

## Freed critics not a sign China is soft on dissent (AP)

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June 27, 2011 — BEIJING (AP) — Despite recent releases of high-profile critics, China's authoritarian government seems as determined as ever to silence dissidents and run roughshod over their thin legal protections, activists and academics said Monday.

Sunday's scheduled release of the prominent activist Hu Jia from a Beijing prison came days after outspoken Chinese artist Ai Weiwei was freed after nearly three months in detention. A major figure in China's dissident community, Hu advocated a broad range of civil liberties before he was imprisoned in 2008. Ai was the most high-profile target of a sweeping crackdown on activists that started in February in a bid to prevent protests similar to those in the Middle East and North Africa.

Activists welcomed the releases but said the international community should not take the developments as signs of softening in the government's attitude toward its critics, noting that Hu was freed only after he had completed his 3 1/2-year sentence for sedition. Ai was never formally indicted and was mysteriously released under a form of bail that restricts suspects' movements to their home city for one year.

Activists also note that many once-vocal activist lawyers and dissidents who were rounded up in the government crackdown that started in February have been silent since

their release. Ai told reporters last week that the conditions of his release mean he cannot give any interviews or say anything about his case.

Many petitioners and other activists also continue to be rounded up routinely, they said. "We closely follow dozens of rights' defense cases, and I've found that at the grassroots and lowest levels of society in China, the rights defense environment has not seen any fundamental improvements," said Huang Qi, a veteran dissident who was released earlier this month from prison at the end of his 3-year jail term for illegal possession of state secrets.

"One cannot count how many ordinary people are being locked up or taken away every day," Huang said by phone. Bruce Jacobs, a China expert at Monash University in Australia, said China was not easing its clampdown on dissent. "I don't think there's any evidence that the Chinese regime is softening up," Jacobs said. "I think fundamentally it will want to hold on to its hard line."

U.S.-based Chinese activist Wan Yanhai suggested, however, that there could be an easing of pressure on rights activists in the short term. Wan argued that the government might be realizing that the current crackdown has not prevented recent bouts of unrest, such as riots by migrant workers in southern China's Guangdong province and protests by ethnic Mongolians in the north.

Many have pointed to the restrictions imposed on the dissidents despite their release as evidence the government is not letting up. Hu and his wife are apparently not allowed to receive any visitors. "Everyone, please do not come to visit us, you will not be allowed in. We will meet you when there is a chance," Hu's wife, Zeng Jinyan, said in a posting on her Twitter page on Monday.

Hu was dropped off at his Beijing home in the early hours of Sunday morning, apparently to evade media attention, and on the day of his return, dozens of police and plainclothes security patrolled the compound where the couple live.

In a brief phone interview with Hong Kong's Cable TV on Sunday, Hu, too expressed concern about hostility from the authorities though he indicated he would not give up his work. "(My parents) have told me to just be a normal citizen and don't confront the system because this system is very cruel, using the country's absolute power to violate people's dignity without restraint. But I can only tell my parents I will be careful," Hu said.

Another activist, Chen Guangcheng, and his wife have been kept under an unofficial house arrest in their village in eastern China since he was released from jail last fall, and reporters trying to visit them have been kept away by thugs who patrol the village.

Such illegal detentions mean China is moving further away from international norms on human rights, said Human Rights Watch senior Asia researcher Nicholas Bequelin. "The Chinese government used to tell diplomats that they were handling things according to law whenever a dissident was arrested. They would justify it. And we would not agree with the justification. Now they just flatly deny that they are arbitrarily detaining these people," Bequelin said.

China's state-run Global Times newspaper, meanwhile, lambasted the Western media's coverage of Hu's release, saying that they were "making a saint" out of Hu, a person the paper said is unknown to most Chinese people.

"Hu and other people win Western applause not because of what they have done for Chinese society and world peace, but simply because they are anti-Chinese government," the paper said in an editorial Monday.