

## **Dissent and Protest Necessary for a Socialist Society**

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Issue date: 4/25/07 Section: [Opinion](#)

The university is one of the few places in U.S. society where there is space-highly contested and under attack-for critical thinking and dissent. But what about dissent in socialist society? Students and intellectuals must be raising concerns and criticisms of government policies and social institutions-and throw up challenges to the program and vision of society. People must have the right and ability to speak out freely about all aspects of society, to organize protests on their own, and not to be confined to a controlled situation of "official" politics and channels. There must be "wide-openness" in the framework of a society moving to overcome all forms of exploitation, oppression, and social inequality. Political and intellectual ferment and dissent are vital to the process of deepening the understanding of reality and transforming society.

Bob Avakian, chairman of the Communist Revolution Party, believes that if one really understands this epistemology-the unfettered search for the truth in relation to moving humanity to a whole new stage-one seeks intellectual challenges. And if socialist society is true to this, things will get unruly and wild. This presents big challenges to the socialist state. Let's say people organize movements and struggles protesting the government's environmental policies. What if this takes a new turn with blockades and sit-ins causing disruptions to the economy? The economy must meet people's needs and the requirements of the socialist state. But debating the issues driving this protest, the implications for developing a sustainable socialist economy, drawing more of society into the debate, and putting the complexity of all this before people-this is what the socialist state and revolutionary leadership have to ultimately rely on-and not force.

What about people expressing opposition to the entire socialist project and calling for the return of capitalism? Will they have the right to dissent? Their ideas must be heard and debated, and their most ardent advocates must be able to espouse and defend them in the media and through publication. Even if such criticisms are incorrect, they may still shed light on problems and defects in society and on the deeper contradictions. And people must engage with these views as part of understanding the world more fully. If anti-government views are quashed or summarily declared wrong, this hurts academia and society more broadly.

There is a crucial difference between people advocating that socialism be replaced by capitalism and forces organizing and carrying out actions to sabotage or overthrow socialism. The importance of this distinction has to be popularized throughout socialist society and spelled out as a matter of law in the constitution. History has shown that socialist states will have to repel imperialist attacks and invasions and defeat counterrevolution and attempts to restore the old

order. But the socialist state must not confound those actively organizing to sabotage or overthrow socialism with people who express disagreements with, or oppose, socialism. This distinction was not always handled well in previous socialist societies, even though, especially in China, in Mao's time, there were important positive experiences, including in the Cultural Revolution. Nonetheless, socialist society has to do much better in the future.

It has proven relatively easy for the socialist state to suppress reactionary opposition-for a time. What is difficult, and this is the challenge, is to foster debate, experimentation, and ferment, and to risk upheavals without losing power. A socialist state is a powerful and necessary tool for the oppressed to create a society in active transition to communism, a society of freely associating human beings and a world without states and repression. It will not be possible to get there without a socialist state and communist leadership that value and foster critical thinking and the wild contestation of ideas, without wide-ranging dissent and tumult, and without the unfettered search for the truth.

*The author is a Maoist economist. On April 30, he will speak with social theorist Bill Martin at the Columbia University bookstore about a wide range of issues. The above is part of a longer essay.*