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Asia - China

Repression intensifies

Arrests, censorship and propaganda mark expanding government control of information

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Dong Rubin, a blogger in the southern Chinese province of Yunan who has written critically of local officials' actions, has been sentenced to six and a half years in prison as a wave of arrests of journalists and bloggers signal tightening of government control of the internet.

Censors have gone so far as to prevent web searches for "[Big Yellow Duck](#)". And references to toads have been systematically erased from the website of state news agency *Xinhua*. That move followed popular response to installation of a statue of the amphibian creature in Beijing park. Citizens mockingly claimed that it resembled former president Jiang Zemin.

That episode may be comical. But censorship and repression usually take harsher forms.

Imprisoned journalist **Dong Rubin**, who writes under the pseudonym **Bianmin**, has reported on local officials' misappropriation of funds, and other actions. His sentence, also included a fine of 350,000 yuan (42,000 euros). His conviction in a court in the Wuhua district grows out of a government "anti-rumour" campaign.

"This conviction, following an unjust trial, shows officials' determination to muzzle all critical voices," said Benjamin Ismail, head of the Reporters Without Borders Asia-Pacific desk. *"The action also shows authorities' sense of weakness in the face of a growing numbers of netizens and whistleblowers. Party officials, and the political and government elite in general, feel themselves under constant threat from bloggers' asserting freedom of speech and the right to criticize."*

Ismail asked, *"When will officials understand that for each netizen who is convicted, 100 others take up the battle against censorship and for freedom of information?"*

In Dong's case, he [had previously been arrested and had computers seized](#) following his criticism of construction of a petrochemical plant near the Yunan capital of Kunming in 2013. That project prompted major protest demonstrations. In the latest case, Dong's daughter was the only family member authorized to attend his trial.

New rules in effect

A number of journalists had been asking about delays in the implementation of new rules published in July by censorship authorities of the Chinese Communist Party. The rules include prohibitions on disclosing state secrets, expressing unauthorized criticism, and on working with foreign media.

The answer to journalists' questions about timing was not long in coming. **Song Zhibiao** was the first victim of the new regulations. He was fired by *China Fortune*, a monthly magazine, after publishing work on the Hong Kong website *Orient*, which is owned by the Hong Kong-based Oriental Press Group.

If any of Song's articles in particular led to his dismissal, it may have been a piece in July about Pu Zhiqiang, a human rights activist detained for more than two months. *China Fortune*, whose immediate owner is *Southern Metropolis Daily*, is believed to have been acting under an order from the party's propaganda department to end the journalist's contract.

Song was the target of a previous punitive dismissal in 2011, when he worked for *Southern Metropolis Daily*. He was forced out after writing an article on the three-year anniversary of the Sichuan earthquake, in which he pointed to official responsibility in the disaster and its aftermath.

The internet as propaganda tool

Free Tibet, an NGO, recently revealed the existence of about 100 false Twitter accounts, which are used to promote Chinese policies in Tibet and to malign those who defend Tibetan rights. Employing western names and frequently using portraits of American celebrities in user

profiles, the accounts publish and re-tweet attacks, especially those against the Dalai Lama. Some messages have been re-circulated several thousand times. After the false accounts were revealed, Twitter announced that it would move to suspend them.

"The official policy of censorship and disinformation is especially visible in issues involving Tibet and Uyghurs," Ismaïl said. "On these subjects, the government has lost all self-restraint. All means are seen as acceptable to keep Tibet and Xinjiang isolated. They have become information black holes."

A report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project last June found that 80 per-cent of the content on Uyghur websites had been destroyed in 2009-2010 in what amounts to a digital book-burning. The operation followed repression of a Uyghur protest movement.

In October, 2009, three months after violent disturbances in Xinjiang, Reporters Without Borders [investigated conditions of access to websites aimed at the Uyghur community](#). The conclusion: the vast majority of sites were inaccessible, whether they were based in Xinjiang or abroad and regardless of the language they used. Of 91 websites surveyed, more than 85 per-cent were blocked, censored, or impossible to access.

China is ranked 175th of 180 countries in the [Reporters Without Borders world press freedom index for 2014](#).

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