

Chinese jasmine

The Arab revolutions are forcing the Chinese empire to consider political reform. Internet is censored, but it can't hinder the curiosity and the wish for change of a billion Chinese, and Xi Jinping opens 2013 by abolishing the re-education camps.

by Claudia Astarita

China too had its Jasmine Revolution. Sadly it failed miserably. When the Arab people began to rebel against their dictators in 2011, some expected the uprisings to extend to other regions besides the Mediterranean. In East Asia this rekindled the enthusi-

asm and hopes of reformers. To be fair, the Arab Spring, the "coloured" revolutions and even the fall of the Berlin Wall were all, in one way or another, inspired by another very important spring: the one that in 1989 "bathed the streets of Beijing in the blood of its students, workers, passers-by, men and women who had believed in the possibility of changing the country for the better" (Ilaria Maria Sala, *Cina, la primavera mancata* (China, the Failed Spring) 2012, Ed. L'asino d'oro). It was the spring of Tian'anmen. Another failed spring.

In 1989 Deng Xiaoping was caught by surprise. He never expected the demands for freedom and democracy issuing from academic circles to raise so many expectations. Otherwise he would never have made any promises that China might follow Mikhail Gorbachev's example, when the president of the Soviet Union visited Beijing in 16 May 1989 and was welcomed by the "rebels" as the man who intended to bring about major reforms in his country. And he would have shown more mettle when he first ordered the Army to clear Tiananmen Square on 20 May, thus discouraging the joy and the hopes of some protesters who felt they'd won their battle once the Army appeared hesitant about using force to execute their orders.

In a few days however all uncertainty was dashed. The massacre was authorised on 4 June and on 9 June Deng Xiaoping boasted of having "stopped a group of rebels who had attacked the army," and praised the latter for having



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helped “by dint of great sacrifices to restore order and save socialism.”

Since then, there has been no more word about Tian’anmen. Those born after 1989 don’t even know what happened in the large square in the centre of Beijing. There is no talk about those events in schools, and parents shy away from sharing memories that could get their children in trouble.

Due to this inability to manage the memory of such tragic events, followed by the decision to give top priority to a “do all it takes to maintain stability” attitude, the West has kept wondering whether Beijing had learned anything from what happened in Tian’anmen Square.

The answer came in February 2011: as soon as calls for a Chinese “Jasmine Revolution” began circulating on the Internet, the regime responded by instating a zero tolerance regime against anyone who was directly or indirectly involved in organising a second oriental spring.

The message that had appeared in Mandarin on 19 February 2011 on the North American website boxun.com read: “Whether you are the parent of a child with kidney stones, the head of family who has had to leave home, a soldier on leave, the senior partner of a bank, a dismissed worker, a tourist. [...] Whether you signed Charter 08, are a Falun Gong practitioner or a member of the Party. [...] At this

☒ Xinjiang. An old Uyghur reads the Qur’an in a courtyard of the Kah Mosque. The Uyghur are a Muslim ethnic group found mainly in the Xinjiang, an autonomous region in North-Western China.

☒ During recent years the Uyghur population in the Xinjiang province has dropped by 45%.



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time you and I are citizens of China with dreams for the future. We have to take our children's future into our own hands."

A bold provocation which was soon circulated via the social networks of the People's Republic. It called for people to take to the streets in thirteen Chinese cities to stand together for the right "to work, to food and housing and the right to a little justice."

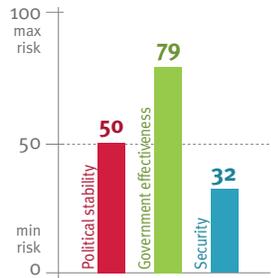
The 19 February appeal did not trigger a new Tian'anmen, but it did nevertheless have some repercussions. It gave people the courage to take part in the demonstrations. True, no slogans were shouted, and the burden (and honour) of throwing white jasmine flowers at the Police was left to the more daring protesters, but all participants had overcome the fear of reprisals.

The result should not be underestimated. There's been no news of the



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The Beijing government tends to portray the Uyghur's as dangerous terrorist and implement repressive policies in order to thwart any hopes of independence.

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|  | <p>China</p> <p>AREA: 9,596,961 Km² POPULATION: 1,343,239,923</p> | <p>Political indicators Political Risk & Country Analysis - UniCredit</p> | | |
| <p>MEDIAN AGE: 35.5 years</p> <p>RELIGIONS: Daoist (Taoist), Buddhist, Christian 3%-4%, Muslim 1%-2%</p> <p>FORM OF GOVERNMENT: Communist state</p> <p>SUFFRAGE: Universal (18 years)</p> <p>CHIEF OF STATE: HU Jintao (Marzo 2003)</p> <p>HEAD OF GOVERNMENT: WEN Jiabao (Marzo 2003)</p> <p>GDP: \$ 9,405 bn (nominal, estimates 2013)</p> <p>INFLATION: 4.3% (estimates 2013)</p> | |  <p>Reference values: first country Norway, last country Somalia</p> | | |
| | | <p>Corruption</p> <p>80</p> <p>out of 176 countries</p> | <p>Judicial independence</p> <p>66</p> <p>out of 144 countries</p> | <p>Quality of bureaucracy</p> <p>min risk 3 max risk</p> |
| <p>EIU, ONU, WB, WEF, Heritage Foundation, Transparency International, Global Peace Index</p> | | | | |

survivors of the 1989 events. Everyone thinks they have a good idea of what happened to the arrested demonstrators, but no one knows for sure. The government has always believed that the fear of being involved in a new massacre would continue to dissuade anyone from organizing further mass demonstrations, and this in turn would allow dissent to be limited to the actions and words of isolated groups of dissidents.

That's why the Beijing bureaucrats started worrying again when they realised that the Chinese were responding to the Oriental Jasmine appeal. And in order to avoid any misunderstandings, the leaders opted for harsh repression, managing to nip the protest in the bud, but not to eradicate the desire for change that is rapidly spreading across Chinese society.

In China, as a matter of fact, things are changing slowly. Over the last few years many small signs

would seem to indicate that the People's Republic is undergoing a very important transition centred around political reform. In other words, the acknowledgement of those values that the population began to claim in 1989, and had the courage to put back on the agenda in 2011, in the wake of the Arab revolutions.

The mantra the Party keeps chanting to itself and the world has been that the Nation has been engaged in a very delicate phase. It went through "difficult" times during the Beijing Olympic Games, the Shanghai Expo, the Arab revolutions and the transition at the top of the Chinese Communist Party. Then along came the 18th Congress which placed the leadership of the People's Republic in the hands of a group of unabashedly conservative officials. The choice was met with pessimism by analysts around the world, many of whom were forgetting that the

economic woes of the country, in a globalised economic environment, had in actual fact opened the door to some hope for renewal – even in the political sphere.

Although conservatives have never been the champions of reform or attempts to usher in change, there's no doubt the country is badly in need of both. That's why it seemed reasonable to believe that change was in the air. And this explains the stance of the freshly-elected president Xi Jinping, who in addition to reviving the economy and cleaning up the Party's image, is also set on tackling political reform. A field in which Xi Jinping, by Chinese standards, has already achieved important results after handling the journalist's revolt without too much fuss and announcing the abolition of re-education through labour. And anyone claiming all this might not have happened without the jasmines might well be right... **E**

