

It has been 25 years since the Tiananmen massacre. And while the memory of the government's bloody crack down on protesters is alive in the minds of many, the anniversary is likely to go unnoticed in Chinese media. The media blackout is a strong reminder of how, 25 years after the events of the spring of 1989, China's leaders have yet to respond to one of the protesters' key demands - the call for press freedom.

During the 1989 protests, when journalists joined the students in the streets, one of the slogans they displayed on banners was: "Don't force us to tell lies!"

A spontaneous gathering to commemorate the death of Hu Yaobang, a reformist leader, evolved into a broader call for political participation and freedom of expression.

Leaders split

As sit-ins around Tiananmen Square continued for weeks, some publications that were supported by reform-minded leaders covered the events with significant independence.

Hong Kong based journalist Liu Ruishao was reporting on the students' movement from Beijing for a Hong Kong newspaper. He said that the leadership itself had planted the seed for more accurate news reporting at a Party congress in 1987.

"Leaders had made statements saying that people should be informed and discuss about important events. The environment was more open, and people in the media circles were very active," said Liu.

That relatively free media environment began to be curbed when Beijing imposed martial law on May 20. Then, the violent crackdown on protesters on June 4 showed that the hard line within the Communist party had prevailed.

Aftermath for the media

Leaders who had spoken in favor of media reform were marginalized, and a draft law intended to make media more open was shelved.

China's leaders then used state-controlled media to amplify their message denouncing the democratic movement. Many journalists who had sided with the students were jailed or suspended.

Chang Ping, a well-known journalist ostracized in China for his bold editorials on sensitive issues, said that by 1989 the leadership decided that media freedom was a liability.

"The Communist party came to a conclusion after Tiananmen," he said. "Not having properly controlled the media was a huge lesson for them, the lesson came from the events in Tiananmen, from the Soviet Union collapse and the changes in Eastern Europe. So," he said, "after Tiananmen they realized that controlling the media was a top priority."

China is online

Twenty-five years later, China is now the world's biggest market for newspapers and internet users, both of which are closely regulated by authorities.

Despite the constant policing of content deemed sensitive, the Internet remains a major force for spreading information and exchanging ideas. Internet users routinely use the medium to discuss sensitive political ideas, shame officials accused of corruption or post videos of lawbreakers.

Fine line for journalists

While some of the work of journalists and citizen bloggers leads to party and police investigations, reporters still face big risks when using the internet to distribute their findings or comment on sensitive topics.

Authorities recently charged journalist Gao Yu with divulging state secrets after she shared the contents of an internal party policy paper with foreign media organizations.

Ching Cheong, a senior Hong Kong journalist, faced the same charge in 2005 and was imprisoned for almost three years.

He said there used to be hope among intellectuals and the public that the internet would be a catalyst for freedom, but such optimism has since faded.

"Clearly this is not going to happen, because Chinese president Xi Jinping has just ordered the set up of a national commission to monitor cyber security and he also mentioned last year in his August 19 speech that the internet has become a source of threat to national security," said Ching.

Journalists still pushing back

After that speech, authorities launched a campaign to punish rumor mongering online, criminally charging bloggers for posting content deemed sensitive.

Journalists are still defying state censorship. Despite years of censorship, Hong Kong journalist Liu Ruishao said, the public still clamors for unfiltered information and open debate.

"The policies on media freedom have not changed in the past 25 years," he said. "But what has changed are the increasing aspirations for media freedom from common people, staff in the media industry, intellectuals and students. Common people and journalists are not leaving propaganda officials with the monopoly on news."

Journalism chilled despite profusion of media

Still, this year's Tiananmen anniversary is likely to go unnoticed on Chinese media.

While in the last decades journalists have gained more leeway to cover social and political events, June 4 is still a taboo topic. Authorities already have warned foreign journalists against reporting from Tiananmen Square.