



## **China should heed grass-roots pressure for change - author.**

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WASHINGTON, April 7 (Reuters) - China's masses are clamoring for rights promised on paper but denied by authorities and Beijing risks economic progress by stifling change, said a chronicler of Chinese grass-roots activism.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ian Johnson said the efforts of ordinary Chinese like those portrayed in his book "Wild Grass: Three Portraits of Change in Modern China" will do far more to change China than any outside pressure.

"China is in a period of increasing change at the grass-roots level from below, but this is coming into conflict with this stagnant political system and leading to tension," Johnson said on Thursday during a book tour in Washington.

"It's something that China will have to face if it wants to go to the next level of development," he said. The Wall Street Journal correspondent won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for reporting on China's brutal crushing of the Falun Gong spiritual sect.

Wild Grass evocatively narrates the quest for redress by the daughter of an elderly Falun Gong adherent beaten to death by police, a legal clerk who pursues a class-action suit for overtaxed farmers and Beijing residents who try to sue government authorities for illegally confiscating their homes.

The pursuit of justice is quixotic at best and in two of three cases the protagonists land in jail. But the subtle portrayals by Johnson, who details his own travails as a reporter evading police, underscore the courage of ordinary Chinese and the increasing complexity of modern China.

"The story I'm portraying here is positive," Johnson said in an interview. "People are pushing for change by standing up for their rights."

Readers new to China will be surprised to learn that the country which tops many human rights groups' lists of serious offenders has built an increasingly sophisticated legal system from scratch since revolutionary leader Mao Zedong died in 1976.

"This legal system is now being taken seriously by Chinese people. Although it is imperfect, and at the end of the day the Communist Party still has control over the legal system, people are using it," he said in a summary of his book's theme.

Johnson said many of the tensions in the world's most populous country and fastest growing economy arise because "they've dealt with the economic problems very well, but they haven't dealt with the political side of things at all."

The 42-year-old author, who moved to Berlin after seven years in China, said few observers expect China to become democratic overnight.

"But if there was at least some indication it was pursuing gradual political reform just as it pursued gradual economic reform, I think a lot of people would feel better about the country's prospects," said Johnson.

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