

What price conscience?

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Apple, the Houston Rockets, the NBA, Tiffany & Co and Activision Blizzard this week joined the long and growing list of international companies to run afoul of Beijing and the rabid jingoistic nationalism it encourages as a way of distracting its citizenry from their lack of rights or voice in governance.

At issue was the real — or imagined — support for the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, which has joined the list of taboo subjects for “outside criticism” that includes Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang.

Four decades ago, as Beijing began opening its doors to foreign companies and capitalism, Western policymakers and businesspeople eager to tap into China’s vast market said that such exposure would gradually lead to China becoming democratic, with human rights improving alongside the economy. Time has proven just how wrong they were, and are.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has not stopped jailing and killing dissidents, Falun Gong members and others, brutally repressing Tibetans and Christians who do not follow state-sanctioned churches or destroying the religion and culture of the Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang.

Being a Muslim does not automatically make one a terrorist, despite Beijing’s efforts to conflate Islamic radicalism and militant attacks elsewhere with Uighurs living according to their religious beliefs. Neither does advocating democracy and the preservation of humans rights in Hong Kong make one a separatist, despite what Brooklyn Nets owner Joe Tsai (蔡崇信) has said.

For too long, too many in the world have stood silent in the face of atrocities in China, but speaking up for human rights is not interference in a nation’s internal affairs.

Most people condemn the actions of Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist government, and the atrocities they committed before and during World War II, yet it is important to remember that those actions did not occur in a vacuum.

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Many leading businesspeople and government officials were willing to ignore what was happening in Germany before the war, because they believed that business or sports could be separated from politics, even though the Nazis established their first concentration camps just weeks after Hitler became chancellor and began rounding up political opponents.

The camps were a way to indefinitely incarcerate those the regime considered a security threat, as well as eliminate individuals or groups away from public or judicial purview or exploit them as forced labor.

The CCP has followed the Nazi playbook since the founding of the People's Republic of China's (PRC), much as the Soviet Union did with its gulag system.

To stay silent is to be complicit, as Beijing well knows. That is why it reacts so aggressively to those who criticize the CCP's policies and what it views as its national mandate.

However, the protests in Hong Kong can no longer be discounted as the work of a minority, as people from all walks of life, all ages and professions have made it clear that they will not go quietly into the darkness: not now and not in 2047.

Beijing's demand for silence is also why it has begun to target Taiwanese who have promoted human rights or supported Hong Kong activists, while continuing its efforts to destroy Taiwan's democracy.

China is trying to make people, companies and governments who criticize it pay for their words and actions. It is time that the CCP and the PRC pay the price as well.

It can be done. This week the Prague City Council canceled a sister-city pact with Beijing, while the US imposed sanctions on government agencies and high-tech businesses involved in running or supporting the concentration camps in Xinjiang.

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Criticizing Beijing can be costly, but staying mum is even more expensive.

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