2009: The Year of Anniversaries

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In China, the year 2009 has a special name: the year of anniversaries. And once again, the Chinese people are subject to control and monitoring by the authorities. This is due to the sensitivity of the issues commemorated. Unfortunately this situation is repeating itself too many times. The regime appears always to have good reasons for imposing restrictions and silence on public opinion. And each time the motivation and excuses seem reasonable to some observers, who think it will be the last time, and afterwards things will change for the better. But the practice of oppression never seems to change.

Reforms were announced as imminent by certain observers at various times in the past. When Deng Xiaoping was still alive, many foretold that a big change would take place after his death. But he died, and no change came about. Reforms were expected after the 1997 return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty; after the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the PRC in 1999; or after 2002 and 2007, 16th and 17th Party Congresses, and after the Olympic Games (2008). Every time people were told that due to the occurrence of such major events, a period of tightening up could be expected temporarily. But then things would improve... One suspects that the theory of "sensitive years" is just a stratagem to continue the oppression and to re-assert the will of the communist leaders over the people.

2009 is the "year of anniversaries" because of a series of occurrences marking key chapters in China's recent political history. We list them, starting from the most recent ones:

1. 10th anniversary of the crackdown on the Falun Gong spiritual movement (July 20, 1999).

2. 20th anniversary of the crackdown on the Tiananmen democracy movement (June 4, 1989).
3. 30th anniversary of PRC-US relations and the start of Deng Xiaoping's open door policy (January 1, 1979).
4. 50th anniversary of the crackdown in Tibet and the Dalai Lama's exile (March 10, 1959).
5. 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (October 1, 1949).
6. 90th anniversary of May Fourth Movement (May 4, 1919).

These anniversaries do not all have the same significance. Three of them remember violent and recent crackdowns by the communist regime, and are the most sensitive and worrisome for it. The other three are unlikely to arouse any unrest among the population.

The May Fourth Movement of 1919

The most distant in time, the 90th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, cannot create trouble because the communist ideology acknowledged the anti-imperialist and patriotic nature of that movement. The communist ideology especially viewed the May Fourth Movement as instrumental for promoting the spread of Marxism in China, and for the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party (1921). For the communists, May 4th was a part of the world's Proletarian Revolution, initiated by the October 1917 Socialist Revolution in Russia.

The Nationalists also endorsed the movement's nationalist sentiments. The patriotic protests of May 4th, justly stirred up in reaction to imperialism's humiliation of China at Versailles, were not an outright xenophobic movement like the Boxer uprising of 20 years earlier. The protesters affirmed Chinese culture, together with the necessity for reforms and learning from foreign countries, which they considered indispensable for the salvation of the nation. Students asked for the introduction of "science" and "democracy". Ninety years later, one may ask: how is the implementation of

"science" and "democracy" proceeding?

Maybe there has been too much science, and too little democracy. Unchecked scientific and technological development is taking the country to the brink of irreparable environmental disaster and nuclear proliferation.

Too little democracy: unfortunately China is very distant from the democratic achievements of most countries in Asia and of the world. At the same time, China is still under a communist ideology which has been rejected almost everywhere else around the globe as a disastrous remnant of the 19th century. What is China waiting for?

The Founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949

This anniversary is not considered controversial, both in China and in the international community. People tend to consider the take-over of the government by the communist party as a blessing and as a success for the Chinese nation. But is it really so? What about the sufferings inflicted on the population during the Great Leap Forward, the subsequent great human famine, and the Cultural Revolution? Was the death and suffering of millions of citizens the inevitable price to pay for the success of the revolution? Is the doctrine of an inevitable price acceptable? What about the people's freedom and human rights?

Paraphrasing a recent writing of Cardinal Joseph Zen, I would say that this is a sad anniversary because it recalls 60 years of the suppression of human rights and of religious freedom!

The Open-door policy of Deng Xiaoping since 1979

Let's jump to the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States on January 1, 1979. That major event took place a couple of weeks after the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party (December 1978), which endorsed the new political course for China, initiated by Deng Xiaoping. It signaled the end of class struggle, and the beginning of the program of the

Four Modernizations and the opening up of China to the outside world.

Communist China has been 30 years under Maoist political campaigns, and 30 years under Deng's reforms. Half of its existence has been under Mao's totalitarian policies and half under Deng's open door policies. It is about time to evaluate the Deng-inspired policies without comparing them favorably with Mao's disastrous years. Too many times one hears: China under Deng had some limitations, but they are nothing compared to the Maoist era. Well, 30 years is a long time, and after all these years China is still without religious freedom, democracy, civil liberties and human rights. For how long must the Chinese people wait?

The crackdown in Tibet and the Dalai Lama's exile in 1959

The most disturbing anniversaries revolve around three violent crackdowns. The 1959's suppression of a Tibetan revolt and the consequent exile of the Dalai Lama are probably the most worrisome for the authorities, because the Tibet question is not yet settled, and the Dalai Lama has gained a reputation in world opinion as a peaceful champion of his people's rights. The March 1959 rebellion against Chinese rule was suppressed, and the Dalai Lama, followed by 80,000 Tibetans, went into exile in India. Thousands of Tibetans were killed or imprisoned. In their eyes China has become a cruel occupier of their land, intent upon eradicating the ethnic and religious heritage of Tibet. Through its resettlement policies and the massive importation of economic goods, the central government has initiated a process of the "Sinification" of Tibet, which tends towards "cultural genocide".

National authorities claim to have saved the Tibetan population from a medieval theocracy that employed slavery in oppressing its own people. Most Tibetan scholars would reject this characterization, which is based on a communist ideological rejection of religion. However, in the beginning, this was not the motivation put forward by the communist party for justifying its occupation and repression. Early justification was ideological

nationalism and the liberation of Tibet from foreign imperialism.

If Tibet were left alone, it would certainly have developed, changed and modernized as most other nations in Asia and around the world have done. The last two Dalai Lamas were reformist leaders, who cared for their people. Tibet would have had to face the challenges of modernization, which devastated most traditional societies. But it was never given the chance to do so on its own terms. Instead the present regime put the Tibetan people under many years of oppression and duress, through political campaigns and ethnic suppression. Today Tibet is still an underdeveloped area, whose religion and culture are at risk of extinction.

The Tiananmen protest crackdown in 1989

The 20th anniversary of the crackdown on the student demonstrations in Beijing and other cities in China, calling for democratic reforms, is probably the most well known around the world. Many people still remember the television footage and photos of the repression against the unarmed students on June 4, 1989. Since then, the regime tried to justify the killings and the subsequent repression of protest as the inevitable price to pay for guaranteeing the continuation of the process of reform. An increasing number of common people, politicians, intellectuals, public figures and governments accept the justification theory, and prefer to set the issue aside. There is only one major event that keeps the memory of the killings alive, and seeks the rectification of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations: the annual June 4th Vigil in Victoria Park in Hong Kong. Fortunately thousands of Hong Kong citizens still join the Vigil, which really shows Hong Kong at its best. But for how long? More and more people seem inclined to put it out of their minds.

Falun Gong crackdown in 1999

Ten years ago, communist leader Jiang Zemin launched a violent campaign to eradicate adherents to the Falun Gong faith.

Falun Gong is a Buddhist spiritual movement with a syncretistic outlook that spread quickly in 1990s' China. At first the authorities favored its spread as an alternative to the success of Christian groups. But when, in April 1999, Falun Gong members held a mass demonstration near the Zhongnanhai residences of the leaders, Jiang Zemin became upset by the organizational capacity of the movement. He especially took the opportunity of ordering a crackdown as a way of asserting his power and of perhaps minimizing the influence of the popular Prime Minister Zhu Rongji. The latter, at the outset of the Falun Gong crisis, was able to diffuse the tension with them. The suppression of them then was, and still is, completely unwarranted. Many people suffered because of factional struggle inside the Communist Party. Thousands of people were arrested. Some were tortured, and some died, due to maltreatment.

Most people around the world have forgotten about Falun Gong. Many citizens of China have been persuaded that there is something evil about this religious group, and therefore the suppression of them was to a certain extent justified. But in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries around the world the Falun Gong have never caused any public disturbances. The Falun Gong is not a popular cause, and very few people bother to say anything in their defense.

The emergence of neo-nationalism

In the last few decades China has experimented with both communism and liberalism, but now it has turned in the direction of a resurging nationalism. The scholars define the emergence of virulent nationalism as "neo-nationalism". This movement has assumed the outlook of a quasi-religion, with its sacred terminology and language, symbols and liturgies. The Internet, utilized mostly by young people, has become a convenient vehicle to express nationalism in a fashion that occasionally goes beyond the limits of rationality.

Many hoped that the Internet would have brought new information for a more informed and pluralistic debate on any subject under the sun. Many more hoped that young people would be freed from old-fashioned ideologies. Far from it! Neo-nationalism is powerful, and seduces young people, causing the Internet to become a spiral of often uncontrolled, nationalistic sentiments. Many Internet blogs are filled with accusations and insults towards anyone, Chinese or not, who may be critical of official policies. Those who dare to express politically incorrect opinions are treated as traitors to national sovereignty, enemies of the motherland, or conspirators at the service of foreign interests.

The six anniversaries highlighted above require a cool and open discussion. But that is not possible in the Chinese media or on the Internet today. The rare disparate voices are censored; and what is even sadder, they are censored with the enthusiastic support of the great majority of netizens. Most young people do not even care about Tiananmen. They accept government's side of the story. The same is true of such issues as Tibet and the Falun Gong.

The regime does not need to worry. It has succeeded in winning the support of most people and of the new generations. The consensus was achieved by skillfully playing the nationalistic theme in a most advantageous way. The young people effectively absorb it at school desks, and celebrate it in spectacular liturgies, such as during the Olympic Games, or through the space missions. The Olympic Games were not about sports and universal brotherhood, but a celebration of obtaining awards for the nation. The spatial missions were not about scientific achievements for the progress of humanity, but a celebration of national greatness. Sadly, nationalism is an ideological disease that affects many countries around the world. It is to be feared that the year of anniversaries will not stimulate a much needed, open, pluralistic and critical debate, but that it will only be an exercise in national correctness.