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Hostage Crisis Ends With All Victims Freed

REUTERS

PROSPERIDAD, Philippines - Tribal gunmen freed dozens of hostages in the southern Philippines Sunday after authorities transferred murder cases against them to a tribal court and disarmed both them and a rival group.

The gunmen had abducted 71 people in Agusan del Sur province on Thursday as they fled police pursuing them after a gunbattle with their rivals but had freed 29 over the next two days.

Witnesses saw the remaining 42 hostages brought down from the mountain hideout of the gunmen and driven to Prosperidad town in a convoy in heavy rain, with the leading car carrying a banner saying "Peace reigns in Agusan."

The gunmen were also in the convoy after surrendering their weapons.

"At last the crisis is over," provincial vice-governor Santiago Cane said. "The guns, bullets and grenades of these men are with me now."

The hostage crisis in the lawless Mindanao region came just three weeks after 57 people were massacred in nearby Maguindanao province in an attack bound to raise tensions ahead of a presidential election next year.

The Mindanao region is full of bandits, communist guerrillas and Islamic rebels. Powerful families maintain large private armies and feuding among them is common.

Financial markets have more or less shrugged off the massacre and the hostage crisis since they took place in Mindanao, which is far away from Manila and Luzon island, the industrial centre of the country. But analysts have said any prospects of violence spreading in the runup to May's election could cast a pall over investor sentiment.

In Agusan, negotiators had said the hostage-takers had demanded that murder cases against them be dropped. They had also demanded police disarm rivals from the same tribe, with whom they are feuding.

Clan wars, known locally as "rido," are common in the south.



Reuters

Relatives and friends of the remaining 42 hostages held by armed tribesmen pray for their safety and release at a chapel in Prosperidad town, Agusan del Sur province, in the southern Philippines on Saturday. The gunmen freed the hostages the next day. (Story left)

Martial Law Is Rescinded in Southern Philippine Province

BY CARLOS CONDE
THE NEW YORK TIMES

MANILA - Stung by severe criticism and faced with a possible rebuke by the Supreme Court, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo lifted martial law on Saturday in a strife-torn southern Philippine province.

Maguindanao Province, where 57 people were killed last month in the country's worst election-related violence, will remain under a state of emergency as the police and the military continue to investigate a powerful political family whose members are accused of carrying out the massacre and then fomenting rebellion to prevent family members from being arrested.

Arroyo had imposed martial law there after the massacre, allowing the government to make arrests without warrants. It was the first time martial law had been imposed in the Philippines since the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, which ended in 1986.

Eduardo Ermita, Arroyo's executive secretary, said the president decided to lift the Dec 4 decree after murder and rebellion charges had been filed against the suspects in the massacre, including members of the Ampatuan clan, close allies of Arroyo's who had ruled the province for much of this decade.

"The local government is back and functioning," he said. "We can say rebellion has been addressed

and the purpose for which it was called has been achieved."

During the eight days of martial law, the authorities arrested dozens of suspects, among them members of a militia controlled by the Ampatuans, and raided a number of houses and properties that yielded more than 1,500 weapons that the government said were being used in a rebellion.

Prosecutors previously said they had identified at least 161 people who were to be charged with the massacre.

Lieutenant Genera; Raymundo Ferrer, the military administrator of Maguindanao during the martial law period, said Saturday that the end of martial law would not affect the operations to go after the suspects in the massacre and the rebellion.

"We shall continue with the military and police operations against the remaining suspects and strengthen even more our checkpoints to ensure that people are insulated against hostile acts," he said.

The massacre on Nov 23 appeared to have been an effort by members of the Ampatuan family to prevent a rival from filing papers to run for governor, the authorities said. The dead included family members and supporters of the rival politician, Esmael Mangudadatu, as well as 30 journalists who were covering the event.

In Philippines, Gunmen Storm Jail, Free 31

REUTERS

MANILA - Suspected Muslim rebels punched a hole in the wall of a provincial jail on a remote southern island in the Philippines and freed 31 prisoners before dawn on Sunday, security officials said.

They killed one jail guard and wounded another during a 10-minute raid at the main prison on southern Basilan island, Superintendent Abubakar Tulawie, the provincial police chief, told reporters.

"We got two of them. Their bodies were abandoned just outside the jail's perimeter," Tulawie said, adding that the raiders rescued two Moro Islamic Liberation Front leaders detained there for their role in the beheading of soldiers on Basilan in 2007.

"These two rebel leaders are high-risk prisoners. We have organized a team together with the military units on the island to pursue them. We've started an internal inquiry to determine responsibility for the lax security in the jail."

The MILF, which is seeking broad autonomy in southern Mindano island, is in peace talks with the government. Another Muslim rebel group Abu Sayyaf, once linked to al-Qaida, is also fighting in the south, but it was not clear if any of their jailed members escaped.

Tulawie said that the raiders used sledge hammers to make an opening on the prison's 5.5-meter high rear perimeter wall and then used bolt cutters to destroy the padlock of a jail cell where the two rebel commanders were held before shooting their way out. Only four of 16 guards were on duty at that time.

The two rebel leaders who escaped were on trial for the murder of 14 soldiers in al-Barka town in July 2007. Twenty-nine other prisoners got out. The 1-hectare facility has 65 inmates. Police authorities said it was the second mass jailbreak on the island after 53 inmates escaped during a riot in 2004.

Jailbreaks are common in the Philippines, where many of the more than 1,000 penitentiaries are overcrowded and guards are underpaid.

REGIONAL

Briefing

Pope Meets VN Leader, Edging Toward Full Ties

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict held talks with Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet on Friday, bringing the Vatican and the communist state closer to establishing diplomatic relations. A Vatican statement said the visit was "a significant stage in the process of bilateral relations" and expressed the hope that outstanding questions could be resolved soon. Vietnam has Asia's second-largest Catholic population and has been holding talks with the Vatican for years on forging diplomatic ties. Triet was the highest-ranking Vietnamese official to meet a pope. Vietnamese bishops have invited Benedict to visit the country next year, but he would also need an invitation from the government. The Vatican's relations with Hanoi have suffered because the Church is associated with Vietnam's colonial past under French rule, but officials say many problems have been resolved, and agreement has been reached on the appointment of bishops. (Reuters)

Indonesian Ex-Pilot Wins Appeal Over Air Crash

JAKARTA - A former pilot for flag carrier Garuda Indonesia who crash-landed his plane in 2007 killing 21 people, has won his appeal against a two-year prison sentence, his lawyer said on Saturday. Prosecutors had said that Marwoto Komar ignored warnings from his co-pilot and onboard alert signals about the plane's speed and trajectory when landing the aircraft with 140 people on board. The Boeing 737 bounced and skidded off the runway at Yogyakarta airport in Java, before bursting into flames in a rice field. The Yogyakarta High Court "overturned charges of negligence and said he [Komar] did his best to save the plane and passengers," said Muhammad Assegaf, a lawyer for Komar. Assegaf said that Komar, who was sentenced to two years in prison in April 2009, was "very happy and grateful" for the decision and wished to fly again. Five Australians—two policemen, a diplomat, a journalist and an aid official—died in the crash. They were part of a group that had accompanied former Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer, who was not on board the plane, on his visit to Indonesia. The case triggered airline industry protests over the use of a criminal court to punish the pilot. (Reuters)

Jakarta Politician Backs Possible Suspension of VP

BY TOM WRIGHT
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

JAKARTA - Aburizal Bakrie, a leading Indonesian politician, said the nation's vice president and finance minister should be suspended from duty if needed to give them time to participate in a special inquiry into a \$700 million bank bailout last year.

"If [the suspension] is needed, then why not," Bakrie, chairman of the Golkar Party, which is leading the investigation, told state news agency Antara.

He questioned whether the officials would have sufficient time to answer the questions of the special parliamentary committee while performing their jobs, Antara said. A spokesman for Bakrie confirmed the comments. The investigation began Dec 1 and is expected to last two months.

Vice President Boediono and Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati have been the subjects in recent weeks of a parliamentary investigation into the bailout of Bank Century in November 2008. Sri Mulyani oversaw the bailout as finance minister; Boediono was

head of the central bank at the time.

Backers of the probe, led by the Golkar Party, say the bailout was done without legal authority. Sri Mulyani and Boediono say the bailout was legal and necessary to stop a run on other banks at the time of global financial weakness. Both deny any wrongdoing but say they are willing to cooperate with the investigation.

Scores of students, including this one, armed with rocks and wooden planks clashed with anti-riot police and vandalized commercial buildings at a rally in Makassar, the South Sulawesi provincial capital, 1,600 km north-east of Jakarta.

A spokesman for Boediono, who was elected as President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's running mate earlier this year, said Boediono had no intention of stepping down as there was no evidence of wrongdoing in the bailout.

"We are concerned that any monetary and economic policy decision-making is now being used by the opposition to make baseless accusations of corrupt actions," said

the spokesman, Yopie Hidayat. Sri Mulyani has also said she has no intention of stepping aside.

Other senior government officials involved in the bailout say the probe was legal and needed to restore confidence among depositors.

This was the first time Bakrie, one of the nation's most powerful politicians and wealthiest businessmen, has suggested the pair may need to step down during the probe, although other Golkar Party members have been calling for their suspension.

Bakrie's comments came after Sri Mulyani said in an interview with The Wall Street Journal that Bakrie and the Golkar Party are using the probe to try to unseat her because they don't agree with reforms she has pushed through aimed at rooting out corruption.

A Golkar Party leader behind the probe said Sri Mulyani wasn't being targeted.

Sri Mulyani also said relations between herself and Bakrie have deteriorated in recent years. Bakrie denied there are any tensions between them.

Malaysia Premier To Offer Emissions Reductions

REUTERS

KUALA LUMPUR - Malaysia's government will offer "credible" cuts in its emissions of carbon dioxide at the Copenhagen climate change summit in a bid to halt global warming, Prime Minister Najib Razak said on Sunday.

Najib will be among more than 110 world leaders who will meet in Copenhagen next week to attend a summit to try to clinch a deal on deeper emissions cuts by rich nations, steps by developing nations to cut their carbon pollution and finance to help the poor adapt to climate change.

"We are willing to offer our commitment, I am not just going to call on the developed world I am going to commit Malaysia and I am going to commit Malaysia to very credible cuts which means we have to spend, which we will do," Najib said in the interview.

Najib said the cuts were still being worked on.

The UN has said a full, legal treaty to expand or replace the existing Kyoto Protocol is out of reach at the talks, after two years of troubled negotiations, and is likely to be agreed some time in 2010.

UN data shows Malaysia's carbon emissions in 2006 stood at 187 million tons or 7.2 tons for each Malaysian.

Although that figure is far less than neighboring Indonesia, which is the world's third largest emitter with 2.3 billion tons or 10 tons per capita, according to Indonesian government data, Najib said all nations must contribute.

"It has to be predicated on the fundamental principles of the Kyoto protocol and the UN Framework on Climate Convention," he said.

"Amongst which the most important being the common but differentiated responsibilities that the developed world must deliver against larger cuts in terms of carbon emissions and that the developing world should be assisted particularly in terms of financial

assistance, capacity building and technology."

Najib said that despite the current economic turmoil, which has seen the US and Europe plunge into huge budget deficits, the fight against climate change had to take priority.

The UN wants to raise \$10 billion in quick-start funds to help the poor cope with global warming and move away from fossil fuels. But few nations have offered quick-start cash. In the longer term, the UN estimates the fight against global warming is likely to cost \$300 billion a year from 2020, largely to help developing nations adapt to impacts such as droughts, floods and heatwaves.

— Regional Brief —

Unilever Cuts Ties to Indonesian Palm Oil Supplier

LONDON - Consumer goods company Unilever, the world's largest user of palm oil, has suspended purchases of edible oil from Indonesian group Sinar Mas on concerns over rainforest destruction. Unilever, which uses palm oil in such products as Dove soap, Ben & Jerry's ice cream, and margarines like Stork, canceled its annual \$32.6 million contract with Sinar Mas after a critical report by environmental group Greenpeace. Anglo-Dutch Unilever said on Friday it was suspending purchases from PT SMART, which is part of Sinar Mas, until the Indonesian group could give proof that none of its plantations was contributing to the destruction of rain forests. Greenpeace alleges that Sinar Mas, Indonesia's biggest palm oil producer and the second biggest in the world, has been responsible for widespread deforestation and peatland clearance, practices that release vast amounts of carbon dioxide. (Reuters)

Copenhagen Protesters Mostly Quiet After Day of Action

By TOM ZELLER, JR.
THE NEW YORK TIMES

COPENHAGEN, Denmark - Scattered protests continued on Sunday, but climate activists in Copenhagen were largely quiet after a day of mass demonstrations resulted in nearly 1,000 arrests.

Per Larsen, coordinator for the Danish police, said that officers arrested about 230 people by mid-day Sunday, most in an illegal protest in the northern part of the city. The Bella Center, where representatives of nearly 200 countries have been meeting to craft a global strategy to combat climate change, was closed for the day.

On Saturday, tens of thousands of demonstrators from around the globe took to the streets here for the largest protest planned during the two weeks of talks on a global strategy to combat climate change.

The police and organizers estimated that 60,000 to 100,000 participants joined a long march on

Saturday from Christiansborg Slotsplads, or Castle Square, southward to the Bella Center.

The main demonstration—which brought together a broad coalition of hundreds of environmental groups, human rights campaigners, climate activists, anticapitalists and freelance protesters from dozens of countries—was mostly peaceful. But in other parts of the city, spontaneous demonstrations by bands of radical protesters resulted in at least 950 arrests, the police said.

A spokeswoman for the police department said there were scattered reports of localized riots in which protesters threw rocks and smashed windows. The police said that four parked cars had been set ablaze in the Christiania neighborhood and that at least one police officer had been struck in the jaw by a rock.

"We saved the demonstration from being disturbed totally,"

Larsen said. "There were some hard-core protesters that we have neutralized."

The violence was a counterpoint to the otherwise peaceful march, in which a rolling sea of flags and banners undulated across the city. Most bore slogans related to global warming or urging world leaders to resolve the vast differences that still make an international accord seem elusive as talks here move into the second and final week.

"Bla, Bla, Bla," read one popular sign. "Act Now!"

On a stage at the eastern edge of the square, a succession of speakers stoked a cheering crowd, their voices booming over loudspeakers. "My words cannot replace action," said Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the leader of Denmark's Social Democrats, the dominant opposition party here. "We are here to show leaders that what is made by man, can be changed by man."

In Saturday's throng was 26-year-

old Jemimah Maitei, dressed in traditional clothing from her native Kenya. She said she had traveled to Copenhagen to be part of a delegation representing indigenous peoples at the talks, which are overseen by the UN.

"I came here to give my views on how climate change is impacting my community," Maitei said. She cited relentless droughts that had made growing crops, among other things, increasingly difficult for the Masai, her ethnic group.

The vast demonstration, which unfolded in crisp temperatures under cloudless skies, was not the exclusive province of climate campaigners. Groups of diverse social and political pedigree took advantage of the huge gathering to advance their agendas, too. One sign urged the overthrow of the Iranian government. Another, with the words "Earth in Need: Delete Meat," was one of many promoting vegetarian diets.

Zimbabwe's Mugabe Endorsed To Lead Party for 5 More Years

REUTERS

HARARE, Zimbabwe - Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe was endorsed Sunday to lead his ZANU-PF party for another five years and vowed to resist demands by his opponents to reform the country's security forces.

At 85, Mugabe is in the twilight of a political career spanning more than half a century and has led ZANU-PF since the mid 1970s when the party fought a guerrilla war against white minority rule.

But the veteran leader was forced to share power with Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change party after losing its parliamentary majority for the first time in March last year.

The coalition has been rocked

by differences over how to share power and the MDC is pressing for reform of the security forces it accuses of being used by ZANU-PF to stifle dissent.

"May I state this clearly and categorically, as ZANU-PF the defense of our sovereignty rests with us and with no other. Any maneuvers to tamper with the forces will never be entertained by us," Mugabe said while closing a ZANU-PF congress.

Many senior officers in the security forces fought in Zimbabwe's war of independence and remain loyal to Mugabe. They have vowed never to recognize Tsvangirai as leader.

ZANU-PF and the MDC are involved in a round of talks to clear outstanding issues of a political deal signed last year.

The MDC wants the central bank governor and attorney general replaced, and party treasurer Roy Bennett and some senior officials sworn-in as deputy agriculture minister and provincial governors, respectively.

ZANU-PF passed a resolution Saturday rejecting the demands and said, instead, the MDC should call for the removal of Western sanctions and persuade radio stations broadcasting from abroad to stop.

While Mugabe has managed to remain at the helm of ZANU-PF, a raging battle is under way over who will eventually succeed him, threatening the future of a party that had enjoyed uninterrupted rule from independence in 1980 until last year.

ZANU-PF retained Joyce Mujuru, 54, as Mugabe's deputy while party chairman John Nkomo, 75, filled in the vacant second vice president position. He will be sworn in as Zimbabwe's deputy president today.

Mugabe Friday condemned internal fighting over leadership posts in the party, saying this was "eating up" ZANU-PF, but on Saturday the veteran leader said the party had emerged from the congress much stronger.

"We go back much stronger, a better focused party raring to go, to take on the enemy who has sought our ruin through sanctions," Mugabe said.

He accused Western countries of plotting to reverse seizures of white commercial farms to resettle blacks but said they would not succeed.

Top al-Qaida Planner Apparently Killed in Pakistan by US Drone

By JOBY WARRICK
AND KAREN DEYOUNG
THE WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON - An apparent US missile strike along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan is believed to have killed a top al-Qaida operations planner last week, US counterterrorism officials said Friday. If confirmed, this would be the second deadly attack against a senior terrorist leader this fall.

Saleh al-Somali was one of two Arab men thought to have been killed when a pair of missiles tore into their car Tuesday near the

town of Miran Shah in North Waziristan province, according to US sources and Pakistani officials in the region. Local authorities said the missiles were fired by an unmanned aircraft of the type operated by the Central Intelligence Agency inside Pakistan's lawless tribal belt.

"They were driving in a white car, heading toward the Afghan border, when the car was hit," said an official with Pakistan's civilian intelligence agency, speaking by phone from Miran Shah. The official said suspected local militants

rushed to the spot and quickly confiscated what remained of the "totally demolished bodies."

Local authorities were unable to verify the victims' identities, but two US counterterrorism officials cited unspecified evidence that Somali was among the dead. Somali was described as a senior al-Qaida military planner who ran the terrorist group's operations outside the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

"He was engaged in plotting throughout the world," said one senior official, who spoke on the

condition of anonymity, citing the sensitive nature of US airstrikes inside Pakistani territory.

"Given his central role, this probably included plotting attacks against the United States and Europe. He took strategic guidance from al-Qaida's top leadership and translated it into operational blueprints for prospective terrorist attacks."

The second US official said Somali had risen quickly through al-Qaida's ranks and was well-connected with other extremist groups in the region.

OPINION

The Messy Reality of a War-Time Leader Getting a Peace Prize

BY MARTIN KETTLE
THE GUARDIAN

US President Barack Obama should not have got the Nobel peace prize. The award was too premature, too wishful, too lacking in awareness, too much of a hostage to fortune. It told you at least as much about the committee as about the man who received it in Oslo, Norway, on Thursday.

But at least Obama gave the committee the reply they deserved. He was at the start and not the end of his labors, he pointed out in Oslo. Compared with some of the earlier recipients, "my accomplishments are slight," he said. Others "are far more deserving of this honour." Given that, by Obama's own admission, he is also the commander-in-chief of a nation in the midst of two wars, this was surely right.

Obama's speech, though, contained a deeper reprimand—and not just to the committee. Running throughout was his insistence that politics will always be more complicated, nuanced and messy than high-minded liberals often seem to understand. Rarely can the speech of a man receiving a peace prize have contained a more subtle and serious defense of the necessity of war than Obama offered. It was the speech of a grownup and practical political leader wrestling in public with what he admitted were immensely difficult questions.

When they announced their award, the Nobel committee did not to know that the president would come to Oslo in the same month he

announced that he was sending a further 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan to take part in a conflict that has dragged on for eight years and whose casualties during 2009 have far exceeded those in any previous year. Indeed, never has the tension between what liberals would like to think about Obama and the actions taken by Obama himself been stretched as tight as it is now.

For some, the tension with Obama has reached breaking point. "I did not think he would lose me so soon," recently lamented the historian Garry Wills, a fellow Chicagoan who 18 months ago wrote a soaring comparison of Obama's Philadelphia campaign speech on race with the campaign speeches of Abraham Lincoln. Though others gave up earlier, "I kept hoping." But then came the Afghanistan announcement. "Obama will not get another penny from me, or another word of praise, after this betrayal," Wills announced.

Betrayal? Not in my book. A mistake? Perhaps. The dilemma in Afghanistan is profound. Obama's chosen course may prove disastrous, masterly or, more likely, somewhere in between. But that does not make it a betrayal.

Betrayal has long provided a liberal comfort zone from which to survey the difficult issues in modern politics. But it's becoming a default setting, enhanced by the blogosphere. And not just about Obama. Only a couple of days after Wills' diatribe, my eye was caught by an anguished attack by the Times religious affairs commentator Ruth Gledhill against Rowan Williams for, in her view, sell-

ing the pass on gay rights and women in the Anglican church.

The late Henry Drucker pointed out long ago that the British left loves to wallow in the warm bath of betrayal. Since 1997, a leitmotiv among British liberals has been the sense of disappointment, disillusion and betrayal about the Tony Blair and Gordon Brown governments. Whether it's Iraq or social justice, climate change or civil liberties, the default liberal stance is that the Labor Party has let us down, failed to achieve much and has gradually proved itself as incompetent, contemptible and corrupt. Criminal too, in Blair's case.

This month two new scaffolds are being erected on which politics will again prove itself unworthy of the hanging jury of liberal opinion. The Copenhagen climate change conference is guaranteed to be branded a betrayal of the planet, while the Chilcott inquiry into the Iraq war is already condemned as a whitewash.

My argument with other liberals does not depend on the view that Obama is right to increase troop numbers in Afghanistan, that Rowan Williams is sensible to try to keep the church together, that the Blair government was actually rather a good one, that limited agreements at Copenhagen are better than none at all, or that the Iraq inquiry is doing a pretty useful job in spite of some of the Vicars of Bray who have turned up to give evidence at it—although as it happens I believe all these things.

My argument is that the world's

big problems are inherently complex and difficult, that solutions are inescapably imperfect, and that liberals who wish to be taken seriously must not stand aside from the process of forging them. Politics is the least worst way of attempting to take decisions about conflicting human needs.

Politicians are neither bad nor stupid. They are wrestling with difficulties. That does not mean that all compromises are as good as all others, or that every imperfect solution is the best that can be achieved. It is as important to avoid Panglossian pragmatism as to learn to discard habits of political thinking—about the paramountcy of economic efficiency, for example—that may have worked once but which no longer apply in changed circumstances. I do not advocate luxuriating in difficulty, but liberals must learn that in politics, dirty hands are better than clean ones.

I accept a world in which Tiger Woods is flawed. I feel the same, along with some unease, about Obama's fragile foreign policy, Williams' handling of the conservatives, Blair's efforts to move Labor beyond its core vote—and indeed David Cameron's uneven progressivism. The right has always thought politics can never achieve anything. The left is now slipping into an equivalent middle-class heresy. Obama was right, when he said in Oslo: "We can understand that there will be war and still strive for peace." He hasn't lost me yet. But the only Messiah is the one by Handel.

China Must Be Held to Account for Its Political Repression

EDITORIAL
THE GUARDIAN

The rising power of China has been a constant theme in economic and political commentary in recent years, often accompanied by observations on the relative decline of the West. A seat at the top table is now always reserved for Beijing at global summits, whether it is climate change or financial stability under discussion. European politicians warn ruefully of the G-2—the US and China—setting world affairs between them.

But in admiring China's progress to superpower status, it is easy to forget how far it lags behind in political terms. Last week, there was a reminder. Liu Xiaobo, a 53-year-old former literature professor, was charged with "inciting subversion of state power," an offense that carries a potential prison term of 15 years.

Liu's crime was to organize a peti-

tion last year, under the title Charter 08, calling for basic political freedom. He was first arrested for supporting the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and has spent much of the ensuing period in jail or under house arrest. Meanwhile, the Charter 08 petition has collected thousands of signatures. For anyone in China to put their name on such a document is an act of immense courage, which is certain to draw a hostile reaction from Communist party officials.

It is not clear how much support there is in China for the kind of reforms asked for by Liu. Conventional wisdom in recent years has been that, outside of dissident intellectual circles, rising prosperity and state intimidation have ensured basic public tolerance of Communist Party rule.

Meanwhile, the financial crisis has given party leaders more confidence to brush aside Western criticism. Since the US model of capitalism

looks so flawed, they note, its political system might be just as rickety.

That is hubris. The rapid, but vastly uneven, expansion of China's economy is creating social divisions that a one-party system cannot contain indefinitely. Competing interests will demand open competition for political representation. Meanwhile, some observers see in the rush to try Liu during the West's holiday season evidence that Beijing still cares what the outside world thinks.

The realization that the West's economic interests lie in engagement with China does not diminish the need to challenge Beijing on political reform. The crisis might have exposed flaws in the Western model of capitalism. But the repression of political freedom, as well as being morally wrong, builds potential instability into the Chinese system that poses a whole new set of threats to the world economy.

The BURMA DAILY

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