



Villager Wei Yonghan makes a speech before assembled Wukan villagers, who are demanding justice for a series of land grabs and for the release of their elected village chief Lin Zuluang, China. **Picture by James Pomfret**

China 'democracy village' rises up again

BY JAMES POMFRET AND BENJAMIN KANG LIM

JULY 1 — SEPTEMBER 23 WUKAN/HONG KONG, CHINA

Hopes for democracy crushed in the Chinese rebel village of Wukan

BY JAMES POMFRET

JULY 1 WUKAN

Hopes for democracy in the Chinese village of Wukan, where an uprising against corruption five years ago gained global notice and led to direct village-wide elections, have all but evaporated, with protest leaders either in detention, in exile, facing arrest or quitting their posts.

Villagers have been marching in protest every day since the middle of June in a fresh flare-up of unrest, but the so-called “Wukan model”, with authorities seemingly taking a more tolerant approach towards unrest by

kicking out corrupt officials and allowing a free vote, appears to have been a one-off.

Wukan is about a four-hour drive northeast of Hong Kong, where a 79-day “umbrella revolution” in late 2014 demanding Beijing allow full democracy, brought chaos to the streets.

This time the turmoil in Wukan focused on the arrest by local authorities of elected leader Lin Zuluang, one of the last of the 2011 protest leaders to remain in office, for bribery after he urged demonstrations against new land grabs and graft.

“The corrupt are very proficient in deceiving the people,” the 72-year-old Lin wrote in a signed letter to the village dated March 2, adding that the seized land had been “raped by power, money and gangsters”.

In 2011, rampaging villagers ransacked the Wukan police station and government offices before barricading themselves against riot police for months. This time, the villagers have held thousand-strong protests for 12 straight days in sweltering summer heat watched by riot police, with no sign of stopping.

‘COULDN’T BEAR IT ANYMORE’

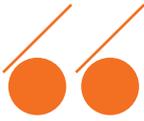
Lin had become increasingly dismayed with authorities stonewalling attempts to reclaim plots of land knotted up in dodgy deals and for brokering fresh deals behind his back, relatives said.

Lin “couldn’t bear it anymore,” said one of his relatives who declined to be identified. “The Lufeng (city) government sold this land, a new piece of land, without telling anyone.”

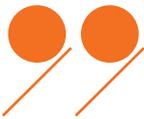
Officially stamped documents provided by people close to Lin and reviewed by Reuters give substance to his increasing frustrations.

In December, Lin wrote several letters to a developer, Hua Hui Real Estate, that he said had acquired a 110,000-sq-metre plot in Wukan without Lin’s knowledge or the approval of the Wukan village committee that oversees land use and is the main administrator of the village. Lin is the committee head.

The committee had demanded the company give evidence of the land deal and provide a detailed survey map of the “Long Hu Bay” area



When they captured me, they were very excited...



Lin Liyi
Grandson of
Lin Zuluan

it planned to develop, according to a letter dated Dec. 28.

The company replied to the committee three days later that it had acted “in accordance with law and procedures”, but declined to provide any documents, directing further inquiries to the “relevant government departments”.

After repeated correspondence over several months, there was still no clarification. The company also declined to clarify details of the land deal to Reuters.

The Lufeng government that oversees Wukan said in a written reply to Reuters that Long Hu Bay was “state-owned land which does not belong to the villagers” and that Hua Hui had now halted construction given Wukan’s objections. It added that it had been actively helping resolve Wukan’s land issues with 646 acres of land having been handed back since 2011, but 1,221 acres are still being contested between Wukan and 7 nearby villages.

MIDNIGHT RAID

A few days after his call for new protests, on June 18, Lin was arrested by SWAT officers who stormed his walled compound after midnight and bundled him away, pushing his elderly wife, Yang Zhen, to the ground as she tried to intervene, she told Reuters.

Lin’s 22-year-old grandson was detained less than 48 hours later in another late night raid and interrogated for 12 hours straight. A confession by Lin admitting taking large bribes was aired on state television on the morning of June 21, and the grandson was released hours later.

“When they captured me, they were very excited,” said the grandson, Lin Liyi. “I think they used me to pressure my grandfather” to make a confession.

Reuters was unable to contact Lin, and it wasn’t clear whether Lin has legal representation after two lawyers who were hired by his family were blocked by authorities from taking on his case.

“The intervention violates the rule of law,” one of the lawyers, Ge Yongxi, told Reuters by phone. “They obstructed a lawyer’s daily business and abused Lin’s human rights.”

Lin’s arrest was the latest move on the core group of Wukan protest leaders from 2011. Lin remains in police custody and investigations continue into allegations he took bribes of up to 600,000 yuan (\$90,200) for land deals and public works projects, according to the official China Daily newspaper.

In 2014, two former deputy village chiefs, Yang Semaoy and Hong Ruichao, were jailed for two and four years respectively for bribery, around the time of another village election. Those who knew the men, including Hong’s father, Hong Tianbin, said they were framed. Chinese authorities say they took bribes linked to public work projects.

Another leader, Zhuang Liehong, fled China and sought asylum in the United States, fearing for his safety amid what he told Reuters was “political persecution”. Two others quit, while Sun Wenliang, a former accountant, has an arrest warrant on his head, village sources said.

The Lufeng government said in its statement to Reuters that it “has not discovered any situation of unfair suppression or punishment” of Wukan’s protest leaders, or of undermining village rights and interests.

Hundreds of riot police were sent to the village when the protests started but there has been no crackdown. There are, however, signs of authorities tightening their grip.

Some reporters in Wukan said they were accused of inciting unrest and told to leave, which they did, while three other sources said authorities had been aggressively going after potential ringleaders to quash any escalation.

Few have dared lead from the front this time round.

“Everyone can see the old leaders were all caught and are afraid,” Lin’s grandson told Reuters. 

Additional reporting by **Lindsay Long and Tris Pan** in Hong Kong; Editing by **Nick Macfie**



China 'democracy village' protests three-year graft sentence for former leader

BY JAMES POMFRET

SEPTEMBER 8 HONG KONG

The former head of a Chinese village once dubbed a symbol of grass-roots democracy was sentenced on Thursday to three years' imprisonment, Hong Kong media reported, triggering anger and fresh protests in the village.

The ruling follows victories by several pro-independence candidates in Hong Kong's first major election since democracy protests in 2014, spurring a warning by China this week that any independence would damage the city's security and prosperity.

Lin Zuluan, 72, was jailed by a court in the southern city of Foshan for three years and one month, and fined 400,000 yuan (\$60,000) on several charges, including accepting bribes, Hong Kong's Ming Pao newspaper said.

Many residents of the fishing village of Wukan, about a four-hour drive northeast of Hong Kong, were outraged and fresh unrest was likely, said a villager contacted by Reuters.

"It's definitely not just the sentence," added the villager, who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the subject. "He didn't do anything wrong and he wasn't even able to hire his own lawyer. The village will fight this."

Red notices posted around the village called for shops and markets to close and urged residents to rise up in support of Lin, he said.

Huang Shunxing, an official of Foshan's People's Court, said he was not aware of Lin's case. Reuters could not reach Lin's relatives and associates by mobile telephone to seek comment.

Wukan made global headlines in 2011, with a protest against corrupt former village leaders and landgrabs that prompted provincial authorities to sack the former village chief and allow fresh polls, in which many protest leaders won seats.

In June, authorities arrested the democratically elected Lin, just days after he made a public appeal for a mass march against fresh illegal seizures of land.

In a televised confession after his arrest, Lin admitted accepting kickbacks, but many skeptical villagers dismissed the confession as having been forced, and defied authorities' warnings with mass demonstrations for several weeks this summer.

Authorities blocked at least two lawyers hired by Lin from taking on his case, his relatives have said.

In late 2014, Hong Kong's 79-day "umbrella revolution" brought chaos to the streets as protesters sought to press Beijing to allow full democracy in the former British colony. 

Editing by Clarence Fernandez

Rubber bullets and tear gas — how China's 'democracy village' was silenced

BY JAMES POMFRET

SEPTEMBER 14 WUKAN

When the first wave of riot police swept into the southern Chinese “democracy village” of Wukan shortly after 3am Tuesday, some breaking through gates with wooden battering rams, frightened residents sounded gongs to raise the alarm.

The gongs are now silent, and for the first time in nearly three months, Wukan's streets are closed to protest as anti-riot squads seal the area and sever communications.

With dozens of villagers detained and

arrested after running skirmishes with police, local authorities appear determined to keep it that way. That could finally end an extraordinary five-year-old experiment in grassroots democracy in an authoritarian state.

While villages across China conduct low-level elections under close Communist Party management, Wukan's followed an uprising in 2011 that forced local Party chiefs to back down under the glare of domestic and international media attention.

The fishing village in southeastern Guangdong was then in open rebellion over a land grab by local officials, who were forced to flee. A stand-off with police ended when residents were granted the right to hold secret ballots for its village leaders.

Over the following years, the early hope of the “Wukan Spring” evaporated as many of its new elected leaders were detained, pushed into exile or pressured to quit their posts.

The latest protests started in June after the arrest of respected village chief Lin Zuluang, 72, one of the 2011 protest leaders to remain in office.

They surged again last week when Lin was jailed for three years on graft and other charges. A televised confession convinced few in the village.

Roused by the hammering gongs in the pre-dawn darkness on Tuesday, hundreds of residents spilled on to the streets and howled out a series of chants.

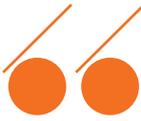
“Long live the Chinese Communist Party ... Return Secretary Lin to us ... Return our land to us.”

A villager surnamed Lin, who described the raid as a complete surprise, said: “We didn't do anything violent. It was all peaceful when they attacked us.”

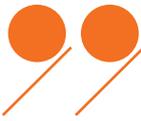
RUBBER BULLETS

Veterans of the 2011 campaign said the police action this time, involving an estimated 300 to 400 officers, was more forceful than anything they experienced during the 2011 stand-off.

As dawn approached, the villagers began hurling bricks at the officers, who gathered in



It felt like
we were
pieces
of tofu,
beaten and
smashed
by them.



Villager of Wukan

tight formation, clad in helmets, green khaki fatigues, and full-body shields.

Firing rounds of tear gas and rubber bullets, the police blocked streets and prevented any advance by villagers. By Tuesday night, it was quiet, if tense.

Some residents sported large red welts they said were caused by rubber bullets.

“It felt like we were pieces of tofu, beaten and smashed by them,” said a villager surnamed Chen on Wednesday, who peered nervously through a crack in the drawn curtains of her bedroom as she spoke.

She said she feared the security forces would come after her for having been in touch with outsiders and sharing photos, video and information on the crackdown.

Nearby a large group of villagers gathered beside an open-air village stage decorated with dragons.

“They were like gangsters, not police ... This government is too corrupt,” one said. “I’m too disappointed with China. (China’s president) Xi Jinping hasn’t helped at all.”

Wukan was a problem Xi, who took office in 2012, inherited, with the first rallies and petition campaigns dating back to 2009 and a movement called the Wukan Hot-Blooded Patriotic Youth League.

Patrick Poon, Hong Kong-based China researcher for Amnesty International, said it was possible that Xi’s government wanted rid of the Wukan headache once and for all.

“We have seen they have used a strong hand in dealing with other dissidents ... Under Xi’s regime the crackdown on such democratic protests has stepped up,” he said.

Though the scale of the police response was a surprise to some Wukan residents, the likelihood of an official response had been building in the week leading up to Lin’s sentencing.

Days beforehand, letters from the Lufeng police, which oversees the village, were sent to residents warning that if the protests did not stop by Sept. 10, action would be taken.

On Sept. 11, the Guangdong government’s Southern Daily newspaper carried a front-page story promising better communication with

Wukan villagers and noted some eight square kilometres of land had been given back.

But it insisted that seeking the release of Lin was an “unreasonable act”, and that “criminals should be punished according to law”.

Since the crackdown, Chinese state media coverage of Wukan has been limited to brief statements about the unrest from the local government on social media.

Calls to the Guangdong provincial government for comment went unanswered.

Wukan’s residents remain adamant.

“The whole village hasn’t done anything illegal; we just want old Lin to come out and to get our land back,” said a villager surnamed Zhang. “But they don’t care if we’re guilty or not. They just beat us.” 

Additional reporting by **Venus Wu and the Hong Kong bureau**; Writing by **Greg Torode**; Editing by **Will Waterman**

Chinese villagers describe police beatings in 'wild crackdown' on protest

BY JAMES POMFRET

SEPTEMBER 14 WUKAN

Residents of a Chinese village once seen as a cradle of grassroots democracy were in shock on Wednesday after a "wild crackdown" by police in clashes with protesters which they said led to about 70 people being detained.

Hong Kong rights activists fear Tuesday's violence marks a last-ditch push to silence Wukan, a southern fishing village in Guangdong province, which received international attention when a 2011 uprising over land grabs forced authorities to back down and grant local direct elections.

"Most people have been scared badly," said a villager named Chen.

"This time it was a wild crackdown. They went after everyone, chasing them up into their houses, beating people."

As she spoke, peeking nervously from behind curtains in her home, scores of riot and security police tightened a cordon around Wukan.

Violence flared in the 10,000-strong hamlet early on Tuesday as police launched pre-dawn raids on homes seeking leaders of protests that had rumbled since June after the arrest of a popular leader.

Village chief Lin Zuluan, one of the last of the 2011 protest leaders to remain in office, was jailed this month for three years on graft and other charges.

Villagers threw bricks at police as they advanced with shields, batons and helmets, firing rubber bullets and using teargas. Some residents suffered wounds to their legs, mobile phone footage seen by Reuters showed.

Many said the violence was worse than that in 2011, when the village was locked down for several months.

Repeated calls to the Guangdong provincial government for comment went unanswered.

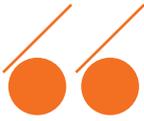
Tension rose again as dusk fell on Wednesday, with uniformed and plain-clothed police starting more house-to-house searches, seeking both protest organisers and journalists, villagers reported.

The sound of police speaking through loud hailers echoed through the streets. It was not clear what they were saying.

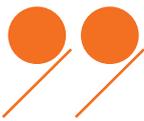
WRISTS BOUND

While low-level democratic experiments have been tried in villages across China, Wukan's took place in the glare of both domestic and international publicity — and marked a rare moment when Communist Party officials backed down in the face of protest.

Beijing leaders are fearful of growing calls for democracy and losing their grip on power. Weeks of "umbrella revolution" pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, to the southwest of



The whole village hasn't done anything illegal, we just want old Lin (Zuluan) to come out and to get our land back.



Villager of Wukan

Wukan, in 2014 presented Beijing with one of its biggest political challenges in decades.

According to the mobile phone footage seen by Reuters, elderly villagers and youngsters in school uniforms were among those detained in Wukan on Tuesday. Three rows of villagers could be seen in a police station, their wrists bound with white nylon cords.

Blue teargas cartridges could still be seen strewn in the narrow alleyways, with black burn marks on concrete.

“The whole village hasn’t done anything illegal, we just want old Lin (Zuluan) to come out and to get our land back,” said a villager surnamed Zhang. “But they don’t care if we’re guilty or not guilty. They just beat us.”

Lufeng county police, who oversee Wukan, said in an earlier microblog post that 13 people had been arrested for organising illegal assemblies and using threats to force villagers to join protests. The blog has not been updated since Tuesday.

Hong Kong media have reported that the police have also televised photographs of five village protest leaders, offering 100,000 yuan (\$15,000) rewards for information on their whereabouts.

A small group of Hong Kong democracy activists and politicians marched to Beijing’s official liaison office in the city on Wednesday to show solidarity.

Legislator Kwok Ka-ki warned that Hong Kong people must not remain silent, saying Hong Kong could one day face a similar crackdown.

Chinese state media coverage of Wukan has been limited to brief statements from the local government, posted on social media, about the unrest. The comment function has been disabled under many of those reports. 

Writing by **Greg Torode**; Additional reporting by **Hong Kong bureau** and **Ben Blanchard** in Beijing; Editing by **Nick Macfie** and **Robert Birsell**



Provincial boss ordered crackdown on China's 'democracy village' with eye on national power

BY JAMES POMFRET AND BENJAMIN KANG LIM

SEPTEMBER 23 WUKAN

This month's crackdown on protests in China's Wukan village was ordered by the provincial leader under pressure to prove his mettle ahead of a pivotal Communist Party congress next year where he could reach the top table of power in China, sources close to the leadership say.

Guangdong party boss Hu Chunhua, at 53 one of the two youngest members of the party's 25-member Politburo, is a candidate for the seven-person Politburo Standing Committee, the apex of Chinese political power, according

to analysts and several sources with ties to the central leadership.

The pacification of Wukan, where villagers had marched for over 80 days since mid-June in protest at the jailing of democratically elected village chief Lin Zuluan, was crucial to Hu's chances, the sources said.

"It's a test of Hu Chunhua's ability," one of the sources with central leadership ties told Reuters.

The source added that the leadership's view of Hu's handling of the Wukan situation would be an important factor in determining whether he makes it onto the Standing Committee.

Hu couldn't be reached for comment, and there was no reply to requests for comment from China's State Council, or cabinet, nor from Guangdong's Public Security Bureau and the Lufeng government, which has direct jurisdiction over Wukan.

The fishing village came to prominence in 2011, when it rose up against land grabs by local officials and wrested concessions including a free vote to elect Lin and other village leaders from Hu's predecessor as Guangdong boss, Wang Yang, now a vice premier in Beijing.

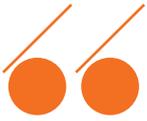
The protestors this time were beaten back by rubber bullets and tear gas, and by hundreds of police in riot gear, who made scores of arrests and barred Hong Kong and foreign journalists from the area.

A source close to senior officials in Guangdong said Hu opted to take a harder line on Wukan to minimise risks to his prospects and any perception of weakness from a repeat of the climb-down in 2011.

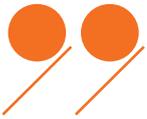
He took that option after leaders in Beijing made clear they wanted it suppressed, said a second source with central leadership ties.

"The central leadership held a meeting (recently) and decided that Wukan should be dealt with appropriately," the source said, adding that Hu was facing a delicate situation.

The possibility that the Wukan protests could spread to other villages or mushroom into a nationwide pro-democracy movement is particularly unwelcome in Beijing ahead of the party congress next autumn, when precedent



We have no weapons; how could we fight back? People aren't going to stand up anymore. We're finished.



Villager of Wukan

suggests a sweeping reshuffle could replace five of the seven PSC leaders.

“There can be no noise pollution,” a senior Chinese official in Beijing told Reuters. “Threats to stability must be nipped in the bud.”

The crackdown received extensive coverage in Hong Kong, just 200 kilometres (125 miles) to the southwest, which held massive street protests in late 2014 demanding full democracy and this month angered Beijing by electing several independence advocates to its legislature.

MEDIA BLACKOUT

For now at least, Wukan appears defeated.

“We have no weapons; how could we fight back? People aren't going to stand up anymore. We're finished,” said a villager who brought drinks and snacks to three Reuters journalists as they hid out while police were searching for journalists in the village.

After journalists' departure following police pressure, there has been scant information coming out of Wukan; communications have been largely severed, social media posts censored, and mobile phone calls blocked or scrambled.

Four villagers told Reuters that authorities had offered a 20,000 yuan (\$3,000) reward for tip-offs leading to the capture of journalists.

“Anyone who helps a journalist will be arrested,” one local with a shoulder wound from a rubber bullet told Reuters last week in a village house. “I'm afraid of them catching me; they may beat me to death. There are informers everywhere.”

“The presence of reporters in Wukan is not conducive to our work,” the senior Chinese official in Beijing told Reuters. 

Editing by **Will Waterman**

