

## 'Very brave to protest': What to know about China's anti-lockdown demonstrations

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In a rare display of defiance, protests have erupted across China over the government's so-called zero-COVID policy, which has caused economic damage and mounting anger over stringent lockdown policies.

The protests were triggered Thursday after a deadly fire at an apartment building in China's Muslim-majority Xinjiang province. Videos of the incident appeared to show that lockdown measures delayed firefighters from getting to the victims, at least 10 of whom died.

Meanwhile, China reported Monday that it had a daily record of 40,000 new COVID cases, raising questions about the effectiveness of the authoritarian government's strict measures as other nations largely relax their protocols.

Kerry Brown, director of the Lau China Institute and professor of Chinese studies at King's College in London, spoke to Yahoo News to explain what's behind these rare protests transforming into a bigger plea for change. (Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.)

**Kerry Brown:** They have been happening with main urban centers — Shanghai, Beijing — places where there have been recent COVID outbreaks and where people have experienced the lockdowns. I think the government is aware that people have reached their limit. I don't think that they're doing this for the fun of it. The problem is that if government leaders do lift restrictions quickly, there will be a spike. And the Chinese health care system is somewhat imperfect and uneven: Where it's good it's good, and where it's not good it's nonexistent. I think that's the real problem. They're frightened that if they do lift restrictions, and as other places have experienced, there will be a spike of infections and a rise in mortality, and then the hospital system and the public health system will be close to a breaking point. So that's a bigger problem in some senses that the government is looking to at the moment. They're caught between those two options: Continue the very unpopular lockdowns, or lift them, but too quickly, and then risk having a spike.

### **Why is China still seeing record numbers of daily COVID cases despite its zero-COVID policy?**

I just think because the Omicron variant is very infectious, and also because the levels of vaccination in China are relatively low. It's an aging, vulnerable population. So the combination of those two things means that you have had a fast spread in the last few days. They have modestly lifted restrictions, so this is a taste of what things could become. A combination of those means the infection rates have gone up.

### **Why have some protesters called for President Xi Jinping to step down?**

I think some people have been doing that. They're extremely frustrated and fed up. However, I don't think that that's the mainstream view. I think that people just want these policies to be lifted. They're realistic, and they know it's just not going to happen. The Communist Party is not going to fall anytime soon, as Xi

Jinping is well entrenched in power. But I think they're just very frustrated and angry, and this is an expression of their anger that someone has to take account for this and there have to be changes.

### **Why is it rare for protests like this to happen in China?**

People have to be very brave to protest in China. There are significant security lockdowns and there are consequences. The central government tells local security to just deal with things no matter what. Their priority is to restore public order. There can be significant reprisals against people who are seen as causing public-order crimes. Of course, if it gets very widespread the security forces could be overwhelmed, but on the whole they tend to try and deal with things very, very quickly. Even if it's not particularly pleasant, they do a very blitzkrieg kind of approach in the hope that it just cools things until they can get on top of things.

### **What is the symbolism behind the white pieces of paper held up by protesters?**

It's just about freedom of expression. The fact that people feel they can't protest legitimately, not against the regime and its right to rule, but against things that they feel should be changed. They feel that this is unfair, that they have legitimate grievances that should be listened to, and they're holding up a blank sheet of paper sort of saying, "Because this isn't saying anything, is this a problem?" So it's really making a symbolic point, and obviously quite powerfully.

### **Where does China go from here?**

They have lifted the restrictions a bit in Xinjiang, which is where the most extreme lockdown was. They have lifted some of the restrictions in Beijing already. I think that they'll compromise on some issues. There won't be a complete change, but there'll be tactical changes in the hope that people see an exit strategy out of the very unpopular lockdowns that are being imposed recently.