



## **Unirule: China's crackdown on economists and free speech**

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**When China's president travels abroad, he likes to present an image of a country that is open and outward-looking.**

At the World Economic Forum in Davos last month, he positioned himself as the last great defender of globalisation and free trade.

But at home, the attitude to freedom is very different.

Since coming to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has overseen a concerted crackdown on individual freedoms in what human rights groups describe as the most sustained attack on civil society in China in decades.

Human rights lawyers have been rounded up and put on trial, activists abducted and tortured and critical voices silenced, as the Communist Party moves to stifle potential sources of dissent.

Now one of China's only truly independent think tanks, and one of its most respected, is under threat.

In January the website of the Unirule Institute of Economics was shut down, along with its social media accounts.

As far as the Chinese internet is concerned, it has ceased to exist.

It all happened in less than an hour, co-founder Professor Sheng Hong told us, with no official notification from the authorities, which they could then appeal.

The only explanation has been an article in state-controlled media, describing the think tank as one of 17 "illegal" websites, closed for "violation of laws and regulations" or providing "pornographic content".

His staff are determined to continue their work at their Beijing headquarters, but without a platform to publish their research or raise funds, the institute's survival is in jeopardy.

"In this age of the internet, getting online is an essential part of life and work for any individual," Professor Sheng explained.

"If this is taken away from an organization, it constitutes a highly significant attack as it has no way of getting its voice across, no way of letting the outside world know what work it is doing."

The professor was keen to stress that their organization was not "anti-government" and that this should not be seen as an issue of "left" or "right" politics in China.

He believes this is about freedom of speech, and that fundamental values are now at stake.

He said: "Article 35 of the Chinese constitution states that all citizens have freedom of expression, including freedom of speech, of publication, of assembly, of association.

"So the severity of this problem goes far beyond an attack on [a single] organization and any losses it may incur, as this poses a potential danger to the entire people."

Founded by liberal intellectuals in 1993, Unirule advocates independent research and the open sharing of ideas as the country moves from a planned to a market economy.

But in Xi Jinping's China, it seems the organization's ideas are no longer welcome.

"Unirule's idea comes from the the Chinese 'Tianze', which is a word for universal rule," James Dorn, of the Washington DC-based Cato Institute, explained.

"They think that you should have a system in which the government protects people's rights and their property rights, rather than just telling people what to do.

"And that's a threat to the Communist Party, because they have a monopoly on power, and the power of ideas is very strong in that type of a system."

Cato honoured another of Unirule's co-founders - the now 88-year-old economist Mao Yushi - with the Milton Friedman prize for Advancing Liberty in 2012, in recognition of his lifetime's work in support of the principles of a free society.

Mr Dorn said he was concerned by what was now happening to Unirule, and called on President Xi to apply some of his rhetoric in Davos on trade to the freedom of ideas.

"He likened protectionism to locking someone in a dark room, and not allowing any light to come in, and that's what protectionism does in the market place," Mr Dorn explained.

"But he didn't say anything about the free market for ideas and protectionism there - which closes off the light of competition, and knowledge, and new information coming in.

"So there is a hypocrisy there - and people should call him on that."

So far there is little evidence of that, and every sign that Mr Xi's crackdown will continue.

It is difficult to show what is happening here on camera - there are few dramatic scenes, you don't need riot police to shut down a website.

This is repression by increment - the gradual silencing of critical voices and ideas.

China's economy may be slowly opening up, but in terms of civil liberties and intellectual freedom, it is moving backwards.