

# China's Covid Revolt

The New York Times Virus Briefing November 30, 2022

The broadest and boldest surge of protests in a generation is sweeping China, as people in cities across the country take to the streets to denounce the government's inflexible and exhausting Covid measures.

Last night, in the southern city of Guangzhou, workers and residents resisting a Covid lockdown tore down barricades and threw bottles at riot police. They pushed over a makeshift hut used for Covid tests, while hundreds of onlookers roared in approval. Videos showed hundreds of police officers subduing residents.



Blank pieces of paper have become an implicit protest of censorship. Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

For more on the protests, I connected with my colleague Li Yuan, who wrote about what the protesters want in her New New World column.

## Why are these protests happening now?

That's a question I've asked more than a dozen protesters, and the "zero Covid" policy is definitely one of the main issues. The Chinese people have been locked up, literally, for almost three years. But this year, the zero Covid restrictions have become very extreme because of the nature of the Omicron variant. It's very infectious and it's impossible to eliminate, which is a goal of zero Covid.

So we've seen large-scale lockdowns all over the country. Some analysts have said that anywhere between 200 million and 400 million residents have been placed under some form of lockdown this year. And when people are in lockdown they can't go out. It can be difficult to go to the hospital, and pregnant women have had miscarriages, and some people have died. Many people have lost jobs, lost income and lost business. Others have had mental problems, and we saw many reports of

people jumping off apartment buildings during lockdown. It's very tragic, and these protesters have lived through all of that.

### Mass protests in China

In a rare nationwide display of unrest, residents in China protested in these cities over the weekend.



By Agnes Chang, Josh Holder and Denise Lu

At the same time, it's obvious to everybody that this policy has become a political campaign for Xi Jinping. And some people say it shows that the government doesn't really care about the people, because the policy continues no matter how many tragedies have happened and no matter how much people complain. So I think these young protesters have lost their faith in the Chinese government. I think they have lost their faith in the rule of Xi Jinping, who promised them a new era, but they no longer believe that promise. And they definitely pose a threat to the rule of Xi Jinping, no doubt about it.

## What do the protesters want?

Chinese people — we don't know how to protest. They are very disorganized. They have all kinds of slogans. They want the end of zero Covid. They want the government to stop locking down residential compounds. They want freedom of speech. They want their movies back — there are barely any new movies in China this year because so many movies fail to pass the censors.

So it's all kinds of things, but the main consensus is that they want the zero Covid craziness to end. They saw Xi Jinping go to Bali and meet with Biden, and he was not wearing a mask. Then they watch the World Cup and see people from all over the world in the stadiums not wearing masks and having fun, and they are like, "What are we doing?"



Protesters held up their mobile phones in a symbol of tacit defiance in Beijing on Sunday.  
Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

## How unusual are these protests?



Protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Since then, Chinese leaders have fixated on antigovernment social movements.

Catherine Henriette/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

I haven't seen anything like this since 1989, when millions of Chinese students took to the streets all over China, but especially in Beijing and Tiananmen Square.

I was in high school during those protests, and even in my city — I'm from a small town in China — we had protests. So the scale of the protests now is not comparable to 1989, but they're happening.

I recently heard from someone who was in college in 1989, and he participated in the protests. He told me, "These young protesters went a step further than we did. We did not say we don't want the Communist Party. We didn't dare to say that. And these protesters

are saying, 'We don't want you anymore.'"

## How does it feel to watch these protests?

It's pretty amazing to watch what's going on in China. So many of my friends told me they have become emotional. One friend told me that she woke up Sunday morning and watched the videos from the Shanghai protests the night before. She said, "I cried for hours." Because we haven't seen anything like that.

People have been complaining online for years, and nothing changes. And everyone in China knows what it means if you'll take to the streets and what kind of a risk these young people are taking — jail, detention, harassment from the police. People are very moved by the bravery and the courage of these young protesters.

## How have officials reacted?

I just got a message right now from a protester who says he was taken away by the police this morning and questioned for a few hours. There is a very heavy police presence at these protests. The Chinese government has almost unlimited resources to go after people who protest, so the police are calling and visiting protesters at home.

But the government hasn't said anything, and the state media has kind of kept quiet, which is understandable because many Chinese aren't aware of these protests. If the official media reported on these protests, or even criticized them, then people would know what happened.

### **What do the protests mean for zero Covid?**

That's the billion-dollar question. People have been looking for signs of relaxing, and the government has changed some rules, but no one knows.

On Tuesday the Chinese government announced that it would do more to vaccinate older people.

Investors on Wall Street have been trading on expectations that China would move away from its zero Covid rules. But so far it seems to be two steps forward and one and a half steps back.

But, you know, in China, we had the three-year Great Famine, which was caused by a political campaign of Mao Zedong. And we had the 10-year Cultural Revolution. Now people are talking and saying, "So what is the number? We are reaching three years. Are we going to have a 10-year zero Covid campaign?" That's how people are talking about it, but no one knows.

### **What's next for the protesters?**

Part of it depends on how brutal the government is going to be. So far, the police might take you in and question you for a few hours and release you — that's one thing. But if they are going to sentence everybody to a few years, or a few months in jail, that's another thing. People are also politically isolated. They cannot share their thoughts with their classmates, their friends or their colleagues, because the vast majority of Chinese people are still pro-government.

But I also think there's a political awakening going on among young Chinese. And once that starts, it's very hard to stop. Almost all of the protesters I interviewed recently were first-time protesters. Quite a few of them said that if this happens again tomorrow, they'll be there. They are willing to protest.

At the same time, we saw quite sizable protests in front of Chinese embassies and consulates in London, New York and elsewhere by Chinese living there. These were also unexpected even a week ago. To quote Leonard Cohen, "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." Now these young people know where to look for light.



Police officers watching protesters in Beijing on Sunday.  
Mark R Cristino/EPA, via Shutterstock