

Beijing's dread of dissent

By John Lee

March 18, 2008 ([The Australian](#))- WHEN the monks in Burma led protests against the military junta there last September, China initially reacted by making the usual call for calm and restraint from all sides.

As those protests escalated and the world's media responded with expressions of outrage, revulsion and shock, the Chinese Government responded by saying that "demonstrations would not only undermine the stability of the state but also tarnish the image of Myanmar's monks".

Why has Beijing taken a hard line in Tibet? The key is "stability of state".

Don't be fooled by the glamour of Shanghai or the magnificence of Beijing. There are large swaths of disunity and disorder in the country.

For example, China claims 23 provinces, five autonomous regions, four municipalities, and two special administrative regions: Hong Kong and Macau. Of these, Taiwan remains recalcitrant and is effectively a separate state. Many of the Uighurs in the western province of Xinjiang want out.

Residents in Hong Kong want guarantees that Beijing will not dismantle the rights they enjoyed under British rule. And traditional Tibetans, fearful of a complete Han Chinese takeover and the suppression of their culture and religion, want more and more autonomy.

Furthermore, there is widespread disorder even in provinces that pose no challenge to Beijing's right to rule. In 2006, the latest available figures, there were 87,000 officially recorded instances of unrest, which is defined as those involving 15 or more people.

These protests are overwhelmingly spontaneous and arise from the frustration of the one billion or so "have-nots": with the hardship in their lives, against illegal taxes and land grabs by corrupt officials, against job losses and so on.

Although these protests rarely call for the overthrow of the regime, they do express profound dissatisfaction with local officials.

This brings us back to Tibet.

Note that most Chinese do not support the separatist agendas of Tibet, Taiwan or Xinjiang.

They would rather see a strong and unified China restored to historic glory. Indeed, most Chinese do not want to see their government give in to separatist agendas and would be critical of the leadership if it did so.

Therefore, as far as Beijing is concerned, when the regime's moral and political legitimacy is threatened, the leadership almost always chooses to take a hard, uncompromising line.

It is one thing to negotiate with protesters when the issue is about lost jobs in Chongqing. It is another thing completely when the protest is a direct challenge to the party's right to rule.

To be sure, the monks and their supporters cannot by themselves foment widespread protest throughout China. The protests will eventually be quelled and their leaders will no doubt be dealt with brutally.

However, President Hu Jintao, who incidentally earned early brownie points within the party by leading a crackdown of political dissidents in Tibet in 1989, deeply understands that authoritarian regimes appear weak at their own peril and losing face will only embolden the "enemies of state".

Even back in 2005, the Communist Party's Leading Group on Foreign Affairs, which is chaired by Hu, argued that "hostile foreign forces have not abandoned their conspiracy and tactics to Westernise China and to divide the country". Principles such as self-determination sought by provinces such as Tibet and Taiwan were part of these Western political weapons.

Elsewhere, the LGFA has spoken about the democratic and other "viruses" that were behind the "colour revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia, and which could conceivably take root in places such as Xinjiang and Tibet.

This in large part explains why Chinese authorities are so deeply suspicious of any grouping with loyalties that might transcend the state and regime or at least cannot be easily controlled by the state, such as the Falun Gong, Catholics and independent trade unions.

While we see the Dalai Lama as a humble and peace-loving spiritual leader of a major world religion, Beijing sees him as a political agitator in league with influential Western agents who presents a clear and present danger to the "stability of state". In Beijing's eyes, these protests were, after all, preceded by the Dalai Lama's calls for greater Tibetan autonomy.

Beijing has written several manuals to counsel officials on how to manage protests in the lead-up to the Olympic Games in August. It details options to deal with protest leaders: namely the tactical use of permissiveness and repression, compromise and coercion, on a case by case basis.

This is designed to take the fuel out of the fire. Sometimes leaders of protests are taken away; other times they are paid off; and other times they are given what they want.

In this case, its handbook for managing protests has offered authorities few options.

Predictably, Beijing will feel that it has no room to move and has taken a hard line by cracking down on the protesters and declaring a "people's war" of security and propaganda against the Dalai Lama.

Hu will at least be relieved that this has happened now rather than in August when several thousand Western journalists will be in China.

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