FAQ#4: How Is Beijing Planning to Handle Political Protests during the Olympic Games?

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FAQ#4: How Is Beijing Planning to Handle Political Protests during the Olympic Games?

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One of the most important issues for the upcoming Beijing Olympics is whether activists will attempt to carry out public protests and demonstrations, and how the Chinese authorities will react if they do. Some Western journalists believe that there will be protest attempts, and if the Chinese reaction is to immediately send in the security forces, this will dominate the front-page coverage of the Games. One journalist acquaintance observed that if this should happen, it is likely that a photo of a policeman manhandling a protester will become the graphic emblem of the Games for years to come, carrying on the tradition of the photo of the student in front of the tank in 1989. Many non-Chinese have been wondering if the Chinese authorities were so naïve about the outside world that it did not occur to them that there would be protests during the international torch relay, and are wondering if government leaders really think they can prevent protests by foreigners by screening visa applications, stopping likely activists at the border, or sending home Westerners who seem inclined to protest. Although I have no inside information, my impression is that the answer to the first question is: Yes, they really were so naïve that they had not anticipated the protests during the torch relay – this even though Beijing’s bid for the 2008 Olympic Games (decided in 2001) had probably been the most politically-contested bid ever. The biography of He Zhenliang, China’s senior member of the IOC, recalls that some IOC members received a hundred e-mails per day protesting Beijing’s bid and reportedly received threats of physical harm from groups promoting Tibetan freedom (Liang Lijuan, He Zhenliang and China’s Olympic Dream, 2007: 490). In 2001 Moscow police arrested 21 anti-China protesters, including a Tibetan monk, in the two days leading up to the IOC vote on the 2008 host city. Ironically, when some Beijing bid committee members tried to take a group photo behind a banner in Red Square to commemorate their success, they were accosted by police and threatened with arrest.

One measure of the lack of forethought about dealing with protests is the slowness with which public statements have emerged about how protests will be handled during the Olympic Games. Well after the torch relay uproar, on June 2, the Beijing Olympics Chinese Organizing Committee (BOCOG) released the “Legal Guidelines during the Olympic Games for Foreigners to Enter the Country and for the Period of their Stay in China,” in the form of 57 questions and their answers (in Chinese – translations are my own). Relevant guidelines included the list of answers accompanying question # 8: “Which foreigners are not allowed to enter the country?” Answers #2 and # 6 read: “those considered likely to carry out terrorist, violent, or subversive activities after entering the country,” and “those considered likely to carry out other activities harmful to China’s national security and interests.” Question #48 asked, “During cultural, sporting, and other events with large crowds, which behaviors that disturb the order of the event are forbidden?” Three answers were: “articles that violate the regulations...;” “the display of insulting banners, streamers, and other objects,” and “other behaviors that disturb the order of an event with a large crowd.” The most relevant statement was hidden near the very end as the answer to Question #55: “Can one carry out assemblies, marches, protests?” The answer was, “Holding assemblies, marches, and protests must be applied for at a public security office according to the law. Those who have not received a permit cannot hold an associated activity.” To date no concrete instructions have been released about how foreigners might apply for such a permit. I talked to a journalist who was aware of at least one pro-nationalist Chinese group that had applied for and gotten such permits, and held demonstrations, but it is not clear how often groups apply for them and what usually happens when they do.

Another measure of the lack of preparedness was the fact that the "Manual for Beijing Olympic Volunteers" that was released on May 30 contained no instructions to volunteers about how to handle political protests, even though BOCOG is aware of the display of a Republic of China (Taiwan) banner that took place at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games and resulted in the arrest of a spectator, and has published the statements on the backs of the admission tickets that will provide a legal basis for ejecting spectators who engage in political protests (see my previous post). At least, Chapter 6 of the
English-language version of the “Manual” that I was able to find on the internet did not contain any such instructions, though there were instructions on crowd control should there be emergencies like terrorist acts (pp. 155-160). The English version is no longer available on BOCOG’s website because of the unhappiness in the West with the condescending language toward the disabled, while the Chinese version currently on BOCOG’s website ends with Chapter 5. There are general statements that “social volunteers” (in the communities) and those helping the spectators are responsible for helping to maintain order. However, from personal experience I can say that instructions to volunteers about how to handle protesters will probably be given orally and not in writing in a document meant for public consumption.

Protests and religious proselytizing in the public spaces surrounding the venues are an Olympic tradition (how Christian evangelists are planning to deal with the Beijing Olympics has been discussed by Monroe Price on a blog posting). While for the Beijing Olympics the IOC is particularly concerned to enforce Rule 51.3 of the Olympic charter – which states “no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas” – it claims no authority over spaces outside the venues (but press conferences in press rooms inside the venues will allow political statements, which seems a bit contradictory to some Chinese). In the spaces outside the venues, city and national laws apply.

At the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, Falungong adherents performed their meditation exercises on an almost daily basis in Syntagma Square, and so far as I know met with no interference and attracted little media attention. But then, demonstrations around Syntagma Square are so common that I have learned that it’s helpful to ask before scheduling a meeting there whether any strikes are planned on that day – my image of Athens approaches that which many Chinese now have of London and Paris. At the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, the equestrian event organizers had a great deal of concern about People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), which had recently protested equestrian events in very dramatic ways, such as handcuffing themselves to the course obstacles, or in one case grabbing the reins of a competing horse and pulling it to the ground so that it broke its neck and had to be euthanized. As a result, a protest area was assigned to them near the equestrian events, but in the end they did not use it. This back-and-forth seems to have gained little if any public attention; I only know about it because my sister and mother were volunteers at the equestrian events. Even in the US, organizing committees of large sports events typically make requests or at least recommendations that their workers do not speak to the media, and the Atlanta equestrian organizers adapted a number of strategies toward image control in the event that a horse should be injured or die (which did not happen). Probably there have been many potential protests at Olympic Games that were managed behind the scenes and so never reached the public eye.

In most US cities, protesters must apply for a permit to have a demonstration. “Free speech zones” or “protest zones” became common in the U.S. after the 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle, in which protests became disorderly and 500 people were arrested. The Democratic and Republican National Conventions utilize the practice. It is not well-known that “free speech zones” were set up at the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Games in anticipation that large numbers of protesters were going to appear. It was believed that this was the first Olympic Games to institute this practice. A description of the planned zones does not appear in the very lengthy section on security in the Official Report of those Games. Seven “free speech zones” were set up near different venues. The ACLU approved the plan and the organizing committee invited the protesters to the negotiations and brought them into the process. As a result, the protesters calmed down and either they were not used, or if they were slightly used, the media did not pay any attention.

The rules proposed for the Salt Lake City Free Speech Zones were as follows: The zones are available 24 hours a day. A fair and neutral system is designed for applying for a permit, which allows protesters to protest in a designated area near the public events during a designated time. A map of demonstration areas and a schedule of planned demonstrations are made available. Banners and cards encourage lawful, peaceful expression of different view points. Guidelines describing rights and responsibilities are provided to demonstrators and security personnel. Journalists are allowed free access to the protesters. Teams monitor the areas to ensure that public security is maintained. Legal volunteers who are law students monitor the areas to ensure that civil rights are not violated. A
procedure for rapid response to claimed violations of First Amendment rights is developed. (See the analysis by Global Policy Forum.)

It is recognized that protest zones enable the government to arrest other protesters outside the zones, or who have not followed the policy, without provoking a big negative reaction from the public. However, because legal experts have concluded that they can be conducted according to the Constitution, the dominant opinion in the U.S. has been favorable.

Knowing that there was international precedent, I started wondering whether it might be feasible to set up protest zones during the Beijing Olympics. I found that when I brought it up with Westerners they generally thought it was a good idea. There is something of a precedent in China – during the 1995 U.N. International Conference on Women, protests took place at the NGO meetings, which were sequestered outside Beijing in Huairou. A Chinese friend who now works for BOCOG still recalls with amusement the nude protests there. I started asking my Chinese colleagues, friends, and people I ran into whether they thought protest zones could be implemented in Beijing. The reactions I got surprised me and made me realize the huge gulf that exists between Western and Chinese views on the topic of protests. For these reactions, see the following FAQ#5: Why Can’t the Chinese Authorities Allow a Little Space for Protests during the Olympics?

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics