

Populist Authoritarianism: The Future of the Chinese Communist Party

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The conventional wisdom on China’s domestic political situation is one of tension and turmoil. China’s leaders seem beset with a host of problems for which they have no ready answer. They face a growing number of popular protests in the cities and the countryside. Corruption seems to be endemic, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) lacks the means or the will to crackdown on corrupt officials, despite more than two decades of rhetoric that stopping corruption is a matter of “life or death” for the party. Faced with growing popular nationalism and critical discourse in cyberspace, it attempts to control and limit the expression and dissemination of critical views. The CCP shows no sign of undertaking fundamental political reforms; instead it is determined to remain in power through short term solutions to immediate problems.

Despite this conventional wisdom, the CCP has been more adaptable and more resilient than it often gets credit for. Most observers look at China’s political reform primarily in terms of whether it is becoming more democratic, but democratization is not the only metric for measuring political development. If we recognize that greater democracy is not the immediate goal of China’s leaders, we may also find that the domestic environment is not so desperate or fragile after all. The CCP is pursuing a variety of political reforms that are intended to enhance the capacity of the state to govern effectively, if not democratically. It has used a mix of measures to shore up popular support, resolve local protests, and incorporate the beneficiaries of economic reform into

the political system. In turn, it also forcefully represses efforts to challenge its authority and monopoly on political power and organization. As a result, public opinion is surprisingly complacent: while many are unhappy with their current situation, they remain optimistic about the future. This is not a recipe for imminent revolution. China's leaders face a series of serious problems, but they are more chronic than acute, and absent a sudden and unexpected flare-up do not pose an imminent threat to the incumbent regime.

Unity of Purpose

Under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, the CCP has made a priority of creating a relatively prosperous and harmonious society through economic development that is both rapid but also scientific. Although these familiar phrases are a bit vague, they do indicate the CCP's current priorities. In contrast to the emphasis on unrestrained growth of the Jiang era, the current leadership is also concerned with the distribution of growth, the increasingly apparent environmental degradation, the spreading plague of corruption, and the growing diversification of society.

This change of emphasis seems not to have engendered the kind of elite conflict that characterized Chinese elite politics in the past. There are no identifiable individuals, groups or factions calling for a retreat from the *gaige kaifang* strategy and a return to central planning and isolation from the international economy. Current leaders seem committed to a continuation of the high growth policies of the Jiang era, balanced with a commitment to the economic development of inland provinces, a program begun under Jiang and accelerated under the incumbent leaders; a reduction in the degree of economic

inequality, which was already apparent by the mid-1990s but only recently became a salient political issue; and possibly a “greener” orientation in economic development to address both the long-term costs of environmental degradation and short-term costs of public protest, which have been particularly prominent in recent months. Efforts to spread the benefits of economic development to a wider range of the country and a greater share of the population have been well publicized, but still without dramatic results.

The CCP remains focused on improved governance instead of the kinds of political reforms (i.e., democratization) that many observers are looking for. From their perspective, the reforms they are undertaking, and that the party has been pursuing for more than a decade, are designed to maintain social stability and ensure the survival of the CCP as the ruling party. In some cases, efforts to maintain stability focus on addressing the causes of unrest, as noted above. In other cases, efforts focus on the expression of critical ideas, not just political dissent calling for democracy but also criticism of the CCP’s handling of foreign and domestic affairs. Inside the party, a new ideological study campaign is also trying to keep party members “on message,” despite grumbling that such an approach is incongruous in contemporary China.

This does not mean to suggest that Hu Jintao is firmly in control of the party, government, and military and that he can control the policy process and personnel appointments without challenge. While he is making progress consolidating authority and solidifying support, his work is not yet done. Once that work is done, he may surprise both his supporters and critics by undertaking the kinds of political liberalization that are currently being suppressed, but there is little evidence to support this prediction. However, there is also little evidence to suggest that if Hu were to stumble and not be re-

elected as general secretary, his successor would not embark on a radically different policy agenda. The CCP's top leaders seem remarkably unified in the proper responses to the economic and social problems they are facing.

New Political Institutions

The CCP is not complacent as a ruling party. In order to adapt itself to the changing economic and social environment, the CCP has created a variety of new political institutions to channel political participation and to provide a bridge between state and society. The most well known of these new institutions are village elections. Begun in the 1980s and instituted nationwide throughout the 1990s, village elections have provided some areas with the opportunity to remove incompetent or corrupt leaders and replace them with more popular leaders from the local community. The extent to which these elections conform to the election law for nominating and electing leaders is unclear, and reports abound of interference by higher level officials. But villages that have experienced successful elections reportedly have a more stable political atmosphere and are better able to enforce even unpopular policies such as family planning and tax collection. Experiments are also underway to hold elections at the township level,¹ urban districts, and for some local party posts, which were formerly the sole preserve of the party's nomenklatura system. How far this process can go – and how far the CCP is willing to let it go – before it impinges on the party's authority will be an important indicator of the further evolution of China's political system.

¹ Although some areas have experimented with township elections, other areas are also experimenting with eliminating the township level of government and turning it into an administrative arm of the county. This change would make moot the spread of elections upward from the villages in rural areas.

With rapid privatization of the economy has come a variety of business and trade associations. Some have been created by the state, but they are not simply the “transmission belts” of old. These official business associations are a means for the party to try to monitor and control the private sector, but they also provide opportunities for businessmen to seek official support and intervention on business related issues. They play a symbiotic role, both representing the state and business. In addition, Chinese companies are banding together to form their own associations to lobby the government on technical standards, protection of property rights, and similar common interests. They typically do not raise broader public policy issues, but their activities and success may create public space for other groups. For example, home-owners, teachers, retirees, and other groups have their own organizations to promote and pursue their collective interests. They are not necessarily politically oriented, but even non-political achievements can have broader implications. In particular, these new professional and civic organizations are not based exclusively on where people work or live, or what community or clan they came from. Because they attract members from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and because individuals can belong to more than one group, they may create the types of social networks that create a more orderly society, but also one that expects more and seeks more from its government.

The CCP has also provided another institution for state-society interaction, the letters and visits offices of governments at all levels. They ostensibly provide a conduit for citizens to petition the government to correct grievances and injustices, but the efficacy of this channel is doubtful. Although the number of cases presented to letters and visits offices has skyrocketed, the number of successfully resolved cases remains

miniscule. Yu Jianrong, a prominent scholar of rural affairs, has even suggested abolishing the offices because they are so ineffective. On the other side, the central government has reportedly ordered local officials to clamp down on local citizens trying to make use of this system, especially those who appeal to provincial and central levels. The growing use of this system, combined with frustrations created when people cannot get the relief they are entitled to, presents a potential challenge to the state. As Huntington noted, when the level of participation overwhelms the available institutions, instability is likely to rise. If the state cannot reduce demands percolating up, or increase its responsiveness to those demands, the alternative is to have the demands raised outside official channels. This can already be seen in the spread of popular protests.

Responding to Popular Protests

Popular protests have become a common feature of political life in China. Although full, accurate, and reliable reporting is not available, it is clear that protests are growing in size and frequency. This alarming trend reflects both the growing grievances among local communities and social groups as well as the ineffectiveness of existing political institutions in resolving these grievances. In addition, the pattern of local protests shows an increasing sense of rights-consciousness among protestors and an emphasis on the implementation side of the policy process. Protestors ask for better and fairer implementation of policies, rather than challenge the propriety of the policy itself. This may be strategic behavior – protestors know a direct challenge to the state’s authority to make policy is unacceptable and will elicit forceful suppression – or it may signal general support for the existing system but anger and frustration when local

officials do not properly implement and enforce public policies. As a result, the growing size and frequency of protestors may not be an imminent threat to the regime, even if they do threaten local stability.

The state has chosen to respond to these protests with a mix of carrots and sticks. On one hand, they make concessions to the tangible and often monetary demands of protests which are deemed appropriate and legitimate. On the other hand, they punish a few protestors as purported leaders as a warning to others that such protests remain risky, especially for those who organize and present demands. Despite the dire consequences, the rising tide of protests shows no sign of abating.

Incorporating New Social Groups

Just as the CCP uses a combination of rewards and punishments to handle protests, it uses a similar strategy to incorporate new economic and social elites into the political system, while excluding those with more explicitly political goals. The “three represents” slogan, originally coined by Jiang Zemin and enshrined in the party constitution in 2002, provides the justification for admitting “advanced productive forces” (i.e., entrepreneurs, high tech specialists, professionals, and other new urban elites) into the CCP. The CCP now claims to represent their interests as well as peasants, workers, and soldiers, the traditional social base of the party, and welcomes them into the party. Entrepreneurs also increasingly run in elections for village chiefs and local people’s congresses and are frequently appointed to higher level people’s congresses, government posts, and even party committees. Many in the CCP remain critical of this trend, fearing it betrays the party’s traditions and also concerned also about the popular

disdain for the merger of political and economic elites. But the inclusion of new urban elites is a result of the CCP's commitment to reform, and will undoubtedly reinforce that commitment. Whether it will keep legitimate participation within existing institutions or will create pressures for broader democratization, which would weaken the CCP's grip on power, will be the ultimate test of whether the CCP's adaptation will prove successful.

At the same time, the CCP still excludes those who pose a direct challenge to the status quo. Efforts to create an opposition party, the China Democracy Party, were blocked and the leaders of the effort sentenced to lengthy jail sentences. Those who seek true autonomy from the state, including labor unions, Christian churches, Falungong practitioners, and advocates of free speech and freedom of the press, are normally punished for their efforts. The state monitors internet chat rooms, electronic bulletin boards, email, and according to some even instant messages to root out subversive content. In recent months, the state has stepped up efforts to limit access to the internet and the electronic exchange of ideas to stymie dissent. It also reportedly ordered an end to media coverage of "public intellectuals" in order to better control reporting on current affairs.

These trends suggest a change in the CCP's treatment of political activity. Rather than periodic swings between liberalization (*fang*) and retrenchment (*shou*), the CCP now has a more nuanced strategy of including supportive individuals in the political process, but excluding the ideas and individuals it perceives to be threatening. The boundary between threatening and acceptable is not always clear, and those who choose to explore this border often suffer the consequences. Both inclusionary and exclusionary policies are

promoted simultaneously, with frequent ebbs and flows in the extent to which each is emphasized.

New Populist Orientation

Toward the end of the Jiang era, the CCP followed a strongly elitist strategy, targeting the beneficiaries of reform and ignoring the plight of those who were slow to enjoy the fruits of economic modernization. As inequality and corruption became ever more prominent, popular resentment toward the close relationship between economic and political elites also grew. Under the new Hu-Wen leadership, the CCP has downplayed the first of the three represents (the urban elites) and emphasizes the third – the interests of the vast majority of society. This commitment to China's have-nots has been shown both symbolically and substantively. Premier Wen has frequently visited miners, SARS and AIDS patients, and victims of natural and man-made disasters, even developing a reputation for weeping in public to show his sympathy. Beyond this, the state has also boosted rural incomes through subsidies and income transfers. One immediate effect has been the return of migrant labor back to the countryside, creating labor shortages in some cities and putting upward pressure on wages and working conditions.

Several motives may be behind this populist shift. First, Hu and Wen spent parts of their careers in some of China's poorest provinces. They did not make their careers in cosmopolitan Shanghai, as did many in Jiang's camp, and therefore have a better understanding of why some areas continue to lag behind. Second, as part of their succession strategy they need to distinguish themselves from Jiang. In the grand tradition of Chinese politics, they have not abandoned the three represents slogan, but have

redefined it. Third, Jiang's elitist strategy led to growing inequalities and disenchantment, potentially threatening popular support for the CCP's policy priorities. A slight re-orientation of the reform strategy could restore some of the balance lost during the years of rapid growth. These three reasons are quite complementary, and show why this new populist orientation has both political and practical benefits.

Attention to Public Opinion

It has become a truism that China's leaders are increasingly attentive to public opinion, especially in foreign policy. This claim is more often asserted than demonstrated. For every story of successful collective action, there are many more that show popular opinion is routinely disregarded by central and local officials. The rise of "popular nationalism" best exemplifies the ambiguous role of public opinion in China's policy process. While leaders cannot ignore public opinion, they are also not powerless to shape it. Even though the agreement to join the WTO was intensely unpopular, and Zhu Rongji personally vilified for agreeing to terms with the US, China ultimately joined the WTO with only marginal changes in the terms. Anti-American sentiments after the bombing of the Chinese embassy and the collision of the EP-3 surveillance plane with a Chinese jet fighter were not allowed to rupture US-China relations. The recent outpouring of anti-Japanese hostility led to a sudden surge of demonstrations, demands for boycotts of Japanese products, and violence against Japanese owned stores and factories. The state was apparently involved in some planning for these protests, but its role was to limit and channel these activities as much as mobilizing them. Once the state called an end to public demonstrations, planned marches were cancelled. The state is

clearly attentive to public opinion, and public opinion is more apparent, but the extent to which the state is influenced by public opinion remains unclear.

Public Support and State Legitimation

In contrast to common portrayals of acute strife between state and society, anecdotal reports and survey research show a surprising degree of popular support for the existing political system and the reform agenda. There is tremendous pride in the country's rapid rise and growing prosperity. Even those who are unsatisfied with their current situation are optimistic about the future. There is also wide-spread support for the state's commitment to economic reform in general and privatization in particular, even among those suffering from the transitions underway.

In a similar fashion, there is a wide-spread belief that democracy is not appropriate for China, at least not at its current level of economic and cultural development. This, of course, is the CCP's contention, and it is not challenged by most Chinese. It is challenged by many intellectuals and dissidents, but their calls for quick and immediate democratization are opposed not only by the regime but also by most of society. Part of this is the lingering anti-rural bias – so long as most Chinese live in the countryside, urban residents are unlikely to support a one-person, one-vote form of democracy. Under these conditions, the CCP does not face strong societal pressure for democratization. Lacking an alternative political system that is both preferable and viable, the status quo seems secure for the near future.

China's leaders are not content with the stability of the status quo, and as the rest of this paper explains are actively seeking to gain a more solid foundation for the

legitimacy of its rule. While it is true that its legitimacy is derived from sustained economic growth, it also relies on patriotic/nationalist feelings and the CCP's ability to maintain national unity to justify its rule. The CCP is able to take advantage of (and perhaps stoke) optimism about the future, national pride, and fear of chaos to dampen pressures for change. Calls for better governance are likely to resonate with the public more than calls for democratization.

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