

The flowering of an unconventional revolution

Will Clem in Shanghai

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It is public dissent, but not as we know it.

There are no slogans, no banners and no petitions. In fact, to the uninitiated, it is difficult to spot the demonstrations at all.

In cities across the mainland, disgruntled youths and elderly activists have been gathering on Sunday afternoons to hang out, swap knowing looks and deliberately not protest.

But if the aim of the "Jasmine Revolution" with Chinese characteristics is to rankle the authorities, then it has proved highly effective already.

Hundreds of police have been mobilised to break up crowds of possible protesters, any mention of the movement's titular flower is enough to bring websites and blogs into the glare of internet censors, rights groups report that more than 100 activists and lawyers have been detained or placed under house arrest, and the government has issued a stern new interpretation of reporting rules for foreign journalists.

The self-professed organisers of the "Jasmine Revolution" issued a further rallying call to dissenters yesterday, claiming the government's heavy-handed response as evidence the movement was making progress.

"Now China's government clearly shows its horror and fear of the people, as if facing a deadly enemy," the statement said. "A modest amount of people, just by walking, have demonstrated the people's power, and the government's response has revealed its weaknesses to the world."

The authors of the 700-word statement - the first to be circulated in English - call for a three-stage rebellion using "the sound of laughter, singing and salutations instead of the sound of guns, cannons and warplanes".

But the unconventional tactics mean it is impossible to quantify the precise numbers of actual protesters who turned up at the demonstration venues designated in 23 mainland cities on Sunday.

In large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, the sites were in some of the busiest shopping districts, allowing wary demonstrators to meld into the throngs of consumers.

However, the venues swarmed with police, buzzing back and forth, peeping ear-splitting whistles in Shanghai and leading dogs in Beijing. Cleaning vehicles patrolled back and forth, shunting pedestrians out of the way and making it difficult for dense crowds to coalesce for long.

In Shanghai, where the protest took place on a wide stretch of footpath outside the Raffles City shopping mall in the city centre, an event which occurred shortly after the 2pm starting time was the first indication of just how many in the crowd had come with protest on their minds.

When police scuffled with an elderly petitioner, possibly to detain him, the crowd reacted instantly and angrily, emitting a guttural roar and surging forward almost as one. The police quickly closed ranks, with one or two officers exchanging clearly nervous glances.

Although that moment quickly subsided, it encouraged the protesters, and afterwards they began approaching foreign journalists, speaking their minds in only slightly hushed tones and openly snatching name cards as though they were free lottery tickets.

Most of the core participants - some of whom appeared to be deliberately obstructing police efforts to keep the crowd flowing - looked to be elderly petitioners, retirees with a particular gripe against authorities and hardened veterans of campaigns against authoritarian governments.

But they were joined by a younger generation of internet-savvy youths, dressed in trendy clothes and shooting images of the protest with expensive cameras or mobile phones.

A number of them told the South China Morning Post it was the first time they had taken part in a public expression, and they had felt emboldened to do so specifically by the movement's policy of indirect action.

And it was clear from the looks on their faces, now they had tasted anti-establishment action, that they realised they liked it.

"I will be back next Sunday, and the Sunday after that," said one beaming youth, clearly within earshot of police officers. "We have to make our voices heard."

They collected around the edges and smirked to one another, pointing out the comical side of red-faced, whistle-blowing police scurrying around like clowns in an attempt to stop demonstrations that were not actually happening.

There was a certain aesthetic to the action, like a farcical ballet. No sooner had uniformed and plain-clothes officers broken up one possible gathering than the crowds simply re-formed somewhere else.

It was almost the embodiment of the ancient Taoist philosophical concept of wu wei, best translated as "active non-action".

Professor John Burns, chair professor of politics and public administration at the University of Hong Kong, said the tactic was an effective "risk-aversion protest" technique well-suited to those dissenting under a regime that "routinely locks people up".

"It is less risky," he said. "They [protesters] can claim, 'I was here shopping' or 'I was minding my own business'," he said.

Although the fledgling movement's indirect tactics should theoretically make them less obvious and less effective, Burns said it was "slightly surprising" how strongly the government had reacted.

"It can have the effect of spooking the authorities. But if they are that easily spooked, then it is a bit worrying," Burns said.

"It does show they [the government] lack confidence. They do not believe in their own institutions. Do they have confidence in the institutions they set up?"

He suggested the timing of the protests, just ahead of the dual sessions of the National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Beijing, could explain the government's strict response.

"They always seem to round up the usual suspects ahead of these kinds of meetings as they don't want petitioners, especially aggressive, alienated ones, appearing in Beijing," Burns said. "One might say this is just more of the same."

However, he likened the movement's use of indirect action to the mass gatherings held by Falun Gong practitioners on the mainland during the 1990s, which ultimately led to Beijing branding the movement an "evil cult".

"They were a large number of people who were not protesting, just standing there, and that in itself was enough to get the movement banned," he said.

Yesterday's statement by the movement's organisers likened this initial period - which began on February 20 and could last "a few weeks, a couple of months, a year or even longer" - to a "warm-up stage".

They predicted the movement would gather momentum, allowing activists to adopt open protests during the second phase, including "holding a jasmine flower and [using] mobile phones or music players to play [the folk song] Such a Beautiful Jasmine".

The third and final stage would come, it said, "when the street-walking revolution is irreversible" and when people would be able to openly criticise the government without fear of reprisal.

However, despite the expression of general frustration, Burns dismissed the movement's chances of success as "highly unlikely".

"It is not going to have any impact whatsoever," he said. "The Chinese Communist Party is very successful at using the authorities and using the media to put down any form of organised opposition, either coercively or through the legal system."

He said the only chance of the movement making headway would be if there was a split in the party leadership about how to deal with dissent, which might allow it to become more widespread.

"I don't see any evidence of that at all," he said.