

New China policy needed

“Before the revolution,” observed the noted Chinese writer Lu Xuan, “we were slaves. And now, we are slaves of former slaves.”

This week, 10,000 students echoed Lu Xuan's words. They massed in Beijing's main square, loudly demanding democracy for China.

One demonstration, alas, does not make a democratic springtime. China remains one of the world's most totalitarian states — and certainly the largest. Each year, Freedom House in New York puts out a pretty fair and accurate list of countries by their level of political freedom. China ranks near the bottom. Taiwan, mainland China's errant offspring, does rather better.

Keeping China company in the “least free” section are such beacons of human achievement as Haiti, Libya, Paraguay and that old darling of Canadians, Zimbabwe.

Most Chinese, we are told, are untroubled by their country's lack of democratic institutions, such as a free press, fair courts, open elections and opposition parties. The authoritative nature of China's Confucian tradition seems incompatible with western-style liberal democracy. Maybe. But this is still no excuse for China to cling to a darkly repressive system which is out of step with the humanizing trend in the rest of the civilized world.

Protests are growing here in the West over China's outrageous and beastly punishment of a handful of men who have dared to speak out and criticize the government. Civil rights are almost non-existent in China. Those who dare oppose the regime are beaten, jailed, sent into internal exile — or worse. One million Tibetans, say western experts, have died resisting Chinese rule.

Young Chinese, particularly those who have been exposed to western culture, want more freedom. So do China's farmers, who have seen their incomes soar thanks to creation of free markets. But China is still firmly run by the Communist party. Its leaders have recently decided to slow

ERIC
MARGOLIS



down economic liberalization, for fear the party might lose control. Even feeble political liberalization has been shelved.

Can China really march backward? Aged leader Deng Xiaoping is losing his power and will soon either retire or die. A struggle for succession is already under way. So far, conservatives seem to be winning. The death last week of former party leader, the rather liberal Hu Yaobang, leaves reformers without a champion.

Every China watcher can feel the tremors of an impending political upheaval. The last of Mao's companions are dying off. Who will now come to power? A coalition of party bureaucrats, liberal reformers, a military cabal or some new strongman?

China's history runs in cycles, alternating between weakness at the centre and strength. When there's a weak ruler in Beijing, the rest of China grows rebellious. The great fear of China's present regime is that if the party relaxes its iron grip, China's notorious separatist tendencies will quickly emerge. One might even imagine southern China teaming up with Hong Kong to form a sort of China Inc. And telling the sour Marxist dogmatists in far-off Beijing to go jump in the Yangtze River.

What should the West do? First, let the Chinese sort out their own future. At the same time, keep pressing China to begin giving its citizens the human and civil rights that are taken for granted in the West.

We should stop toadying to China and allowing it to get away with behavior that would be damned elsewhere — just because they are Chinese and so very different. Canada, for example, works itself into a seething frenzy over the situation in South Africa but never says boo to far worse abuses in China.

By the way, Freedom House says South Africa's rights record is better than China's. But Canada is so infatuated with China and so lustful for its business that our politicians and media have adopted a see-no-evil policy when it comes to Chinese human rights violations.

Anyone who doubts this should think back to the 1960s. Then, Canada's liberals, leftists and the CBC were lauding Mao to the heavens. None of them bothered to note that Mao's Great Leap Forward and collectivization of agriculture cost, according to recent Chinese figures, between 27 and 30 million dead. All that Canadians saw during those days were barefoot doctors, happy peasants and girls in pigtails singing marching songs. Mao was the Great Leader, the Great Reformer, the Great Humanitarian.

Time now to end this China blindness and shine some bright lights into the world's leading totalitarian state.