

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

ISSUE

On October 5, 1998, China signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, a step which has long been urged upon Beijing by Canada with other states. Despite this positive change, there are still many short-comings in China with respect to human rights.

BACKGROUND

In 1998 China displayed a greater willingness to discuss human rights issues. However, in late 1998, the Chinese government began a crackdown on individuals who had begun to organize new Chinese political parties. The harsh sentences handed down to these individuals represents a clear step backward in the progress China has made on human rights issues over the past several years. China's short-comings with respect to human rights were highlighted in 1998 with the arrests of high-profile dissidents such as Xu Wenli, Wang Youcai and Qin Yongmin, for activities related to the formation of the China Democracy Party (CDP). The trio were sentenced to 13, 11 and 12 years respectively.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of China guarantees in principle a wide range of rights and freedoms, including freedom of opinion and expression, as well as freedom of association and assembly. However, article 52 of the Constitution also states that all legal rights are subservient to interests of "state, society and collective." More important than this caveat, however, is that many provisions of the PRC constitution which touch on fundamental freedoms have not been respected by the Chinese government.

While the Chinese Government has shown itself to be more open to international human rights dialogues, it continues to react defensively to international scrutiny, repeatedly stating that there was no conflict between the trials of pro-democracy activists and China's efforts to safeguard human rights. Canada underlined the contradiction between China's October 1998 signing of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Human Rights, and its harsh sentencing of political dissidents through four separate démarches with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by publicly criticising the arrests of political dissidents in China.

In 1998 China has managed better than most Asian states to deal with the Asian financial crisis and to protect the economic gains of the past two decades that have allowed great improvement in the living standards of much of the Chinese population. While not minimizing the importance of economic growth for the wellbeing of the Chinese people, Canada does not accept that the need for stability and economic growth justifies the neglect of fundamental human rights. Economic decentralization and greater openness in the economic sphere has lessened the power of the central government over many aspects of Chinese life, allowing for greater individual freedoms, such as greater control over career choices. The limited experiments in direct elections by secret ballot at the lowest levels of local government could help to change the political landscape of China if they were to be implemented on a broad scale.