

Will we witness blooming of a Chinese “jasmine revolution”?

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On the morning of February 28, newspapers reported that the previous day's pro-democracy rallies calling for a Chinese “jasmine revolution” had been suppressed. Although I will not go into the details of this incident, which are available from newspaper articles, let me point out two notable things about the latest rallies compared with the previous such gatherings, which were first called for two weeks ago and were held on February 20. First, the number of cities selected as the sites of rallies rose to 27 from 13 and, second, the security authorities strengthened their pre-emptive crackdown. On the face of it, there is a speculation that the authorities are tightening the screws on pro-democracy activists and stepping up Internet censorship now because this is a delicate time for China ahead of the opening of the annual session of the National People's Congress on March 5. Such speculation is irrelevant, however.

Encouragement from a pro-democracy force in Hong Kong

All this started when a Tunisian young man peddling fruits and vegetables set himself ablaze in an act of protest after receiving undue treatment from local police. We are astonished at the speed and scale of the wave of uprising that has swept through North Africa and the Middle East like a wildfire. The Jasmine Revolution, as the pro-democracy uprising in Tunisia came to be known after the national flower of the country, sounds sweet to the ears. However, we cannot afford to be so optimistic as to predict that democracy will bloom and take roots in the countries that have been inspired by the Jasmine Revolution. The regions affected by this wave of uprising will remain politically volatile for some time to come. In the meantime, we cannot rule out the possibility of a jasmine revolution in China, a country with an area 1,000 times as large as that of Bahrain, a Middle East kingdom rocked by an outburst of pro-democracy protest, and a population size 1,200 times as large.

In Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China held a candlelight vigil on February 27 to remember Szeto Wah, its former chairman who died in January. At the vigil, attended by as many as 8,000 or so people according to an estimate provided by its sponsor, the participants sang a jasmine flower-themed song as a gesture of encouragement for the Chinese jasmine revolution rallies. In a speech at the vigil, Lee Cheuk-yan, who assumed the chairmanship of the Alliance, received huge applause when he expressed hope for “blooming of jasmine in the mainland.” What does this mean?

Rising popular discontent

“Jasmine Blooms,” a folk song in China’s Jiangsu Province, is a favorite song of former Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who comes from Yangzhou, a city in that province. This music was performed at a ceremony for the return of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China in 1997. Moreover, it is said that video footage of Hu Jintao, the incumbent president, singing the song during a visit to Africa is circulating in China. This song is also partially quoted in the *Turandot*, a Puccini opera that is familiar to the Japanese people as music to which Japanese figure skater Shizuka Arakawa skated when she won a gold medal in the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin.

The pro-democracy movement in China is unlikely to be snuffed out. Will the Chinese government face a make-or-break moment as it struggles to overcome the popular discontent, on both economic and political fronts? If a jasmine revolution is eventually to bloom in China, when will it be?

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