
Is Cameron selling Britain's human rights values to China?

[28 June 2011] David Cameron's assertion that political change and basic freedoms are just as important as trade for a stable and prosperous society does not ring true when it comes to China. Despite announcing trade deals worth £1.4 billion, there is no visible, tangible progress towards human rights and freedoms for Tibetans, Uighurs and Chinese people.

In February, in response to the early stages of the Arab Spring, Cameron said "we must not hesitate to condemn" violence against peaceful demonstrators. (1)

Where is the condemnation of China's tactics of using armed security forces to crackdown on peaceful protests in Tibet, East Turkestan and across China?

In May, Cameron joined US President Obama in a statement supporting human rights defenders. (2)

Where is the support for Tibetan writers who have been imprisoned for calling for an end to China's oppressive policies in Tibet? Where is the public statement denouncing the detention and disappearance of 300 monks from Kirti monastery following peaceful protests? Where is the encouragement to those seeking democracy in China?

Philippa Carrick, CEO of Tibet Society, said, "The British government is adamant that human rights are central to its foreign policy, but short of saying that freedom brings prosperity, where is the proof that these trade deals with China will bring a betterment of human and civil rights? Signing trade deals alone does not "bring light" to those living in the dark. Unless there have been guarantees of civil and human rights built into these economic agreements, it would seem Britain has sold out its human rights values in the short term interest of trade with China."

China is undergoing its most repressive period since the crackdown following the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. The intensification of arbitrary arrests since February has seen the detention and disappearance of hundreds of human rights defenders and activists who have been critical of the Chinese government. According to a recent report by independent watchdog Freedom House, Tibet is now considered to be one of the ten most repressive societies in the world. (3) The ongoing military lockdown of Kirti monastery in Ngaba, eastern Tibet and the recent arrests of dozens of peaceful protestors in Kardze, are further examples of the disregard the Chinese government has for the basic human rights of ethnic minorities.

Whilst in the UK Wen Jiabao said that dialogue is the way forward; however, China's record on dialogues gives little hope of meaningful progress on human rights issues. The UK-China Human Rights dialogue has produced no noteworthy achievements. Nine years of dialogue with the Dalai Lama's representatives has made no headway in solving the Tibet issue and is now stalled. It is little wonder that there is increasing disillusionment and the feeling that these dialogues are simply for show, enabling the Chinese government to sideline these issues in order that economic matters carry on unhindered.

Tibet Society calls on the British government to be open and transparent in its dealings with the Chinese government. Dialogues should not be held behind closed doors and must have benchmarks and viable outcomes. Trade deals must include measures that help develop civil society, benefit local communities and guarantee human rights including the freedom of expression.

Governments across the world must stand together and not be bullied by China. The Chinese government's unspoken threat to withdraw economic links unless criticism of its human rights record ceases must not only be ignored but

countered with robust inter-government efforts that demand China adheres to internationally accepted civil and human rights, and that enforce trade deals which incorporate tangible progress on the development of civil society, the rule of law and basic freedoms for all those living under Chinese rule.

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Notes:

1. From Prime Minister Cameron's speech to the National Assembly in Kuwait on Britain's relationship with the Middle East, 22 February 2011. <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2011/02/prime-minister%E2%80%99s-speech-to-the-national-assembly-kuwait-60983>
2. From joint written statement made by Prime Minister Cameron and President Obama in The Times on 24 May. <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2011/05/cameron-and-obama-reaffirm-the-essential-us-uk-relationship-as-they-effectively-threaten-further-mil.html>
3. From "Worst of the Worst 2011: The world's most repressive societies". A report by Freedom House published on 1 June 2011. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=1424>