

The Jamestown Sun

Activists say China must improve human rights to make Xi visit a success

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Ahead of a visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to the United States, Chinese dissidents and human rights advocates say Beijing needs to improve its human rights record to ensure the success of the summit.

The view echoes comments from the U.S. State Department in August when it said China would have to "make specific improvements" on rights if it wanted the summit to be "positive."

Xi's administration has tightened control over almost every aspect of civil society since 2012, citing national security and stability.

Xi will spend a week in the United States during the second half of September. He will hold talks with Obama in Washington and also attend the U.N. General Assembly.

The talks with Obama are expected to include discussions on the close economic relationship between the world's two largest economies as well as tensions over China's territorial claims in Asia.

Chinese activist Chen Guangcheng, who is blind, has urged democratic reforms in China. Chen campaigned for farmers and disabled citizens and exposing forced abortions before he was placed under house arrest.

Chen was jailed for four years in China and then held an additional 19 months under house arrest.

He made international headlines in 2012 when he escaped house arrest and spent 20 hours on the run before finding refuge at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing.

"When I was in negotiations, when I was in the embassy, I was told by the American negotiators that the Chinese made a promise to them and me, as well, that they would carry out an investigation into my treatment and into the circumstances of the abuse that I suffered," Chen said.

"To this day, there's been no investigation and no process towards investigation and I think it's important for people to understand and to know things like this because the evidence is clear that Chinese authorities lie through their teeth towards their own people and they're untrustworthy when it comes to the rest of the world as well," he said in an interview in Washington D.C.

Chen said he hoped that the human rights issues would be on the agenda during Xi's visit.

"Since Xi Jinping came to power, he has never encouraged the country to embrace the rule of law, or to embrace legal procedures for policies that would encourage social justice and in fact has done everything within his power to maintain the control of the Communist Party," Chen said.

"This is his sole focus. The Chinese people no longer have faith in the party and they no longer believe in what the authorities are doing and at some point in the process, along the road towards building a more democratic society, the people will have to separate themselves from the authorities."

Xia Yeliang, a prominent Chinese professor and dissident who was fired from the elite Peking University in 2013, has warned that academic exchanges with China carry hidden risks.

"The Chinese regime tried to influence the Western academics in some way and they have some sensitive issues to boost, which the academic investment world even would not touch," Xia said.

Xia accepted a position last February at the Cato Institute think tank in Washington after he was expelled from Peking University amid a broader crackdown on dissent, having drawn the ire of university officials for blog posts calling for democratic reforms and rule of law in China.

"I have the preparation for being put into jail because I told my wife, 'If someday I'm put in jail, you may divorce me,'" he said. "I don't care about me because I think it's worthwhile."

Speaking after a two-day U.S.-China dialogue on human rights in Washington last month, a Chinese official said that human rights should not dominate the U.S.-China relationship.

In June, China's foreign ministry criticised the U.S. over its own human rights record, citing police violence in Ferguson and other cities.

"In fact, on the issue of human rights we advocate that all countries hold a constructive dialogue on the basis of mutual respect and equality, but regrettably the U.S. has not been able to do this at all times," said China's foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang. "I think out of the principle of fairness we might as well speak up about the issues in the United States. This is an equal and mutually beneficial way of reciprocating."

A U.S. State Department report released prior to China's report on U.S. human rights said repression and coercion in China were routine against activists, ethnic minorities and law firms that took on sensitive cases.

And in May, China said that its law bans torture and forced confessions after a report released by New York-based Human Rights Watch said that detainees continued to be tortured during police interrogations.

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said that Chinese law banned torture and forced confessions.

"China is a country with rule of law and Chinese law clearly bans torture and forced confessions," she said.

"If this is discovered being used during questioning the person responsible will be seriously sanctioned by the law. At present, China is strengthening and improving human rights protection mechanism according to requirements from China's Third and Fourth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party with the purpose of ensuring people feel the fairness and justice from every single case," Hua told reporters at a daily briefing in Beijing in May.

Sharon Hom, executive director for Human Rights in China (HRIC), said other issues were keeping human rights on the back-burner.

"We are friends, mutually, instrumentally, useful to each other," she said.

"So to the U.S. why are they useful? They need China for North Korea, they need China for the South China Sea, they need China in dealing with the trade issues, so they need China for the security issues, the counter-terrorism issues, that's how the U.S. perceives it. Now of course I just want to add a gloss, they need China for all those issues, but what they need is a China that abides by law, they need a China that believes in human rights."

Leading U.S. senators have also urged President Barack Obama to use the visit to Washington next month of Chinese President Xi Jinping to take him to task for what they described as an "extraordinary assault" on human rights.