

ASIA

Protest in China

Mobilised by mobile

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Organised by text messages and internet chats, China's middle classes are daring to protest, and giving the government a fright

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INFORMATION technology in China is once again making political waves. In the tropical seaport of Xiamen citizens still talk excitedly about how an anonymous text message on their mobile phones last month prompted them to join one of the biggest middle-class protests of recent years. And in Beijing politicians are scrambling to calm an uproar fuelled by an online petition against slave labour in brick kilns.

Chinese officials have had reason to worry before about the rallying power of the internet and mobile phones. Two years ago they helped activists organise protests against Japan in several Chinese cities. But the government, at least initially, sympathised with those protests. By contrast the demonstrations in Xiamen were directed at officialdom, and the slave-labour scandal embarrasses the government. It involves allegations that officials ignored kiln-owners' use of abducted boys to perform dangerous work. This has triggered a heated online debate about the political flaws that allowed such horrors to happen.

The text message in Xiamen, circulated in late May, called for a rally outside the city government's headquarters on June 1st to protest against plans to build a huge chemical factory on a site, pictured above, in the suburbs. It compared building the \$1.4 billion plant for making paraxylene, used in polyester, to dropping an "atomic bomb" on Xiamen. It warned readers that the factory could cause leukaemia and birth deformities among the city's 2.3m residents and their offspring (hence the choice of June 1st, children's day in China).

The response was remarkable. Xiamen has a thriving economy and little history of protest. Yet

many thousands of people rallied and marched, even though it was Friday, a working day, and as usual hot and humid. They came mostly from China's fast-growing middle class, a group the Communist Party usually regards as a dependable bulwark of support. In many Chinese cities there have been small-scale middle-class protests over issues related to property rights. But they are rarely directed at city governments.

Even more remarkable is that the protest occurred in the face of clear government disapproval. Civil servants were warned they might be punished for taking part. Government offices even required their employees to keep working on the weekend of June 2nd and 3rd to prevent them taking to the streets. On May 30th the government appeared to make a big concession by announcing a suspension of the project pending a further environmental review. But the protest went ahead two days later anyway. At one point some people shouted slogans calling on the city's party chief, He Lifeng, to resign, but the demonstration was peaceful. Thousands marched again on June 2nd.

The text message seemed to touch a raw nerve. Public confidence in the city leadership had been damaged by a proposal submitted to China's parliament in March by senior academics that the Taiwanese-owned paraxylene plant be moved further away from residential areas. Previously, say residents, the Xiamen government had given no indication that paraxylene might be hazardous. Criticism of the project began to flourish on local internet chat forums and blogs. Many complained that the plant would further ruin a once pleasant seaside city already threatened by smog and polluted seawater.

The protests in Xiamen must be worrying to officials in Beijing. Urban environments have been deteriorating across the country. If tolerance for this among the middle classes were to crumble, unrest could spread. Ominously, from the party's perspective, hundreds of Beijing residents rallied outside the offices of the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) on June 5th. Their complaint was about plans to build a waste incinerator in the north-west of the city, which they said could spread toxic chemicals. Two days later SEPA called for a further investigation of the incinerator project as well as of Xiamen's urban development plans.

Chinese leaders have been similarly quick to respond to the torrent of online protest—and even some stiff criticism by the state-owned press—provoked by the reports of slave labour in the provinces of Shanxi in the north, and Henan, to its south. A petition posted on June 7th by fathers of abducted boys on *Tianya*, a popular internet discussion forum, spread rapidly. Official newspapers soon picked up the story, describing the brutal conditions in which the labourers were held captive and the indifference of local police. Within eight days China's leading politicians were reported to have stepped in. Hundreds of “slaves” were declared to have been freed and many of their bosses arrested.

In Xiamen, having made their last-minute concession, officials are now trying to track down behind-the-scenes organisers of the protests (some residents believe property developers, worried about the impact of the project on prices, encouraged people to take part). Notices have been put up in residential buildings calling on protesters to surrender themselves to police. But such tactics inspire far less fear than they did in the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Some residents say they now want a referendum on the project. A professor at Xiamen University says that if the project's opponents win, a new “environmental consciousness” will spread to other Chinese cities.

For all their pro-green rhetoric, China's leaders would abhor this. They remain deeply wary of environmental groups, fearful that if given a free rein they could rapidly mobilise middle-class opinion against government policies. Nick Young of *China Development Brief*, a newsletter, says that these concerns increased in the wake of democratic revolutions early this decade in several former Soviet states. Although they eased a bit last year, Mr Young thinks the government will remain cautious. Xiamen has only one officially registered non-governmental environmental group. It has kept itself nervously aloof from the paraxylene-plant campaign. In Xiamen as elsewhere, it is China's online civil society that is leading the charge.