

GROWING CONCERN FOR PROTESTS IN THE CHINESE MEDIA

H. Christoph STEINHARDT

EAI Background Brief No. 814

Date of Publication: 3 May 2013

Executive Summary

1. During the Hu-Wen era concern for grassroots protests in news media reporting and public debate rose substantially.
2. With the softening of rhetoric from the top leadership, the Chinese news media has become much more inclined to report on previously strictly censored incidents of unrest. Critical depictions of local official behavior have become more common while simplistic and hostile portrayals of protesters have largely vanished.
3. After reaching a peak between 2008 and 2010, media attention to protest has recently decreased somewhat. However, the trend to refrain from portraying protests and protesters in a hostile manner has largely prevailed.
4. Chinese public intellectuals have begun an increasingly penetrating discourse on the causes and consequences of mass unrest. The boundaries of sensitive issues have considerably expanded, thanks largely to a group of vocal social scientists.
5. Critics have interpreted expressions of protest as symptoms of an underlying societal disease. Institutions and policies that are central to the logic of one-party domination have been identified as the root causes of official misconduct and resulting popular discontent. Eventually even the rationale of the Communist Party's principle of "social stability" has been questioned.
6. Demands for institutional and policy change have included greater freedom for the media, more independence for the judiciary, truly independent groups to represent social interests, more effective mechanisms for bottom-up accountability, as well as the institutionalization of public demonstrations and strikes.

7. The demand to make the existing constitutional right to assemble and demonstrate practically feasible has also been part of the most recent intellectual calls for reform.
8. Increased media attention and intensifying criticism have put the spotlight on chronic governance problems at the root of recurring mass unrest. By way of media representation popular protest has generated additional pressure for substantial and systematic reform.