial laws and regulations would be another perfectly legitimate way to shoulder national responsibility. Moreover, overseas democracy activists ought to tell ordinary people in a clear way why their proposed policies and measures need to be adopted, and how they relate to democratic politics and the interests of the common people. Finally, they ought to promote the interests of the common people, inform them about their aims and activities, and as far as possible join forces with them. At present, the overseas democracy movement is comprised of groups that are drifting aimlessly without exerting any real influence on mainland China. The democracy movement has a long way to go in joining forces with the Chinese public and forming a unified political movement, or even in promoting the interests of the common people.

China is currently plagued with a wide range of problems that are crying out for solutions, including rampant corruption within the CCP, excessive military spending, wasteful expenditure on official banquets and perks and a consequent shortfall in funding for education and health care, and a failure to guarantee even minimum living standards. Independent intellectuals and democracy activists abroad ought to undertake a patient and rational investigation into the causes of and possible solutions to these problems, then explain their findings in plain terms and publicize them as widely as possible.

All countries have limited resources. In recent years, whenever Chinese officials address the subject of insufficient public investment in education, they say that China is a poor country and that the focus has to be on mass rather than elite education. Somehow there is always plenty of money for all sorts of "image projects" and engineering projects designed to provide officials with huge kickbacks and burnish their careers, but there is no profit to be made from increased spending on education. As a result, government investment in education remains at only 2 percent of GDP. If democracy were introduced, the money now being squandered on corruption, banquets and wasteful projects might be invested instead in education, and many more young people from poor families would be able to go to school and university without paying tuition.

China faces a multiplicity of serious problems—such as the growing gap between rich and poor, the education crisis, the potential crisis of national independence for ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet once China does become a democracy, the environmental and population crises, the agricultural crisis, unemployment and the growing power of the criminal underworld—which can only be solved through impartial and rational policies and measures. But it is my personal opinion that the mistakes and crimes committed by the CCP are caused more often by ignorance than by malicious self-interest. Criticizing the Communist Party’s mistakes and expressing dissatisfaction is easy, but it is not constructive. Proposing concrete solutions is much more difficult, but also much more useful. As long as information keeps flowing, the Communist government’s considerable capacity for violent repression is ultimately useless. When confronted with the truth, lies can only suffer successive defeats. People with even the most basic capacity for rational thought can distinguish policies designed to advance personal interests from those that are impartial and just.

The various theories of liberal democracy agree on the basics, but the specifics vary widely for historical, political, economic and cultural reasons, and they cannot be applied indiscriminately. The overseas democracy movement needs to prepare accordingly and mend the roof before it rains, as the saying goes.

Judicial impartiality is an important factor in gradual, rational and regulated social progress. Chinese people at home and abroad must unite in unremitting calls for judicial reform and in expressions of concern and support for those who have been imprisoned on false charges. China’s intellectuals and democracy activists devote considerable effort to assisting the wrongfully accused, but they tend to have one serious weakness: once they have written an essay voicing their grievances, if they can’t think of something new to write about, or don’t have any new ideas, they tend to stop writing. They lack experience in advocacy and in following up on an issue over the long term. Secondly, because of censorship, people in China often lack access to even the most basic information, and are unaware of what is actually happening, so it is difficult for them to exchange information and work together. There is a real need for people overseas to assist in collecting relevant information, but foreign Web sites haven’t actually done so.

These issues are very important, but they usually have no news value. In politics (including the cause of human rights) breakthroughs and advances are achieved not only through momentous turning points, but also by grinding away at minor and routine issues, and gradually transforming a vicious circle into a virtuous circle.

The overseas democracy movement proclaims that its policies and measures are very significant, but given that it hasn’t accomplished anything of note, some people are asking: you say that the Communist party is no good, but would you be any better? Of course, there are others who wonder if implementation of the specific solutions and policies that democracy activists have worked so hard to formulate might end up helping the Communist Party and prolonging its life. Then again, would the Communist regime even listen to the democracy

activists and implement their policies, and if it did, wouldn’t the overseas pro-democracy activists become nothing more than the regime’s advisers and lose their independence?

Dr. Yang Jianli once said, “The Chinese Communist Party’s rule rests on three pillars: violence, lies and bribery.”¹ The truth is that if the Communist leadership strips away the lies and pretense and informs the Chinese public about what is really happening in the party and the lives of ordinary people, and speaks unequivocally about the causes of China’s current predicament; if it joins forces with the people to propose and implement measures to provide a more fair and effective allocation, employment and control of government funds; if it cuts down on military spending and curtails useless projects designed to pad official pockets and careers; if it fights corruption and limits expenditure on official banquets, official meetings (including foreign travel) and other perks; and if it honors its commitment to “rule by law” and to “build a party serving the interest of the people and governing for the people”—then the CCP will be well on the way to becoming a modern democratic party.

Ordinary people don’t know or care about freedom and democracy; what matters to them is having enough to eat, making a decent living and enjoying access to adequate education and health care for their families. Educating the people in what freedom and democracy entails will increase the likelihood that they will support it.

To remain in power over the long term, a regime must be fortified by justice. A resolution of the June 4th question would open the gate to democracy for China, but this will require the right political conditions, specifically, a new political power structure and the hard effort of the overseas democracy movement. This much is certain: the forces within the CCP that oppose a resolution to the June 4th question remain very strong. Much work remains to be done to gain the support of the public and key elements within the CCP, and a significant portion of the effort must be focused on ideas, theory and policy measures. There is a need for a careful and persuasive account of the actual consequences of June 4th, of what will happen if the question of June 4th is not resolved, and why freedom and democracy is the only true means by which China’s people can be prosperous and happy and China can become a truly great country.

Translated by Paul Frank

1. Yang Jianli, Tiananmen Square activist, was exiled to the United States, where he earned two PhDs and founded the Foundation for China in the 21st Century. The Chinese government blacklisted him and refused to renew his passport. Aiming to study labor unrest in northeastern China, Yang returned to China with a friend’s passport in April 2002, and was detained while trying to board an internal flight. On May 13, 2004, he was sentenced to a five-year prison term for espionage and entering the country illegally.