China's democratic revolutionaries haven't made much of a revolution so far. Protests have been attended sparsely, if at all. Online discussion of demonstrations in China, demonstrations elsewhere in the world, or anything remotely related have been largely stifled. The urban security presence has somehow become even more ubiquitous, with uniformed and plainclothes police now supplemented with "Old Auntie Brigade," elderly volunteers who, wearing matching red armbands, report everything they see back to local neighborhood committees. Hopes in China that the Egyptian revolution might build momentum for their country's own struggling democratic movement appear to have been stymied.

Despite their failures, democratic activists are still pressing, subtly subverting the state and spreading their message, and the Chinese government is taking them very seriously. International NGOs and journalists now say that the government crackdown is frighteningly reminiscent of 1989, which culminated with troops killing either hundreds or thousands of civilians at Tiananmen Square. As China increases its repressive measures, it may well quell the activists, but also risks upsetting, by its brutality, many of the urban Chinese who are otherwise indifferent.

China's dilemma is the same one experienced by autocratic regimes across the globe: a too-successful crackdown risks creating only more dissent, which will require even stronger crackdowns, initiating a violent cycle in which both the state and the population are neither willing nor able to back down. Such a cycle, if it continues unabated, has only two foreseeable endpoints: the collapse of the regime, which would be disastrous in a country as large, diverse, and militarized as China; or, more likely, the reversion of the state back to the violently repressive dictatorship of the 1970s. In other words, if the conflict between the state and its people continues to escalate, then the state is forced either to pursue the harshest possible campaign against it people, as it has in the past, or to abdicate.

This dark scenario may sound unlikely -- it's possible that the activists will simply give up, and the country's growing middle class will accept repression -- but, outside of the large coastal cities where Westerners travel, it is already underway. In the large, Northwestern province of Xinjiang, where reporters of any nationality are rarely allowed, the Chinese government has spent the last two years strangling basic civil rights and tightening markets. This process began after a spate of 2009 protests there, and has only increased since. A similar process has begun in Inner Mongolia, a province to the east, where security forces have waged a steady campaign of violence against dissenters.

In these areas, the Chinese government's relationship to its people has shifted dramatically: it is one of oppressor to subject, jailer to inmate; a sharp contrast from the relatively gentle hand of state-guided opening in Beijing, Shanghai, and other large, cosmopolitan cities. In Xinjiang

and Inner Mongolia, the China that showed itself off to the world during the 2008 Olympics is gone.

The Chinese government has been able get away with such strong crackdowns in the more remote provinces because there is less media there, the middle class is smaller, and the long-oppressed people have lower expectations as well as less ability to organize against the state. But if dissent continues in the larger, wealthier, more media-savvy cities near the coast, and if the Chinese government responds there as it did in the western provinces, the end result could be dangerous. A Xinjiang-style crackdown in Beijing, which has 20 million people, compared to Xinjiang capital's 2.7 million, would be ghastly, and could roll back China's decades of gradual opening, returning it to a country that is poor, violent, and unhappy.

Source: The Atlantic