

Information Suppression and Dissent in China in the Context of the Chinese Government’s Zero-COVID Policy

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China’s Zero-COVID Policy and Authoritarian Public Health Control

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Senator Merkley, Congressman McGovern, and other members of the commission, thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

Nearly three years after the virus now known as COVID-19 first appeared in Wuhan, the Chinese government is continuing a strict, even draconian, policy to try to contain its spread. While this approach undoubtedly helped stem the spread of the virus and save lives in China during the early months of the pandemic, its inflexible persistence in the face of less dangerous but more transmissible variants has brought significant costs to the Chinese economy, people’s health and well-being, the free flow of information, and the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) own legitimacy. Since March, at least 45 cities across China with populations totaling 373 million people¹—more than the entire population of the United States—stretching from Shenzhen in the south to Jilin Province in the north have faced full or partial lockdowns.²

These lockdowns are occurring in a country that is also home to the most sophisticated and multi-layered apparatus of information control in the world. Freedom House’s latest edition of *Freedom on the Net*, a global assessment of internet freedom published last month, found that the Chinese government was the worst abuser of internet freedom for the eighth consecutive year.³ This apparatus of information control has been intimately intertwined with the Chinese authorities’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic from its inception.

So, how are these two dimensions of life in China—the government’s Zero-COVID policy and its information control system—intersecting?

Three aspects of information suppression over the past year are notable, drawing on incidents and analysis from Freedom House’s *China Media Bulletin* and other research:

1. Suppressing news reporting of COVID-19 outbreaks and lockdowns in China

As occurred in Wuhan in the early days of the pandemic, one key target of censorship or other reprisals, is news and information related to new outbreaks or conditions in locked down areas.

Restricting traditional media and investigative reporting: Chinese news outlets are subject to continued censorship directives from the CCP dictating what they can and cannot report on. On rare occasions when journalists have deviated from state guidance to report more independently on an outbreak, their work has been censored. Caixin, a widely respected business publication with a reputation for investigative journalism, released a long investigative report on April 2, 2022, about hidden deaths at Shanghai’s largest nursing home; the article was later deleted by censors.⁴ An April 1 article about the hospital by the state-owned English-language outlet Sixth Tone was also deleted.⁵

Authorities have also attempted to dictate how media should report on the lifting of lockdowns. For example, as lockdown restrictions in Shanghai began to lift at the end of May, a leaked censorship directive published by the US-based *China Digital Times* website suggested that local media were prohibited from writing about the end of the restrictive two-month period in the city on grounds that it was never declared in the first place.⁶ “Unlike Wuhan, Shanghai never declared a lockdown, so there is no ‘ending the lockdown,’” according to the leak. Instead, the media were told to clarify that “static management-style suppression” was lifting only in certain districts.

Social media censorship: As Chinese citizens have turned to social media and other online tools to share information and register complaints about lack of food or other problems in locked down areas, many have found their messages being censored and their accounts being temporarily or permanently suspended. According to the latest *Freedom on the Net* assessment, nearly three years into the pandemic, COVID-19 continues to be one of the most censored topics on the Chinese internet. In Shanghai, for example, after residents turned to social media to protest a lack of food⁷ and the authorities’ handling of the crisis,⁸ China-based tech platforms censored related videos, posts, and articles, and some authorities told residents not to post “pandemic-related messages online.”⁹ The social media platform Weibo began censoring the search term “buying vegetables in Shanghai” as complaints over food shortages grew.¹⁰

“Content flooding” and hashtag manipulation to drown out Xinjiang, Tibet complaints: This fall, regions with large populations of ethnic minorities such as Xinjiang and Tibet have experienced severe, lengthy COVID-19 lockdowns, accompanied by reports of starvation.¹¹ These areas are typically subjected to harsher censorship than other parts of China, rendering it even more difficult for information about events on the ground to emerge. Yet people in these regions have posted their frustrations and fears online, resulting in censorship and arrest of both minority and Han residents.¹² Censors have not only tried to delete certain content but also to manipulate information in other ways. According to a leaked directive published by *China Digital Times*,¹³ previously trained “internet commentary personnel” were ordered in early September to engage in “content flooding” efforts on Weibo, aimed at drowning out posts about the lockdown in Ili prefecture in Xinjiang with lifestyle and cooking posts, and other innocuous material.¹⁴ A week later, netizens in Lhasa began begging social media users to “please pay attention” to harsh lockdown measures and poor medical care amid a wave of positive COVID-19 cases there.¹⁵ Weibo responded by deprioritizing a hashtag on Tibet.

Prosecution of whistleblowers and critics: The Chinese security services have supplemented these measures with detentions and prosecutions of outspoken citizens, including members of ethnic and religious minorities, who have tried to share information with audiences within and outside China about conditions in the country. In March 2021, retired professor Chen Zhaozhi went on trial in Beijing for posting online that the “Wuhan pneumonia is not a Chinese virus, but Chinese Communist Party virus.”¹⁶ Chen, who suffers from a number of illnesses, was denied bail. As of June 2022, he remained in detention.¹⁷ In September 2021, human rights activist Guo Quan was tried for “inciting subversion” after he published articles criticizing social injustice, corruption, and the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸ In November 2021, a man in the Ningxia region was detained for nine days after he sent a meme to a group on WeChat complaining about the local COVID-19 control measures.¹⁹ In January 2022, citizen journalist and Falun Gong practitioner Xu Na was sentenced to eight years in prison for sending photos and information about COVID-19-related restrictions in Beijing to an overseas Chinese-language website for publication online, one of the longest known sentences to date for sharing pandemic related information.²⁰ In August 2022, a teacher in Lhasa was arrested for posts on WeChat and Weibo documenting harmful aspects of how the city’s harsh COVID-19 lockdown had been implemented.²¹ And in September, Xinjiang police reportedly detained four internet users accused of “spreading rumors,” and over 600 people who defied lockdown orders to protest the lack of food.²²

2. Suppressing information about public outcries over Zero-COVID policy implementation

As lockdowns have affected an ever-expanding number of Chinese citizens, some of whom have faced life-or-death challenges due to the lockdown policies rather than the virus itself, the CCP regime and its censors have had to contend with large-scale public outcries and taken actions to silence them.

Food shortages: During a stringent lockdown in Xi’an that began on December 23, 2021 and encompassed 13 million people, residents of the city turned to Weibo to express anger about food shortages.²³ The hashtag #DifficultToBuyFoodInXian received over 370 million clicks by January 2, 2022. Two days later, Xi’an officials banned residents from posting about the pandemic,²⁴ and placed three individuals in detention for up to seven days on charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” an offense commonly used in free expression cases, in response to their complaints on WeChat.²⁵ During the Shanghai lockdown that stretched from late March into May 2022, an undated video from a housing compound in Minhang District showed residents protesting outside against COVID-19 measures, saying “we want to eat” and “we want freedom”; the social media platform WeChat censored the clip, claiming it violated the terms and conditions of usage.²⁶

Non-COVID lockdown deaths: With almost each lockdown, there have emerged public outcries related to residents who died seemingly preventable deaths as a result of the strict COVID-19 measures rather than the disease itself. Examples include late-term miscarriages of pregnant women denied hospital entry,²⁷ heart attacks,²⁸ or deaths from a bus crash en route to a centralized

quarantine center.²⁹ These cases have been posted online and circulated within and outside China, but often then subject to censorship. One recent such tragedy occurred just weeks ago in Zhengzhou in Henan province. A three-year-old boy whose neighborhood had been locked down since early October died from carbon monoxide poisoning after police reportedly refused to allow his father to take him for emergency medical care.³⁰ The case and the father's account blaming Zero-COVID policies for "indirectly killing" his son sparked heartbreak, anger, and street protests. But within days his posts had been censored,³¹ as were hashtags and other comments grieving the young boy's death.³²

3. Suppressing medical professionals and other elites' questioning of the Zero-COVID policy

The extended lockdowns in Shanghai and other cities have prompted more citizens to raise objections to the human and economic costs of the government's Zero-COVID policy, with some calling on their leaders to consider less rigid alternatives that might still spare many lives. The prominence, diversity, and number of people who have encountered censorship for trying to engage in such a rational discussion are significant.

Medical professionals: Medical professionals remain a key target for censors, as they have been since the start of the pandemic. Indeed, the suppression of health experts' speech in late 2019 and early 2020 may have denied the country and the world an opportunity to contain the virus at the outset.³³ Yet the practice continues. In early April, Zhong Nanshan, the country's top respiratory disease specialist, published an English article in the *National Science Review* that offered suggestions on how China could reopen "in an orderly and effective manner" in the coming months.³⁴ While it acknowledged the effectiveness of policies to date, the article warned that the strict Zero-COVID policy approach "cannot be pursued in the long-run." A Chinese version was quickly censored,³⁵ and during the night of April 20–21, state media flooded Baidu search-engine results with items that partially quoted Zhong expressing support for the existing strategy and downplaying his remarks on the need to gradually open up.³⁶ On May 10, World Health Organization (WHO) director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who had previously praised the Chinese government's pandemic response, remarked that China's strategy was "not sustainable" in the face of the virus's easily transmissible Omicron variant.³⁷ Almost immediately, as clips and references to the comment circulated online, censors descended on his remarks, suppressing his image, name, related hashtags, and even UN-affiliated accounts on Weibo and WeChat.³⁸

More grassroots health workers have also been silenced. In early April, Dr. Miu Xiaohui, a retired infectious disease expert, attempted to calculate how many people with diabetes might have died because of the lack of medicine and treatment during Shanghai's lockdown, reaching an estimated figure of 2,141. The blog post outlining his calculation and suggestions for managing the pandemic—through a stronger focus on vaccination campaigns and home isolation, for example—was deleted.

Law professors: Tong Zhiwei, a law professor in Shanghai, published an online essay arguing that authorities were acting illegally when they took extreme measures such as forcing uninfected

neighbors of infected individuals into collective quarantine.³⁹ Tong also pointed out that Shanghai had never actually entered a state of emergency per law. His article was deleted, his verified Weibo account was then banned from posting, and a hashtag of his name was censored. While the shuttering of an outspoken intellectual’s Weibo account silences their criticism, the closing of a WeChat account can significantly impede daily life. On February 3, days after his sixth WeChat account was shut down, Peking University law professor He Weifang handwrote a letter of protest to parent company Tencent.⁴⁰ He said the account shutdowns made daily activities like “transport, shopping and public health code screenings impossible,” and violated his civil rights. He once had over a million followers on Weibo before leaving the platform in 2013 amid a government crackdown on liberal-leaning intellectuals.⁴¹

Financial analysts and entrepreneurs: As the negative repercussions of the Zero-COVID policy on China’s economy have become more evident, financial analysts have also been swept up in the attempt to stifle debate. Hao Hong, a Hong Kong–based market strategist, was censored after he published a series of commentaries on social media platforms that predicted a gloomy trajectory for China’s economy.⁴² On April 30, his Weibo account, which had three million followers, was shuttered, and his WeChat account was suspended. The Weibo accounts of at least three other chief economists and fund managers have been suspended in recent months for “violating laws and regulations.”⁴³ In another case in late May, Weibo banned the account of the head of Trip.com, one of China’s largest online travel agencies, for commenting on the COVID-19 lockdown’s impact on Chinese people’s life expectancy.⁴⁴ The apparent purge fits a long-standing pattern in which warnings of problems for the Chinese economy are smothered despite growing evidence of a downturn.

Cracks in Beijing’s information controls

Despite the robust resources being invested by the Chinese government to control what news and information reaches Chinese citizens and the wider world about conditions in locked down areas, the regime and its apparatus are not omnipotent. Indeed, the fact that I am able to put this testimony together with detailed examples demonstrates the extent to which information that the CCP would prefer disappeared is still circulating inside and outside China, often to the credit of ordinary Chinese citizens and at great sacrifice.

Online dissent: During the Shanghai lockdown in particular, Chinese users went to extraordinary lengths to circumvent censorship, keep critical content online, and find avenues for freer expression. There was a national outcry after Shanghai implemented a policy to remove COVID-19-positive children from their uninfected parents,⁴⁵ with videos and related hashtags garnering tens of millions of views.⁴⁶ Podcasts have also emerged as a less censored space where women, in particular, shared their daily hardships during the lockdown.⁴⁷

Creative solutions for voicing displeasure have included piggybacking on officially sanctioned hashtags. On the evening of April 13, tens of thousands of angry comments were posted to a hashtag criticizing human rights in the United States, which was artificially ranked second by the

Weibo platform.⁴⁸ Users exploited the hashtag to highlight the lack of rights protections in China and express frustration with the Chinese government. Many of the posts garnered hundreds of likes and shares, although by 4 a.m. the censors had moved in to delete them.

Content preservation: Another collective outpouring of anguish came in the form of a six-minute video compilation of key incidents from the Shanghai lockdown, titled “Voices of April.”⁴⁹ The video deluged WeChat groups and was constantly reposted and forwarded even as censors tried to remove it. People made new versions of it upside down,⁵⁰ embedded in cartoons, or with painted still images designed to evade censorship algorithms.⁵¹

Various initiatives have countered censorship within the Chinese internet by keeping other deleted content alive outside the Great Firewall. A compilation of 200 cases of people who died as a result of the lockdown itself rather than COVID-19—from denial of medical care, hunger, or suicide, for example—was posted to Airtable, a blockchain-based database platform. Overseas bilingual websites like *China Digital Times* (CDT)⁵² or What’s on Weibo,⁵³ along with the Twitter accounts of individual journalists and researchers, have captured, archived, and translated posts like many of those cited above.⁵⁴

Offline dissent: Resentment related to lockdowns has also translated into real-world dissent, including solo and group protests. One recent example that made international headlines was when a Beijing man lowered two banners over a city bridge, shouted slogans, and lit a fire on October 13 in protest of the government’s COVID-19 policies, and demanded freedom and dignity for Chinese people.⁵⁵ Slogans on the banners included: “*No covid test, we want to eat. Remove dictator and national traitor Xi Jinping.*” Occurring days before the CCP’s all-important Party Congress opened on October 16, the “Bridge Man” protest was an act of defiance directed at Xi Jinping as the architect of the Zero-COVID policy, just as he was set to be anointed to an unprecedented third term as CCP chief. The demonstration was met with rapid censorship and the deployment of police and minders across the capital,⁵⁶ but not before sparking attention on social media, international news headlines, and expressions of solidarity by Chinese students at college campuses around the world.⁵⁷

“Bridge man’s” protest, while striking, was not an isolated act of public dissent against Xi’s COVID policies. A new Freedom House project, the *China Dissent Monitor*, documented 40 cases of Chinese citizens protesting COVID-19 restrictions between June and October 2022. They include protests that drew hundreds of people to the streets not only in Shanghai, but also in Hebei, Guangxi, Liaoning, and Jiangsu provinces, and online hashtag movements featuring hundreds of thousands of posts.

Official concessions: In at least some instances, public outcries and news coverage appears to have contributed to policy adjustments or official accountability, at the local level. In Xi’an, several officials were punished and two hospitals temporarily closed down over tragedies—like miscarriages and a heart attack death—during the month-long lockdown from December 2021 to January 2022.⁵⁸ In nine of the 40 *China Dissent Monitor* cases mentioned above, some form of concession was also documented, including local officials lifting burdensome travel restrictions on commuters following street protests.

Looking ahead

Throughout the summer and early fall, many observers were cautiously optimistic that after the 20th Party Congress in mid-October, the Chinese government might transition away from the Zero-COVID policy. Unverified rumors in early November of a change in policy prompted a jump in the stock market from investor excitement at the prospect, further fueled by remarks by epidemiologist Zeng Guang that he believed conditions for opening were “accumulating.”⁵⁹

Such hopes appear to have been unfounded. During the Party Congress, Xi reiterated his commitment to the policy and state media have praised it as one of his key achievements, rendering too rapid a reversal a potential blow to his legitimacy.⁶⁰ Days after Zeng’s comment, Chinese health officials repeated their dedication to the Zero-COVID policy.⁶¹ More broadly, the rhetorical shifts, legal changes, and vaccination campaigns that experts have said would be prerequisites to any significant shift remain notably absent.⁶²

So long as the lockdowns continue, the cycle observed in major metropolitan areas like Xi’an, Shanghai, and Lanzhou of logistical problems, non-COVID-medical tragedies, and overall citizen frustration spurring outcries and even protests are likely to continue as well. All the while, the censorship apparatus continues to expand and evolve.

Regardless of when the Zero-COVID policy ends, the lockdowns, censorship, and citizen responses are likely to have long-term effects, not only for families who suffered untimely deaths or other traumas due to the restrictions. It seems clear that this historic and tragic episode in the lives of millions of people will not be easily forgotten, even if much of the digital evidence is hastily obscured. Interest in emigrating from China is reportedly on the rise, while reflections published by Shanghai residents underscore a disappointment with Chinese state media’s obvious lack of coverage of the problems surrounding the lockdown.⁶³

Meanwhile, a sense of solidarity and community has also arisen surrounding both offline mutual-assistance efforts and online outbursts of collective anger, which itself pokes a hole in the CCP’s tactics of atomizing dissent. As one netizen commented in response to the US human rights hashtag hijacking: “So many posts to like. This is the true voice of the people. Let’s commemorate tonight.... Maybe tomorrow it’s gonna be songs and dances again, but at least we know that we are awake.”⁶⁴

Recommendations

Consistently raise press freedom and political prisoners as part of bilateral engagement:

- Consistently raise the issues of press freedom and internet freedom in China publicly and in private meetings with Chinese counterparts, including at the highest levels. Stress that universal rights like free expression apply to China.
- Urge the release of imprisoned journalists and free expression activists. Experience demonstrates that consistently raising individual prisoner cases can result in improved treatment in detention, lighter sentences or, in rare cases, release from imprisonment. In addition to others listed in this testimony, there are three notable detainees jailed for

reporting or commentary related to COVID-19 who are facing precarious legal and health conditions in custody. Their names should be raised at every opportunity and updates on their treatment and well-being requested. If traveling to China and to a relevant province, US officials should request to meet with these and other prisoners:

- **Zhang Zhan:** Zhang is a citizen journalist sentenced to four years in prison in December 2020 for reporting related to COVID-19, including videos taken in February 2020 from Wuhan, the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak.⁶⁵ She is being held in Shanghai’s Women’s Prison. Under public pressure to grant her a medical release,⁶⁶ after she lost a significant amount of weight in custody, the authorities reportedly improved conditions for Zhang.⁶⁷ The latest known update on her condition was in February 2022. (Zhang is case 2020-00175 in the CECC’s Political Prisoner Database)
- **Fang Bin:** Fang is a citizen journalist who gained international attention for videos taken of corpses at hospitals in Wuhan in the first days of the pandemic.⁶⁸ After two years of efforts to locate him, including by Zhang Zhan, activists reported in February 2022 that he was being held at Jiang’an District Detention Center in Wuhan.⁶⁹ His case was reportedly submitted for prosecution on charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.”⁷⁰ In addition to being a citizen journalist, Fang is reportedly a Falun Gong believer⁷¹ who had been tortured during previous detentions for his faith.⁷² The latest known update on his condition was in February 2022. (Fang is case 2020-00140 in the CECC’s Political Prisoner Database)
- **Xu Zhiyong:** Xu is a prominent rights lawyer and democracy advocate who has suffered years of reprisals and abuse due to his activism.⁷³ After completing a four-year prison term on politically motivated charges, Xu resumed meetings with other human rights defenders in China. He was detained in Guangdong on February 15, 2020 following a nationwide effort to track him down. Shortly before his arrest, he published a scathing letter calling for Xi Jinping to resign over his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁴ Xu was tried on June 22, 2022 in Linshu County People’s Court in Shandong Province for “subversion of state power,” but no sentence has been announced.⁷⁵ He has reported being tortured in custody and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that his detention is “arbitrary”. (Xu is case 2005-00199 in the CECC’s Political Prisoner Database)

Support civil society initiatives that counter censorship:

- Funding should be made available to quickly enhance the server capacity of circumvention tools facing increased demand from China during moments of crisis or political turmoil. During these circumstances, the number of Chinese people seeking uncensored information typically spikes. At last year’s Summit for Democracy, a Multilateral Surge and Sustain Fund for Anti-Censorship Technology was established. Congress should work with the administration to determine whether this fund could be used for rapid responses and to support groups that develop and disseminate tools to enable users to securely access blocked websites, including from mobile phones.

- Support efforts to monitor, preserve, and recirculate censored content within China, including news articles and social media posts related to COVID-19 and lockdown conditions that have been deleted by censors.
- Support research and outreach initiatives that inform Chinese audiences about the censorship and surveillance apparatus, imprisoned journalists and online activists, the regime’s human rights record overall, emerging protests, and how democratic institutions function. Existing studies and surveys have shown that netizen awareness of censorship often yields a greater desire to access uncensored information, assist a jailed activist, or take steps to protect personal communications.
- Pass legislation focused on advancing press freedom globally and with regards to China. Freedom House would particularly urge consideration of two bills with broader relevance: the Global Press Freedom Act (S.204) introduced by Senators Brian Schatz (D-HI) with support from Todd Young (R-IN) and the International Press Freedom Act (S.1495), introduced by Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA) with support from Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC). Both are bipartisan bills that would help prioritize press freedom within U.S. foreign policy, including in China. They would create an office focused on press freedom in the Department of State, and S.1495 adds special visas and funding for journalists at risk.

Apply targeted sanctions:

Impose targeted sanctions, such as travel bans and asset freezes, on individual Chinese officials involved in serious abuses against those who have exercised their right to free expression. Closely monitor conditions in Xinjiang and Tibet. Apply targeted sanctions to officials in regions where international human rights crimes are being committed against ethnic and religious minorities, and may be amplified by restrictive COVID-19 policies. Sanctions should be coordinated with partners and imposed multilaterally.

Respond vigorously to violations affecting U.S. citizens and journalists:

React with strong and immediate diplomatic action (press statements, phone calls, meetings, letters) to any violations of media freedom or free expression involving U.S. citizens or media outlets, including detentions in China, violence against foreign correspondents, restrictions on visas and media access, and efforts by Chinese diplomats to interfere with press freedom within the United States.

Notes

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