



## Surrounded by State Surveillance and Censorship, China's Protesters Face Uphill Battle

As public anger over China's draconian Covid-19 lockdowns erupted in the form of nationwide protests last weekend, the long arm of the communist state's surveillance apparatus has since caught up with many protesters.

Many citizens facing strict lockdown measures from the communist authorities sympathized with victims trapped in a burning apartment building in the city of Ürümqi, in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, late last week. Videos of the apartment fire depicted how rescue efforts seemed to have been obstructed by Covid-19 measures, and how residents were unable to escape as their building was under a lockdown. Consequently, there were 10 casualties from the fire.



AP Images  
Police in Beijing

As tens of thousands of housing estates have been under some type of lockdown or another under the pretext of curbing the spread of Covid-19, the deaths resulting from the fire seemed to showcase the worst fears of many of these residents.

Some disgruntled citizens shared their thoughts in the aftermath of the fire disaster. Yet these people realized that their posts were taken down after a few hours. To make matters worse, last Friday night, Ürümqi officials dismissed claims that the victims were prevented from escaping and instead criticized residents for having low survival skills. Such official dismissals were the final straw for residents and their anger mounted. Unexpectedly, any online criticisms were rapidly removed.

To get around state censorship, netizens tapped their creative juices by sharing entire articles made up of just one word — the Chinese character for *hao* (“good”), to protest state censorship. When these articles got taken down, netizens resorted to other words such as “bad” and “neither good nor bad.”

Others would quote from officials such as former leader Deng Xiaoping, who spoke about the opening up of China. Xi Zhongxun, the father of President Xi Jinping, who himself talked about letting people speak, was also quoted. Also posted were clips from foreign ministry spokesman Hua Chunying, who lashed out at foreign media for allegedly failing to report the “facts and truths” on Xinjiang. Hua's clips were subsequently erased from the online sphere.

Subtler methods of communication seem to be preferred among protesters, amid heavy surveillance measures from the state. Among the most outstanding ways to express discontent were the blank sheets of white paper used in Shanghai, Beijing, and other cities. For instance, a vigil in Shanghai evolved into a street protest where many held blank sheets of white paper in a show of tacit defiance. Similarly, in Beijing, students at Tsinghua University raised signs showing a math equation devised by Russian



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physicist Alexander Friedmann, whose surname in Chinese is a homonym for “free man.”

Netizens also resorted to irony when posting on China’s internet. They posted walls of text filled with the Chinese characters for “yes,” “good,” and “correct” to signal their discontent while evading censors.

“People have a common message,” said Dr. Xiao Qiang, a researcher on internet freedom at the University of California-Berkeley. “They know what they want to express, and authorities know, too, so people don’t need to say anything. If you hold a blank sheet, then everyone knows what you mean.”

Some protesters said the use of white pieces of paper was inspired by a Soviet-era joke, in which a dissident approached by police for giving out leaflets in a public square reveals the flyers to be blank. When questioned, the dissident replies that words are not needed because “everyone knows.”

To put matters into context, the internet within the territories of communist China has been heavily policed by both human beings and bots for years. Moreover, the notorious “Great Firewall of China,” a series of technologies and legislative acts used by the authorities to regulate domestic internet activities, prohibits websites such as Google, Twitter, and even Instagram.

To overcome censorship, many citizens have resorted to using virtual private networks (VPNs) to connect to the outside world. Such actions are technically criminal in China. Furthermore, netizens usually attempt to sustain content online for as long as possible, either by taking a screenshot of the content and reposting, or embedding videos within other files.

Certain search terms, including those alluding to controversial events such as the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, are automatically barred from displaying results. Nonetheless, developing events such as the Ürümqi fire imply that pre-set filters may fail to censor information adequately. As a result, human censors have to manually evaluate and remove posts they think are unsuitable.

For instance, following a Shanghai vigil for victims of the fire, which eventually morphed into a protest late last week, images of the gathering were posted on Chinese social media. Yet, as the state’s human censors caught up with netizens’ activities, these images were removed rapidly.

Based on information from *China Digital Times*, a website that covers topics about China’s internet, a significant amount of content linked to last weekend’s unprecedented protests has been eliminated, including an image of a woman wearing a mask with “404” — referring to a link that has been removed — written on it.

Also removed from public viewing on the popular messaging app WeChat was an essay titled *Fear Not, Children*.

Indeed, WeChat users appear to have faced much censorship.

Protesters in Beijing and Shanghai told *The Straits Times* their accounts have received warnings after sharing content about last weekend’s demonstrations.

A media executive, who wanted to be called Jess, said she was cautioned after sharing images and videos in favor of Saturday’s protest in Shanghai.

“My account has been suspended for a week, so I can’t take part in group chats or post on my WeChat moments,” Jess revealed over a secure messaging app.

“Some of my other friends weren’t so lucky, maybe they shared more information, and so they got calls from their local police.”



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In October, many people also found their [WeChat accounts blocked or suspended](#) after sharing pictures and videos of a protest on Sitong Bridge in Beijing. Some had even gone to the extent of posting “public confessions” on Twitter-like Weibo, pleading for their accounts to be restored. WeChat is essential for daily life in China, as users need it to scan health QR codes required to enter certain public spaces, to communicate with others, and for making many payments.

Others who took part in Sunday’s protest in Beijing also believe they had been tracked through apps on their phones.

One protester who went to the event with three others said that he was contacted by the police on Monday. He said he was not in any confrontation during the protests, and did not give his details to anyone.

“After panicking for a bit, I calmed down and reasoned with my friends who all think I probably got targeted because I used my phone to call a car on a ride-hailing app to get to the location,” he said.

“We’ve always known apps like WeChat are being watched because sensitive content can sometimes disappear or not get forwarded but in this case, it’s more extensive than that. Now we know.”

Anti-government protesters in Hong Kong also used blank paper in 2020, days after a national-security law was passed to quell dissent.

In Shanghai, three men in construction attire walked away with the road sign for “Ürümqi Middle Road” at the site of the protest. This move backfired.

By Monday this week, the severed road sign itself had become a meme. Mocking images playing on the cover of the famed “Abbey Road” album circulated online, with the Beatles crossing the street holding the Ürümqi road sign. “That’s the censorship mechanisms’ own doing. They created this situation,” Dr. Xiao said. “When everyone is suffering from ‘zero-Covid’ restrictions and anger is so widespread, then any memes will catch on.”



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