



China Civil Society Report: Mass Incidents in China



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By Yu Jianrong and Yu Debao

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I. Introduction

Yu Jianrong, Research/Professor of Institute of Rural Development at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Yu Debao, Doctoral Student at Peking University, write, "In a time with so much social conflict, little contradictions can trigger mass unrest, affecting the whole society. If such incidents cannot be solved properly, both society and the whole country will pay a heavy price."

This article was edited by Zhao Yusi, Project Assistant of the NGO Research Center at the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University.

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II. Article by Yu Jianrong and Yu Debao

- "China Civil Society Report: Mass Incidents in China"

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Edited by Zhao Yusi

Recently, a series of mass incidents took place in China. These incidents demonstrate some of the social conflicts within China. First there was the "Weng'an Incident" on June 28, 2008. During this event a police station and a county government office building in Guizhou province were assaulted and torched by the local populace. The chaos started in Weng'an County when people who were dissatisfied with the investigation into the death of a local student gathered at the county government offices and the public security bureau. While officials were handling the case, some people unfamiliar with the exact context of the event surrounded the police station and the office buildings of the county government and Communist Party Committee. The protesters smashed and torched many offices and some cars. The chaos lasted for seven hours and involved thousands of people.[1]

Second was the "Fugu Incident" on July 3. A driver of a farm vehicle in Fugu, Shanxi jumped into the Yellow River to avoid being checked for traffic violations by the police. Local authorities fished his body out of the river two days later, and were then pursued by angry kin of the dead man, who demanded to know why they were not told of the discovery of the body and demanded to have control of the corpse. The two sides struggled over the body, which attracted many spectators and evolved into a clash between villagers and the police.[2]

Third, the "Huizhou Incident" on July 16. During this incident more than 100 people attacked police officers over the controversial death of a motorcycle driver in Huizhou, Guangdong. The driver's family members said that he was beaten to death by the security guards of Shangnan Village, but local police were told that he died from a traffic accident. The unrest lasted from early morning to 1 pm. Seven members of the group, which had also overturned a police wagon and raided a police station, were arrested.[3]

Fourth was the "Menglian Incident". On July 19, rubber farmers attacked police who had been sent to arrest alleged instigators in a conflict with rubber plant managers in Menglian, Yunnan. Forty officers were injured and eight police vehicles were burned during the conflict and two farmers were shot dead by riot police.[4]

We can identify several common characteristics in these incidents: first, they were all caused by accidents, without personal petition, administrative litigation or other legal process. All of the events happened suddenly, and rapidly escalated into conflicts. Second, there was no definite organizer of the events. Most of the participants had no direct relationship to the original incident. The participants sought to defend the weak against the strong and express their dissatisfaction with what they perceived as unfair official actions. Their main reason for participating was to vent their frustration at local authorities. Third, during the occurrence and development of these incidents, information dissemination had new traits; the rapid flow of information through networks has played a very important role. Fourth, the beating, smashing, looting, burning and other criminal acts aroused in these incidents, which not only caused property losses to the state, the collective, and the individual, but also had a negative social impact.[5]

These mass incidents are generally thought to be caused by several factors. First, the widening gap

between rich and poor. The gap includes not only income inequality, but also other factors such as access to education. The mass incidents demonstrate a strong dissatisfaction with these inequalities. Second, bureaucracy and corruption cause tension between cadres and the populace. Some local cadres don't listen to the voice of the masses and demonstrate an indifference to their plight. Little grievances gradually evolve into large ones, which then trigger mass incidents. Third, the legal rights and protections provided to the populace have been strengthened recently but popular awareness of the law is still weak. They want to pursue equality and protect their rights, but they don't know how to express their dissatisfaction by lawful means. Thus the protests seem to be the only way to achieve their goals. Finally, since China has opened up, the social and economic systems have changed dramatically. However, the management and work systems are still very similar to those used in the planned economy system. The populace sees no other method to address their grievances except through mass action.[6]

In a time with so much social conflict, little contradictions can trigger mass unrest, affecting the whole society. If such incidents cannot be solved properly, both society and the whole country will pay a heavy price.

III. Citations

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