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Revolt Begins Like Others, but Its End Is Less Certain

By MICHAEL WINES



Relatives carried a picture of Xue Jinbo, who died in police custody after villagers chose him to negotiate a solution to a land deal in Wukan, China.

WUKAN, China — Each day begins with a morning rally in the banner-bedecked square, where village leaders address a packed crowd about their seizure of the village and plans for its future. Friday’s session was followed by a daylong mock funeral for a fallen comrade, whose body lies somewhere outside the village in government custody.

It has been nearly a week since the 13,000 residents of this seacoast village, a warren of cramped alleys and courtyard homes, became so angry that their deeply resented officials — and even the police — fled rather than face them. Now, there is a striking vacuum of authority, and the villagers are not entirely sure what to make of their fleeting freedom.

“We will defend our farmland to the death!” a handmade banner proclaims, referring to a possible land deal they fear will strip them of almost all their farmland. “Is it a crime,” another muses, “to ask for the return of our land and for democracy and transparency?”

How long they will last is another matter. As the days pass, the cordons of police officers surrounding the village grow larger. Armored trucks and troop carriers have been reported nearby. On local television, a 24-hour channel denounces the villagers as “a handful of people” dedicated to sabotaging public order, with the

names of protesters flashing on a blue screen, warning that they will be prosecuted. Many here fear this will all end badly. “The SWAT teams and the police here are acting like they’re crime organizations, not police forces,” said Chen Dequan, a 50-year-old farmer and fisherman. “The entire village is worried.”

The dispute that emptied Wukan of its government officials is, on its face, like hundreds — if not thousands — of others that inspire protests here each year: villagers who believe their land was taken illegally take to the streets when their concerns are ignored.

But the suspicious death of a well-liked villager, who was selected to negotiate on the citizens’ behalf, appears to have turned this long-simmering grievance into a last-straw standoff with the authorities.

The land deal inspiring the protests involved one of China’s largest property developers, a Hong-Kong listed company called Country Garden that prides itself on fast-paced construction in mostly suburban areas. Yang Huiyuan, described by analysts as the company’s chairwoman, is often listed as one of the richest women in China.

The company has faced controversy before. Xinhua, China’s official news agency, said this year that it had bought Anhui Province land to build a golf course in a deal that smacked of “the typical collusion of real estate business and local government.” The agency’s signed commentary said more than 10 government officials had been punished after that transaction and other cases of illegal purchases and use of land there.

Here in Wukan, many residents believed that the national government had not yet intervened to resolve matters simply because it had been misled by nefarious local officials to believe that all was well.

So far, however, it seems from inside this locked-down village that government leaders at all levels are flummoxed at their blue-moon, if temporary, loss of control.

Lin Zuluan, 67, a retired businessman who is now the village’s de facto leader, said that officials had approached him to negotiate an end to the protest, but that talks had gone nowhere, in part because the officials would not meet villagers’ demands to return all their land.

“I do have concerns” over the lack of progress, he said. “But I do believe this country is ruled by law, so I do believe the central government will do whatever it has to do to help us.”

In the meantime, life here goes on in an aura of unreality as much as uncertainty, a mixture of grief and optimism and somewhat willful ignorance of the hints of trouble at every police roadblock and on every news broadcast.

Inside the village, citizens hail foreign journalists as visiting saviors, bombarding them with endless cigarettes, bowls of rice-and-seafood porridge and free rides on the backs of scooters. The villagers bristle at the government's suggestion that they are being financed by unnamed foreigners, but are convinced that only reporting outside the state-run press will bring word of their plight to leaders in Beijing.

Corruption accusations against Country Garden, the developer, go back for years. In 2007, the Southern Weekly newspaper alleged irregularities in a hotel construction contract awarded to the company by a district government in Zhangjiajie, in Hunan Province. The paper suggested that the government heavily discounted the project's land cost because most of Country Garden's payment was secretly diverted to a company in which two Country Garden officials had invested.

In a faxed statement Friday, Country Garden said both the other projects in Anhui and Hunan were wholly aboveboard. The firm said the Anhui deal was free of corruption and the Zhangjiajie contract was awarded through open, transparent bidding. Officials have contended that the money supposedly diverted was in fact spent for legitimate public purposes related to the project.

In Wukan, two people familiar with the Country Garden proposal said the company planned to buy at least 134 acres of land for villa homes and shopping centers here. About half of that land is controlled by Fengtian Livestock, a pig-raising firm that holds a 50-year lease issued by the government; the rest is apparently in villagers' hands.

Chen Wenqing, the livestock firm's owner, said Country Garden was negotiating directly with the local authorities last spring when the deal fell through over a difference on price. Country Garden said it had intended to build a project but has signed no agreements.

But Mr. Lin, the retired businessman, said villagers became angry in September when they saw construction work at the pig-farm site. Officials of Lufeng city, a district that controls Wukan, ordered the building stopped, he said, and asked villagers to select a committee of locals to settle the controversy.

Negotiations to return the land to villagers produced little, however. On Dec. 9, unidentified men abducted one of the negotiators, a 42-year-old leather worker named Xue Jinbo, and four other men from a local restaurant.

The other four soon turned up in nearby jails, accused of inciting villagers to subvert the government. Mr. Xue was seen only on the night of Dec. 11, when local government officials summoned relatives to view his body at a mortuary.

They said that he had died of a heart attack in a hospital and that medical records of his care would be provided.

But family members say officials confiscated their mobile telephones before allowing them into the funeral home, apparently to prevent them from taking photographs. Mr. Xue's nose was caked with blood, his body was black with bruises and his left thumb was broken, apparently pulled backward to the breaking point, one of them, a nephew named Xue Ruiqiang, said on Friday in an interview.

Word of Mr. Xue's death brought the villagers into the streets and sent members of the village committee that was involved in the land negotiations fleeing.

Mr. Xue's 21-year-old daughter, Xue Jianwan, said before the service that her father "was a straightforward man who always stood up for people."

"Mom said that if he hadn't been such a straightforward person, he probably wouldn't have ended up like this," she added.

Shi Da contributed research from Wukan, and Mia Li from Beijing. Sharon LaFraniere and Jonathan Ansfield contributed reporting from Beijing.