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China: New generation of internet activists targeted

Online calls for China to stage its own ‘Jasmine Revolution’ following protests in the Middle East and North Africa has prompted the heaviest wave of arrests of Chinese activists for several years, Amnesty International has said.

More than 100 activists, many of them active on Twitter and blogging networks, have been detained, subjected to monitoring and intimidation by the security forces, or have gone missing since late February.

“The authorities are not only detaining seasoned dissidents; they are trying to silence a whole new generation of online activists” said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Asia-Pacific.

“The Chinese authorities must end their repression of calls for peaceful political reform and instead listen to voices demanding change.”

The sweep is the worst since 2009 when thousands were detained following deadly riots in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

China’s calls for a ‘Jasmine Revolution’ in February consisted of online instructions to ‘stroll’ through designated public places on Sunday afternoons. Faced with a large state security presence, no significant gatherings took place.

Some 24 activists have been detained on security charges such as ‘subverting state power’, some for as little as mentioning the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ on the micro-blogging website Twitter.

They have included ‘netizens’ who have never been detained before and have only been active online. Many young Chinese bloggers and tweeters refer to themselves as ‘netizens’, ie. active citizens on the internet, rather than as ‘activists’.

One young ‘netizen’ is in detention for ‘illegal assembly’ after tweeting about police detaining people ‘strolling’ through Beijing’s shopping district Wangfujing in February.

22 more people are currently detained without charge, including prominent human rights lawyers active on blogging platforms and Twitter, such as Teng Biao, Tang Jitian, Jiang Tianyong and Feng Zhenghu.

At least 69 further activists and netizens have been detained briefly, subjected to police surveillance and controls, or have disappeared.

“The fear is palpable across many provinces. Some of these people have only been tweeting and blogging, but they have been arrested and accused of China’s most serious political charges” said Catherine Baber.

Twitter-user Hua Chunhui was detained in February in Jiangsu province on charges of ‘endangering state security’, after being accused by police of tweeting messages mentioning the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ from his Twitter account @wxhch64.

His fiancée Cheng Jianping had previously been sentenced to a year of Re-education Through Labour in November 2010 for retweeting a single satirical tweet by Hua about anti-Japanese protests.

Liang Haiyi, a female internet activist nicknamed ‘Miaoxiao’, has been detained in Harbin, Heilongjiang province and charged with ‘subversion of state power’ for posting information about the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ on Chinese social networking platform QQ.

Charges like this have regularly resulted in hefty prison terms for peaceful activists.

“This massive clampdown shows that the Chinese government is rattled by the example of people’s movements abroad using the internet to fight for their freedoms” said Catherine Baber.

“Instead of being afraid of unrest, the Chinese authorities should encourage more participation and uphold people’s right to express diverse views, in order to tackle the country’s problems with social justice, corruption and inequality.”