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Focus

DARK DAYS FOR CHINA
DEMOCRACY DREAM

The death of Liu Xiaobo deprives China's dissident movement of a crucial figurehead at a time when political activism on the mainland is being forced ever deeper underground, and pro-democracy forces in Hong Kong are under threat. The world had not heard from Nobel laureate Liu since he was jailed in 2009 for writing a petition calling for political reform, but he remained an influential heavyweight of China's democracy movement and an inspiration for opponents of the Communist-ruled system.

His death in custody from cancer last week triggered rage and frustration among the dissident community but also a sense of hopelessness as they face hardened repression under China's President Xi Jinping. "When the Chinese authorities can so easily control life and death, people are more afraid to fight," said activist Su Yutong, who fled to Germany after being repeatedly detained and questioned over her work at an NGO. "They see that even a Nobel Peace Prize winner can die in jail."

There are fears that Liu's supporters will now be targeted, particularly his wife Liu Xia, who has been under house arrest since 2010. Veteran China specialist Willy Lam said most of Liu's friends were already under 24-hour surveillance and that the dissident community in general was "highly demoralized". "They realize they are going through a long winter with no light at the end of the tunnel," said Lam, a politics professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

The fact that support from the international community is outweighed by the desire of foreign governments to keep Beijing onside has also hit hard, said Teng Biao, a human rights lawyer and visiting scholar at Princeton University. "If the West is reluctant to anger China, there will be no hope," Teng told AFP. However, some say they will brave it out. One of the country's most prominent social activists Hu Jia, 43, has vowed not to leave China despite being under police surveillance since his release from prison six years ago. "I want to stay and make an impact on the country," he told AFP.

Hong Kong remembers

Liu's death prompted an outpouring of grief in semi-autonomous Hong Kong, where pro-democracy forces must also contend with an increasingly assertive Beijing. "We have to face the same political system and oppression," said pro-democracy lawmaker Eddie Chu. "There used to be some distance, but now it's more intimately felt." A day after Liu died, Hong Kong's High Court disqualified four pro-democracy lawmakers from parliament following an unprecedented intervention from Beijing over the way they incorporated protests into their oaths of office last year. Two lawmakers who advocate complete independence for Hong Kong - a concept that infuriates China - had already been ousted from the legislature. Hong Kong still enjoys freedoms unseen on the mainland - thousands gathered for a memorial march to Liu on Saturday, while over the border even online tributes to him were removed. But a string of incidents, including the disappearance of a city bookseller and a reclusive mainland tycoon, have heightened concerns of Beijing's political overreach.

When it was handed back to China by Britain in 1997 under a semi-autonomous 'one country, two systems' deal, some hoped Hong Kong's colonial institutions, such as an independent judiciary and partially elected legislature, would lead to liberalization over the border. However, as China's wealth and global clout skyrocketed, Hong Kong's influence waned. Now it is seen by Beijing as a hotbed of subversion, particularly since mass protests calling for more democratic reform in 2014.

Xi warned any challenge to Beijing's control over Hong Kong crossed a "red line" earlier this month when he visited the city to mark 20 years since the handover. Jonathan Sullivan, director of the China Policy Institute at the University of Nottingham, described the current political environment as "increasingly circumscribed". "It remains to be seen if (the democracy movement) feels it can advance its agenda through the 'legitimate' political process. And if not will there be a resurgence of street politics?" asked Sullivan. The movement itself is struggling for direction, having splintered between veteran activists calling for change across China and younger Hong Kong-centric "localists" who say the city must just fight for itself. Analysts agree that by-elections for the seats of the ousted lawmakers will prove whether or not the pro-democracy message is alive and kicking.

Lawmaker Chu says the movement needs a clearer vision, but must also accept that change will not come quickly. "Liu Xiaobo persevered, sacrificing even his life, not because he knew he would succeed but because he saw himself as part of a long-term process," Chu told AFP. "Maybe Hong Kong is like this too. It's not about setting a goal for victory at a certain time." — AFP

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OPIUM NUMBS THE PAIN FOR PICKERS

For almost three years, Amandeep started most of his working days eating opium and ended them smoking heroin. In between he picked watermelons for up to 13 hours a day in what activists say are exploitative conditions faced by thousands of Indian laborers in Italy's Pontine Marshes, just south of Rome. Drugs helped him get by, says Amandeep, a 30-year-old who asked to use a pseudonym. "In summer it is very hot, your back hurts. A bit of opium helps you not to get tired...Too much puts you to sleep, I took just a little, only to work," Amandeep told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

About 30,000 Indians, mainly Sikhs from Punjab state, live in the Pontine Marshes, a region that Italy's fascist regime drained for agriculture in the 1930s. Most work as laborers and over the last decade many have been forced to work for virtually nothing to pay off debts to agents who promised good jobs and organized travel from India. This is known as debt bondage - the most prevalent form of modern-day slavery worldwide according to the United Nations. As many as 46 million people are estimated to be enslaved globally, said rights group Walk Free Foundation in 2016.

Atypical Addicts

The Indian workers have settled in villages and the seaside towns where Romans spend holidays, but they have secluded lives. Speaking little or no Italian, many cycle long distances every day from rundown, shared accommodation to the thousands of farms and greenhouses that produce courgettes, radishes, melons, kiwis and mozzarella. A growing number of these laborers are taking drugs to cope with long hours, poor conditions and very low pay, according to interviews with workers, doctors, police and rights groups.

Most chew dried poppy pods, which contain low levels of morphine and codeine, but when consumed regularly can cause addiction that requires methadone treatment. Some, like Amandeep, slide into consuming heavier drugs, including heroin. "They are not typical addicts," said Ezio

Matacchioni, a neurologist at the addiction treatment department of a hospital in the provincial capital of Latina. These users do not seek euphoria or pleasure, he said. "They take drugs to put up with the strain... because they are treated like slaves."

Debt Bondage

Amandeep was prescribed methadone two years ago after he was hospitalized during a withdrawal fit. He first arrived in Italy from Punjab in 2008, dreaming of a bright future promised by a labor agent to whom he paid \$13,000 for a plane ticket and travel documents. Amandeep paid half up front and took a loan from the agent for the rest, which he paid back by working virtually for free for about seven months. "(I was left with) just about enough to eat and pay the rent," he said.

Many Indian laborers who settled here in the last 10 years came in similar circumstances, said Marco Omizzolo of In Migrazione, a migrant rights group. "Traffickers promise work and accommodation as well as sorting out travel and paper work, four essential things for those who do not speak Italian," he said. Newcomers are sometimes stripped of their documents to ensure they don't leave until the debt is repaid, he added. Afterwards most remain in the area, where they rely on the support of the Sikh community but remain vulnerable to exploitation. In many farms, pickers are paid €3-5 (\$3.30-\$5.50) an hour - well below the industry minimum wage of about €8 - and work without breaks in scorching summer temperatures. Those hired with a regular contract often have fewer days than they actually work recorded on their payslips. "I can't read my contract," said one laborer. "Before coming here I thought Italy was a paradise but I still haven't found where that paradise is."

The work is overseen by gang masters, known as "caporali", often members of the Sikh community acting as go-betweens with employers, who recruit pickers but withhold part of their pay. "If the farm owner pays 4 euros, (gangmasters) tell (workers) the pay is 3.80 and pocket the difference," said Gurmukh Singh, head of a local Indian

community association. Andrea de Gasperis, a regional chief prosecutor, said investigation was difficult as few people are willing to speak out against other members of their community. "There is little we can do if they do not report (abuses)," he said. Those who do are seen as troublemakers and it's hard for them to find another work, added Omizzolo.

The code of silence began to crack in April 2016 when Singh helped organized a strike and demonstrations for better pay. Those protests encouraged many workers to come forward - but also exposed Singh to threats and intimidation. Police have since carried out dozens of inspections, and have arrested two gangmasters, a farm owner and a farm manager. Pietro Greco, head of the local branch of Italy's main farming association, said Italy's notorious red tape was also responsible for pushing some employers to cut corners. "If there was less bureaucracy many companies would hire workers with no need for middlemen or caporali," he said.

Poppy Fields

Meanwhile, the consumption of poppy pods is spreading. Omizzolo and Singh said they first heard about opioid use four years ago and reports have been increasing since. Few workers will admit chewing husks as drug use is taboo in the community. Yet laborers said the pods are a common sight and are relatively cheap, with 100 grams costing about €10. One picker said almost half of his about 50 co-workers made regular use of the drug.

At least one worker told a mobile health clinic that he wanted to quit but found it difficult as poppy use was "strongly encouraged" on his farm. Two addiction help centers treated more than 20 Indian laborers with methadone in 2016 and they expect the number to rise this year. "We are the tip of the iceberg," said Matacchioni, the neurologist. Patients seek help to cope with withdrawal that can cause chills, sweating, diarrhoea, vomiting and muscle pain. Gianfranco Mozzillo, head of a local police unit, said poppy pod trafficking is an "expanding phenomenon". —Reuters

MCCONNELL: 'THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE'

For seven years, US Senator Mitch McConnell vowed to slay Obamacare if only his Republican Party controlled both chambers of Congress and the White House. Pull it out "root and branch," he pledged. The 75-year-old Senate majority leader now has that luxury. But instead of basking in the glow of his first major legislative victory in the Donald Trump era, McConnell is what a source close to the majority leader calls "the man in the middle in an impossible spot."

Late on Monday and again on Tuesday, after a long struggle, McConnell's efforts to repeal all or portions of former President Barack Obama's landmark 2010 Affordable Care Act and replace them with less expensive healthcare came crashing down. With 52 Republican senators in the 100-member chamber, McConnell could lose only two of his colleagues on any bill that was opposed by Democrats and still win with Vice President Mike Pence casting the tie-breaking vote. Three times, he failed to muster the 50 supporters needed.

The man who epitomized "the party of no" in Democrats' eyes during Obama's presidency, especially when he slammed the door in February 2016 on Merrick Garland's Supreme Court nomination, fell victim to the "no" of fellow Republicans. "We finally get a chance to repeal and replace, and they don't take advantage of it," Trump, six months into his four-year presidential term, said on Tuesday.

Around Washington, there was dismay Republicans could not deliver on a promise they assert helped them to assume control in January of Congress and the White House. "I am kind of shocked," said Republican Representative Dave Brat, of the conservative firebrand House Freedom Caucus that has been a thorn in the side of the Republican establishment. His hand weakened, McConnell could be heading into fierce budget battles, a tax reform fight



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell talks to reporters following the weekly Senate Republican policy luncheon at the US Capitol Tuesday in Washington. —AFP

and a storm over legislation avoiding a government debt default that could shake global financial markets. The result has Democrats feeling emboldened 16 months before the next congressional elections.

Reputation Questioned

Around town, the sphinxlike McConnell is known as a master of Senate rules, able to outfox opponents, giving nothing away until he can strike at just the right moment. The senator's leadership job, a position he yearned for in the years leading up to his 2015 ascension, does not appear to be in jeopardy. But this rocky run calls into question McConnell's reputation as a master tactician and dealmaker that he earned as Republican minority leader under the Democratic Obama.

It is "a real blow to Republicans in Congress generally and to leadership," said

former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, a Republican. More of the blame sits with the rank-and-file, Lott said. "The problem in Washington today is not lack of leadership. The problem is lack of followership." Had McConnell succeeded, Lott said he would have been "considered a magician" given the inability of Republicans to coalesce around healthcare legislation for so many years.

A Republican operative with ties to McConnell saw a possible silver lining: Failure to pass healthcare could boost chances for tax reform or infrastructure investment if Republicans felt it a more urgent political imperative to rack up a win for Trump before the November 2018 congressional elections.

Fatal Flaws?

McConnell, a courtly Kentuckian who can appear at pains to speak to reporters

nipping at his heels, won accolades in years past for cutting deals with Democrats to keep the government operating and making permanent most of former President George W. Bush's tax cuts. Those deals involved giving voters government services and lower taxes. But Republican healthcare legislation involves taking something away from millions of lower-income people - their medical coverage.

"In part they (Republicans) misunderstood how difficult it will be" to repeal and replace Obamacare, former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, a Democrat, said in a phone interview. Republican rhetoric against Obamacare was so "hyperbolic" it had to take priority early in Trump's presidency, but senators lacked enthusiasm for legislation, said Daschle, who like Lott lobbies on behalf of healthcare interests.

Once boxed into healthcare, McConnell took another controversial step, one that many Republicans questioned. Instead of developing a healthcare bill in public, McConnell and his top aides, with the advice of a 13-member group of male senators, called the shots. McConnell said hearings were unnecessary, as healthcare policy had been intensively debated since Obama took office in 2009. He said he was listening to suggestions of all of his 51 fellow Republican senators.

Many senators felt disconnected and tensions boiled over. As Monday wore on, matters only got worse for McConnell. Republican Senator Ron Johnson publicly accused him of "a real breach in trust" in hard-charging back-room negotiations. He threatened to withhold support for the bill. McConnell supporters argued that no matter how he handled the private negotiations, the Republican leader was dealt a difficult hand from the outset. "The majority leader is trying to keep all the frogs in the wheelbarrow and it's a tough job but he's doing a good job," said Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski. —Reuters