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China Calling: China's Year of Dangerous Anniversaries

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Jennifer Conrad reports on why the important anniversaries of 2009 could make it a year of living dangerously for the leadership in Beijing:

October 1 marks the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, a date that will be celebrated with a military parade in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

But in the preceding months, the calendar is studded with sensitive dates Chinese leaders might want to brush under the rug. "Whenever there's a major meeting or anniversary, people in China see these as opportunities to express themselves and air their grievances on a variety of issues," say Corinna-Barbara Francis, a researcher with Amnesty International's China team. "Typically, we see a pattern of crackdown before these dates." Already an anti-porn sweep of the internet earlier this year coincided with the blocking of Amnesty's website. "We're obviously very dismayed because our site was unblocked just days before the Olympics, and we hoped it would reflect a greater opening up," says Francis. "Last time I checked, I didn't notice any porn on Amnesty's website."

And while the pre-Olympic loosening of restrictions on foreign journalists is still in effect, those freedoms have been cut back for Hong Kong and Macau journalists, who now have to be accredited and get prior consent of the people or organizations they wish to interview. Here are the dates that may be problematic this year:

March 10

Why it's sensitive:

March 10 marks the 50-year anniversary of the failed Tibetan uprising. On that date in 1959, tens of thousands of Tibetans surrounded the Norbulingka palace, worried that the Dalai Lama would be abducted by Chinese troops. As tensions ramped up, Tibetans began to express their anger and distrust of Chinese officials. On March 17, the Dalai Lama began his flight to exile in India, and on March 31, he crossed the Indian border.

The outlook this year:

The Dalai Lama has already warned that the situation is "very tense." Last year's riots in Tibetan areas of China could be a sign of trouble to come: "The Chinese government represents it as one violent protest, but it started a six-month long cycle of protests," says Kate Saunders, communications director for the International Campaign for Tibet. "We have reports of over 130 protests, and they've been overwhelmingly peaceful. According to our information, only the rioting in Lhasa escalated to serious violence against Chinese civilians. At least 15 other incidents included damage to government property such as police stations and police cars.

"And the dissent and protests have continued despite the crackdown, something we haven't witnessed before," she continues. "In 1989 [during an uprising in Lhasa], once martial law was declared, there were no further incidents." And the protests are often spontaneous and unrelated, occurring all over Tibet and in Tibetan areas of neighboring provinces.

The government is reportedly stepping up detentions, increasing troop levels, ramping up travel restrictions, intensifying political education campaigns, and releasing a documentary praising the changes Chinese rule brought to the region. They've declared March 28 Serfs' Emancipation Day, marking the day when Chinese authorities took control from the local government and, according to the official storyline, freed Tibetans from feudalism.

"It's a joke. It's a propaganda piece. The Tibetans will attend, as they have to attend every propaganda ceremony, but inside they never give up," says Ngawang Choephel, whose documentary *Tibet in Song* recently won a Sundance Special Jury Prize. After fleeing to India with his mother at age two, Choepel returned to Tibet for the first time in 1995 and was arrested and imprisoned for six years while filming footage of traditional singing and dancing. His documentary includes some of that early footage (which he had smuggled out of the country), newer footage from Tibet that was taken by a crew he sent, and interviews with Tibetans living in India. "I think most Tibetans see this Communist rule in Tibet very temporary and feel the progression of life and society in Tibet is unnatural because it is lacking the basic substance of life which is religion, culture, and human rights."

February 25, or Losar, the start of the Tibetan New Year could be another challenging date. "Since last year's crackdown, many Tibetans are talking about using the day to mourn the people who've died in the past year," says Saunders. Anxious to discourage these plans, the government encouraged Tibetans to celebrate Chinese New Year instead, even out free fireworks according to the International Campaign for Tibet.

April 25

Why it's sensitive:

Falun Gong, a spiritual practice that combines Buddhist ideas, tai chi-like exercises, and self-improvement, had an estimated 100 million-person following in China, including many government officials, before it was banned 1999. Earlier that year, practitioners protested in front of the offices of a magazine that had published an article critical of the group. In response to alleged rough treatment by the police following that protest, approximately 10,000 followers surrounded the government compound Zhongnanhai in Beijing on April 25, sitting or standing quietly and then dispersing.

"It was an independent organization that the party had not infiltrated, but in reverse had infiltrated the party," says Andrew J. Nathan, a political science professor at Columbia University who has written extensively about China. "When they demonstrated at Zhongnanhai, the government was totally shocked—they had no advanced warning. When they realized the group had the capability to pose a political threat, they decided to get rid of it." On July 22, 1999, the group was banned.

"Throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s, the Party allowed itself to believe that qigong [meditation and exercise techniques such as those done by Falun Gong practitioners] was a happy combination of science and Chinese tradition, and was happy to see people practicing qigong in public parks rather than demonstrating for democratic reforms," adds David Ownby, a professor at the University of Montreal and author of *Falun Gong and the Future of China*. "Falun Gong developed in such a way as to burst the party's bubble of optimism, illustrating the dangers of charismatic leadership and of independent organization. April 25 was sort of a Frankenstein moment, when it dawned on the party what they had created."

This year's outlook:

Experts don't expect any large-scale demonstrations. "There were a lot of public demonstrations at first," says Levi Browde, executive director of the Falun Gong Information Center. "I think people were in shock that this could happen and thought the government would change its mind once they realized the practice was harmless. As the years progressed, it became more evident that the government wasn't going to end the persecution."

If anything, the campaigns against practitioners have intensified. "We're getting reports from almost every county in China, and we believe that the levels of abuse and torture have increased," says Browde. "2008 is as bad as we've ever seen in terms of the number of people tortured and the type of torture they're subjected to. We're also seeing a shortening of the time between when someone is detained and when they're killed and an incredible number of sentences for many years."

May 4**Why it's sensitive:**

The May 4th Movement refers to a protest on that day in 1919, sparked by the World War I-ending Treaty of Versailles that handed over German territories in China to Japan. The first large-scale student protest in modern China, the movement opposed imperialism called for reforms and modernization of China. Professor Nathan also points out that "it was the matrix for the introduction of Marxism into China, and the Communist Party officially claims it as part of their official history."

This year's outlook:

China-watchers don't expect any trouble on this date. "My guess is that some Chinese groups might see it as something nostalgic, symbolizing what might have occurred," says Amnesty's Francis, referring to calls for democracy and modernization. "It represents something important for more aware Chinese citizens."

May 12**Why it's sensitive:**

One year ago on the afternoon of the 12th, a 7.9-magnitude earthquake rocked the Sichuan province, with at least 80,000 people reported dead or missing.

This year's outlook:

While most of the response to the government's handling of the earthquake has been positive, there are lingering concerns. Parents who lost children in poorly constructed schools may use the date to restate their grievances. And recently scientists have come forward with the suggestion that a dam may have triggered the earthquake.

June 4**Why it's sensitive:**

After the death of reform-minded party leader Hu Yaobang, Chinese students demonstrated in Tiananmen Square to mourn and call for democratic reforms and an end to corruption. On the evening of June 3 and into the morning of June 4, troops entered the square to remove protesters.

Human Rights Watch estimates there are over 100 people still in prison, and troops are thought to have killed hundreds of civilians, although the exact number is widely debated and there's never been a full investigation of the events of those days.

This year's outlook:

"Because there has never been an accounting for the deaths in 1989, the host of Tiananmen-related anniversaries this year will be treated with special apprehension by Beijing," says Minky Worden, media director of Human Rights Watch.

Charter 08, a petition created by writers and activists last year and signed by thousands of Chinese citizens, is one sign that calls for democratic reforms still exist in China. "It's a striking event because it shows how widespread the desire is among intellectuals for liberalization, and it shows a decline in the effectiveness of intimidation techniques—they're not scaring as many people as they were in the past." Modeled after Charter 77, written by dissidents in former Czechoslovakia, Nathan says it was constructed in a way that is "110 percent legal." But according to Amnesty, a large number of the signees have been detained or interrogated.

Still, Professor Nathan doesn't see the signs of strain that he saw in 1988 and 1989. "I don't see the regime as being that fragile, and I don't think things are coming apart at the seams," he says, citing China's economic prosperity, the skillful use of repression, leaders' ability to hang together, and strong public support for the government as reasons the government is resilient. "I don't feel the signs of crisis the way I did in 1988. Then, discontent was a lot more widespread—more people were pissed off."

While Nathan doesn't believe that June 4 is as explosive a topic as it once was, he doesn't expect an investigation or reversal of the verdict calling the movement a "counterrevolutionary rebellion" anytime soon. "There are many senior leaders who were involved in one way or another, and people within the party don't want to embarrass one another or throw people's reputations under the spotlight," says Nathan.