

ASIA PACIFIC

**The New York Times**

# *Hong Kong Protests Raise Stakes for Xi's Hard-Line Agenda*

**By Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers**

June 13, 2019

HONG KONG — Since he took power seven years ago, President Xi Jinping has faced a growing din of foreign condemnation over his government's human rights record, a trade war that has sapped China's strength and now, for a second time, mass protests in the streets of Hong Kong.

Yet again and again, instead of moving toward compromise or change, Mr. Xi and his subordinates have made hard-line decisions that have compounded and complicated pressures on the ruling Communist Party. They have stood by those decisions even after they have blown up into unexpected crises, like this week's tumultuous demonstrations in Hong Kong against a plan to allow extraditions to mainland China.

"Xi Jinping has been a very good student of Machiavelli — it's better to be feared than to be loved," said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a professor at Hong Kong Baptist University and the author of "China Tomorrow: Democracy or Dictatorship?"

Carrie Lam, Hong Kong's chief executive, has said she decided to pursue the extradition law herself, without any prodding from Mr. Xi or other Chinese leaders. But several senior Communist Party officials have endorsed the proposal, and it is clear that Mrs. Lam's move would please Mr. Xi's government, which wants greater influence over the city.

Beijing appears to be hunkering down for confrontation. The chances of a retreat by the authorities in Hong Kong seem low, because succumbing to public pressure would show them “in a poor light at a time when Xi Jinping wants to assert his authority,” said Willy Lam, a political analyst who teaches at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.



A digital display of the Chinese flag in Hong Kong. The territory's legislature has delayed consideration of contentious legislation that would allow extraditions to mainland China. Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times



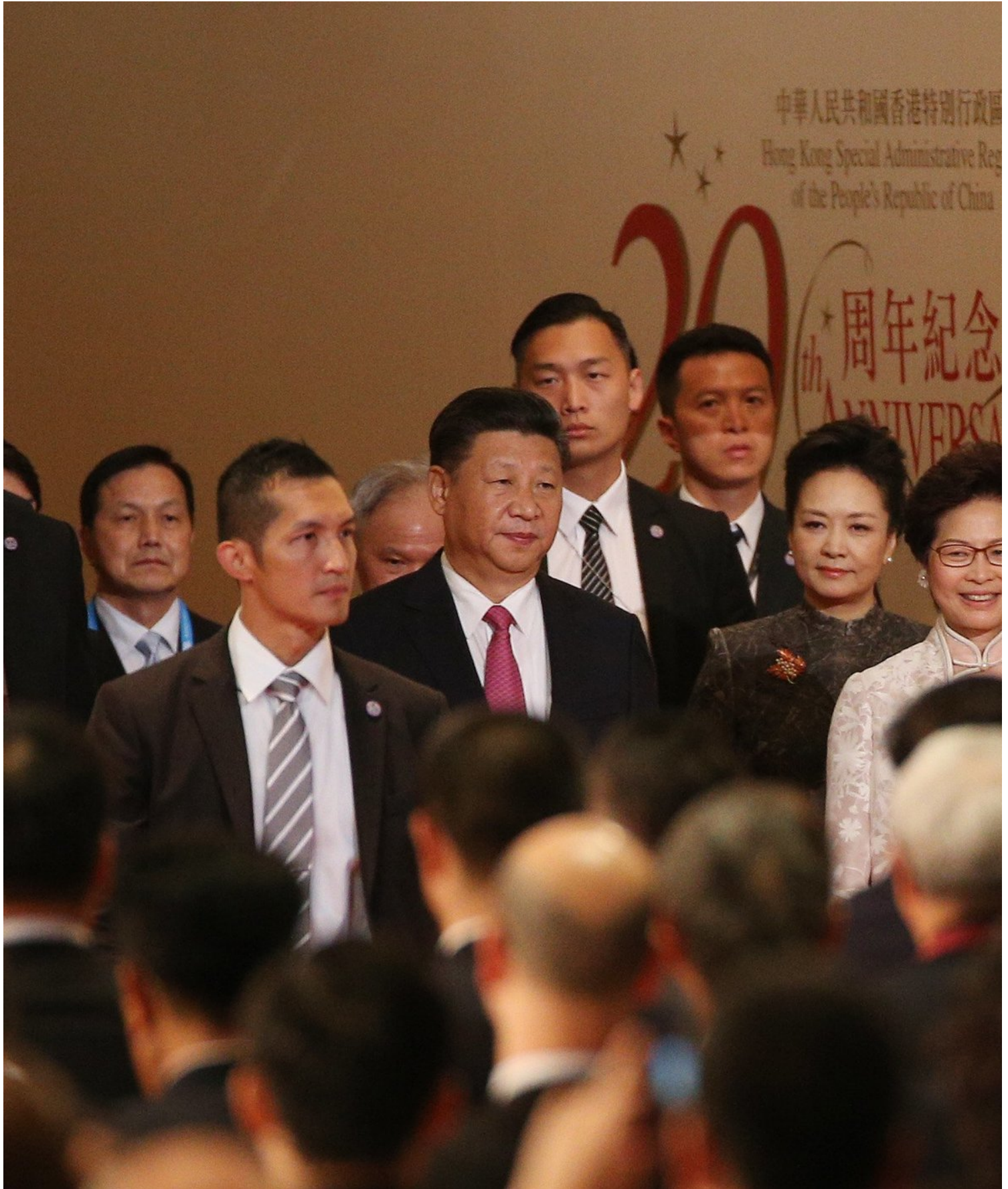
In some ways, each crisis makes it less likely that Mr. Xi will compromise during the next one because every new challenge feeds an official narrative that China's foes are circling and the country must dig in. Early in the trade war with the United States, for example, some in Beijing tried to use the conflict to coax Mr. Xi into adopting market-friendly policies the party has resisted, Professor Cabestan said.

“Now with the level of friction and tensions with the U.S.,” he said, “it has, on the contrary, played in favor of Xi Jinping as a nationalist, so everyone should toe the line.”

And that also makes concessions in Hong Kong less likely. Under such conditions, subordinates like Ms. Lam seem more committed to demonstrating loyalty to Mr. Xi and his authoritarian agenda than pushing options for compromise, several experts said.

After a day of clashes between protesters and the police in Hong Kong, the legislature on Thursday delayed its consideration of the extradition bill, and protest leaders called on the public to keep up the pressure on the government with more protests this weekend.

The proposed legislation would for the first time allow people in Hong Kong to be extradited to mainland China, with only limited safeguards. Mrs. Lam has argued that the legislation is needed to close a loophole that has allowed people to evade justice and made Hong Kong a safe haven for criminals.



Mr. Xi and Hong Kong's chief executive, Carrie Lam, in 2017. Experts said Mrs. Lam and other subordinates appear more committed to demonstrating loyalty to Mr. Xi and his agenda than to pursuing compromise. Jerome Favre/European Pressphoto Agency

But the pro-democracy opposition in Hong Kong says the measure would accelerate the erosion of civil liberties in this former British colony, which was granted a high degree of autonomy when it returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

Many residents are skeptical of the Chinese mainland's courts and police forces, which are controlled by the party and have a long record of abuses. They are worried that Beijing will use the new extradition powers to target political dissidents and others in Hong Kong who run afoul of Chinese officials.

Mr. Xi has not publicly commented on the protests in Hong Kong, and he left China on Wednesday on a previously scheduled trip to Central Asia. But the party-controlled news media has accused opponents of the legislation of acting as stooges for foreign enemies trying to foment disorder and humiliate and weaken China.

“The radical opposition in Hong Kong is not seeking the greater good of all of Hong Kong society, but instead is being driven by selfish political interests to gang up with foreign forces hostile to mainland China,” Global Times, a widely read nationalist news outlet, said in an editorial. “Hong Kong residents must grasp clearly that these forces are trying to swindle and mislead them.”

Such denunciations echo the views of Chinese officials who believe that hawks in the United States are determined to challenge China on every front to thwart its rise as an economic, political and military superpower. The rhetoric of confrontation may make it harder for Mr. Xi to explore compromise.





A mass demonstration against the extradition bill in Hong Kong on Sunday was one of the largest protest in the city's history. Lam Yik Fei for The New York Times



“It is during the Sino-U.S. trade war; therefore, it will be understood as an act of playing the Hong Kong card by the United States,” Tian Feilong, a law professor at Beihang University in Beijing, said of the protests in Hong Kong.

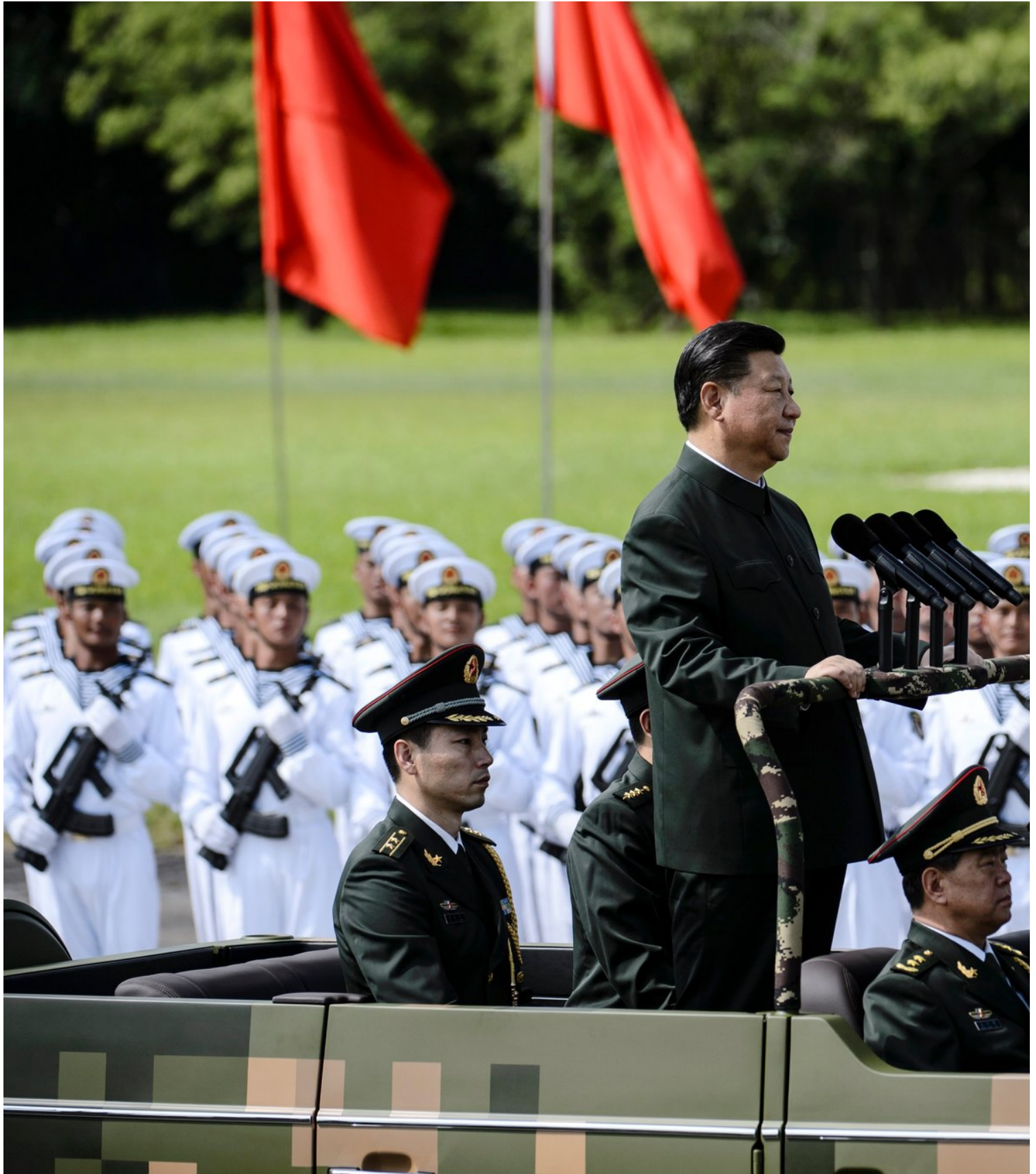
Hong Kong television stations and newspapers have vigorously reported on the protests, but the authorities in mainland China are censoring reports on events in the territory.

“What little the Chinese public knows of the developments in Hong Kong is largely filtered and framed by the Chinese media to minimize the risk that demands for political freedom spread across the border into mainland China,” said Jessica Chen Weiss, an associate professor at Cornell University who studies Chinese foreign policy and public opinion.

Even before the crisis in Hong Kong, Mr. Xi appeared in no mood for concessions to opponents at home or abroad.

For much of the past year, he has been preoccupied with a spiraling trade fight with the Trump administration, which some critics say he has mismanaged and perhaps exacerbated.





Mr. Xi inspecting People's Liberation Army troops in Hong Kong in 2017. European Pressphoto Agency

Last month, President Trump accused Chinese negotiators of abruptly overturning a draft agreement that was months in the making, a decision almost certainly made by Mr. Xi.

Mr. Trump responded by threatening to punish China with more tariffs. Instead of seeking compromise, China dug in again, threatening to punish American companies and launching a wave of propaganda accusing the United States of engaging in economic bullying.

Mr. Xi has also presided over a prolonged crackdown on both official corruption and political dissent. The anticorruption drive appears to have reduced official graft, but the pressure for conformity has also stifled policy debate among officials and academics.

In Xinjiang, a region of northwest China, Mr. Xi has presided over a sweeping drive to wipe out resistance among Muslim minorities, whom the government has cast as reservoirs of potential terrorism. Hundreds of thousands, and possibly more, have been interned in indoctrination camps that have been condemned by human rights groups, United Nations experts and Western leaders.

“I suspect there is a certain feeling of being under siege at the moment,” said Ryan Hass, a fellow at the Brookings Institution who formerly served as director for China at the National Security Council. “Xi’s response to uncertainty is to grip the reins of control ever harder.”





President Jiang Zemin of China, center, in Hong Kong in 1997 as the territory was returned to China after more than 156 years of British rule. Torsten Blackwood/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

As the costs of Mr. Xi's tough policies mount, some have asked how long he can afford to take an uncompromising position on so many fronts.



“The central question is: What is Xi’s calculus?” said Richard McGregor, an expert on Chinese politics at the Lowy Institute in Sydney. “Beijing’s instinct will be to stand its ground and tough things out. But that comes with all manner of consequences.”

“Xi has already agreed to an unprecedented lockdown in Xinjiang which has damaged China’s standing in the West,” he noted. “He is gearing up for a showdown with the U.S. which could hit the economy. Taiwan’s election is on the horizon and his actions in Hong Kong could tip the balance in favor of the candidate that Beijing least wants to win.”

Mr. Xi refused to give ground in 2014 when tens of thousands of protesters occupied major streets in Hong Kong for 11 weeks, demanding democratic electoral reforms blocked by Beijing.

But this time, Mr. Xi is less directly linked to the contentious legislation. He might yet nudge Mrs. Lam to delay the extradition bill or even abandon it if the crisis worsens and the economic costs prompt members of Hong Kong’s pro-Beijing business establishment to break ranks, as some did during a similar showdown in 2003, in which a half-million people marched against proposed national security legislation in Hong Kong. The authorities withdrew the bill soon afterward.

Still, such a retreat would be unusual for Mr. Xi, and perhaps risky, because it would pierce the hard-line reputation he has cultivated and used to reinforce his authority.

“Walking the bill back would send a powerful signal to other groups on other issues that the party will back down in the face of public pressure,” said Jude Blanchette, China practice lead at Crompton Group, a geopolitical risk advice firm based in Arlington, Va. “This is not a message Xi nor the party in general wants spread.”



Chris Buckley reported from Hong Kong, and Steven Lee Myers from Beijing. Claire Fu and Yinuo Shi contributed research from Beijing.

A version of this article appears in print on June 13, 2019, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Hong Kong Crisis May Harden Xi's Resolve to Squelch Dissent

**WRITE A COMMENT**