

## February 2018

### CHINA

Feb. 6—Hong Kong's Court of Final Appeal overturns jail terms imposed on 3 leaders of 2014 pro-democracy street protests—Joshua Wong, Alex Chow, and Nathan Law. The court affirms their convictions for unlawful assembly but reinstates the original sentences of community service for Wong and Law and a suspended jail term for Chow, finding that a higher court erred in retroactively enhancing the punishment. However, the ruling upholds the authority of courts in future cases to impose harsher sentences for “incitement” and other acts that “cross the line of acceptability,” without regard to whether they were committed “in the exercise of constitutional rights.” The defendants criticize the ruling as a blow to the rule of law and a sign of creeping Chinese influence.

Feb. 25—The Communist Party announces that the National People's Congress in March will move to rescind a constitutional provision barring presidents from serving more than 2 terms. If approved by the rubber-stamp legislature, the change would allow President Xi Jinping, who is 64 and will begin his 2nd 5-year term in March, to rule indefinitely. (He also heads the party and the military, positions without term limits.) The proposal draws rare but muted public criticism in China and raises alarms in the West over Xi's aggressive consolidation of power. The term limit was set under Deng Xiaoping, China's reformist leader after the death of Mao Zedong, along with other measures to promote collective leadership and prevent a recurrence of arbitrary 1-man rule and resulting disasters such as Mao's Great Leap Forward, which left millions dead of famine.

### GERMANY

Feb. 7—Chancellor Angela Merkel announces that her center-right Christian Democrats have reached an agreement with the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) to form a “grand coalition” government. The agreement culminates 4 months of difficult negotiations. To persuade the SPD to rejoin her in government after party leaders argued that serving as the Christian Democrats' junior partner had damaged the SPD's standing, leading to its worst election result in decades, Merkel agreed to give it control of the Finance Ministry in addition to the Foreign Ministry and several others. Following the September elections, Merkel's initial coalition talks with 2 smaller parties, the Free Democratic Party and the Greens, collapsed. The grand coalition will leave the far-right Alternative for Germany as the largest opposition party in the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament.

### IRAN

Feb. 10—Authorities at the notorious Evin prison announce that an Iranian-Canadian sociologist and environmental activist who was arrested in January and accused of being a spy committed suicide in his prison cell. Relatives of the professor, Kavous Seyed Emami, a founder of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation who was 64, vehemently reject the assertion that he killed himself. At least 3 others arrested during nationwide protests in December also recently committed suicide in prison, according to authorities.

### ISRAEL

Feb. 13—Concluding a yearlong investigation, the national police agency recommends that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu be charged with bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. He allegedly accepted over \$300,000 in gifts in a 10-year period from wealthy

friends who received favors in return. Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, a former Netanyahu aide, will make the final decision on whether to proceed with prosecution.

### MALDIVES

Feb. 5—President Abdulla Yameen declares a state of emergency and sends troops to surround the Supreme Court after announcing that he will ignore a Feb. 1 decision by the court overturning criminal convictions against 9 opposition politicians. The next day, security forces loyal to the president arrest political opponents including 2 Supreme Court justices and a former president. The island nation strategically located in the Indian Ocean has formed close ties with China and Saudi Arabia in recent years, raising concerns in nearby India.

### PHILIPPINES

Feb. 12—President Rodrigo Duterte bars Filipinos from traveling to Kuwait, accusing its government of failing to protect expatriate workers from abuse. He displays photos of the remains of a Filipino domestic worker, allegedly kept in a freezer in the home where she worked after she was strangled to death more than a year ago. About 10% of the Filipino population works abroad, including some 500,000 in Kuwait.

### POLAND

Feb. 5—President Andrzej Duda signs legislation that makes it a crime to assert that “the Polish nation” was complicit in the Holocaust and other World War II-era Nazi war crimes. Other European Union member states strongly object to the law, as do Israel, the US, and numerous scholars who warn that the measure could serve to suppress historical facts about some Poles' collaboration with the Nazis. Duda refers the law to the Constitutional Court for review of its implications for free speech.

### SOUTH AFRICA

Feb. 14—President Jacob Zuma, yielding to pressure from his own party, the African National Congress, resigns from office after a nearly 9-year tenure marked by a succession of corruption scandals. ANC legislators planned to remove him with a vote of no-confidence if he refused to resign. He is immediately replaced by Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, who was elected leader of the ANC in December.

### SOUTH KOREA

Feb. 9—The Winter Olympics begin in Pyeongchang with athletes from North and South Korea marching together in the opening ceremony. A North Korean delegation is led by Kim Yo-jong, the sister of leader Kim Jong-un. She extends an invitation from her brother to South Korean President Moon Jae-in to come to Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, for a summit. The diplomatic overtures follow a period of rising tensions over North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

### SYRIA

Feb. 24—The UN Security Council unanimously approves a resolution calling for a 30-day cease-fire in Syria. However, government forces backed by Russian aircraft continue attacking eastern Ghouta, a rebel stronghold on the outskirts of Damascus, the capital. More than 500 people were killed in the bombardment in just the past week, according to human rights groups. ■