

Political Reform and the Fragility of Communist Rule in China

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Chinese leaders are haunted by the fear that their days in power are numbered. President Hu Jintao, like Jiang Zemin who preceded him, knows that he lacks the personal prestige and charisma of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, the founders of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Today's leaders also recognize that two and a half decades of economic reform and opening to the world have radically transformed Chinese society and created latent political challenges to communist rule.

The leaders' insecurity was sharply heightened by the events of 1989. Massive pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and more than one hundred thirty other cities—and the differences among the top leaders over how to deal with them—almost brought down communist rule in China. Just months after that close call, China's leaders watched with foreboding as the Berlin Wall fell and communist governments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe began to collapse. No wonder China's leaders are anxious about their own political survival.

Before 1989, Deng Xiaoping and other post-Mao leaders had taken some bold steps in the direction of political reform to spur economic modernization and restore popular trust in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Most notably, they cut back the Communist Party's totalitarian domination of the government and society. But this trend was halted and in certain respects reversed after Tiananmen. Party

conservatives blamed the political reforms for subverting the Party's authority and enabling the protests.

The lessons they drew from the Tiananmen crisis were that for Communist Party rule to survive, they must do three things: Prevent large scale social unrest; avoid public leadership splits that might embolden people to take to the streets; and keep the military loyal to the Party.¹

Since then, Chinese leaders have sought to sustain communist rule by enhancing the system's responsiveness to China's increasingly diverse and pluralistic society, and managing elite politics so that divisions at the top do not mobilize opposition from below.

Responsiveness

Devising methods to make governance more responsive while avoiding any loss of Communist Party control is a difficult challenge. The leaders have shied away from elections that would make officials formally accountable to the public or even to rank and file Party members instead of to the Party authorities above them. Communist Party appointment of government officials at all levels—sometimes called the *nomenklatura* power after the Soviet practice—is the cornerstone of communist rule. Chinese officials and intellectuals talk a lot about democracy these days—the term was invoked more than sixty times in President Hu Jintao's

address to the Communist Party's National Congress last October. But they have shown no courage to actually institutionalize it.²

China introduced elections of village leaders under Deng Xiaoping, and they have continued to the present. Deng even spoke about the ultimate goal of national elections.³ After Tiananmen, however, the efforts of political reformers to extend direct elections of leaders from the village level, which is not part of the government, to the township level, which is responsible for many key government policies such as tax collection, have been stymied by the timidity of Party leaders. As Jiang Zemin reportedly said, if direct elections of leaders in villages today lead to electing leaders in townships tomorrow, and in counties the day after tomorrow, very soon they would directly elect national leaders. "If things go like this," he asked, "where would the Party's leadership be?"⁴ Jiang Zemin had sought to consolidate his power in 1997 by promising the National Party Congress that he would extend the "scope of democracy" and establish a "sound system of democratic elections."⁵ But then he and his colleagues in the Politburo lost their nerve: The Congress did not formally endorse township elections, and when some localities experimented with them, they were banned as unconstitutional in 2001. (The constitution grants formal authority for choosing township leaders to local legislatures which typically rubber-stamp the Communist Party's nominations. The Chinese constitution, which has been revised eight times, could easily have been modified to allow direct township elections if the leaders had really wanted them.)⁶ Direct elections of county or city officials have never been seriously contemplated.

As a substitute for elections, the CCP has come up with a variety of mechanisms to allow citizens to voice their views of individual officials as part of the selection process. One method is called "open recommendation and selection" (*gongtui gongxuan*). Anyone already serving as an official is allowed to apply for the post and take a written examination. The top scorers are given an oral examination by

a group of elite representatives, and then the top two vote-getters are recommended to the Party committee at the district or county level.⁷ Another method is to use straw polls (called "hai xuan" or "sea election") to winnow down to the most popular individuals the list of proposed nominees passed to the upper level Party organ. Party officials, as well, are supposed to be reviewed as part of their promotion process in informal meetings of citizens. The Party wants to identify candidates with local support to make sure that its policies are smoothly implemented.

To head off social unrest, Beijing orders local officials to fight corruption, clean up the terrible air and water pollution produced by the rush to industrialization, and provide social goods like health, education and welfare. But the central leaders are continually frustrated by failures to implement these priorities at the local level. Local officials remain fixated on economic growth because the growth rate is the number one criterion for promotion, and growth is what creates jobs and other patronage opportunities. One obvious answer to the problem is to empower citizen watchdogs. But how is it possible to bring public opinion to bear on local officials without ceding the Party's control over these officials?

To strengthen public oversight of local government Beijing has passed laws and regulations requiring public hearings to review the environmental impact of construction projects, the posting of local budgets and regulations on government websites (e-government), and open bidding for government construction contracts. In some townships, supervisory groups made up of elites holding other Party and government posts have been established to oversee government administration. And by law individuals are legally permitted to express their grievances by petitioning.⁸

Is this managed citizen-oversight an effective method of monitoring governance or a form of faux participation that will only fuel more discontent?⁹ Recent demonstrations against the construction of a highly polluting chemi-

cal plant in Xiamen and the high-speed maglev train route in Shanghai were provoked by objections not just to the projects themselves, but also to the inadequate public notification and discussion of them. The blackout of news about demonstrations also evokes a new rallying cry, “the people’s right to know.”

One way to make citizen oversight more effective would be to allow it to be collectively organized. But the Communist Party, wary of any potential organized opposition, keeps social organizations on a very tight leash. Every non-governmental organization, including religious groups, must be registered with a government sponsor who is responsible for its actions. And the chartering of organizations focused on public policy, such as environmental protection, is strictly limited. In contrast to the tight restrictions on citizen groups, the Party facilitates the organization of state and private businesses into trade associations which lobby actively in their own interests.¹⁰

From the standpoint of China’s leaders, the mass media is an attractive alternative to organized citizen groups for monitoring government actions. The Communist Party allows the now commercialized mass media to serve as a watchdog over local politicians. A popular nationally televised program on China Central Television called *Focus* showcases government responsiveness by investigating failures on the part of local governments and reporting on how they are remedied almost overnight as a result of the publicity. The State Environmental Protection Agency actively calls on the media to help it expose local politicians who neglect environmental protection. And the Party censors have opened up the issues of food and pharmaceutical quality for investigative journalism because top down methods so clearly are inadequate. Because the editors of almost all newspapers, magazines, television stations and news websites are hired and fired by government or Party agencies, it’s less risky to empower a media outlet than a citizen association. Journalists have discovered that exposing malfeasance of local officials sells newspapers and is politically per-

missible ... if the abuses are in localities other than where their own publication is based. But when the media’s monitoring of outside localities (*yidi jiandi*, supervision in a different place) started to endanger the careers of provincial and municipal officials, these officials got the Politburo to outlaw the practice in 2005. At present, journalists find that investigations of abuses outside their own area won’t get them in trouble so long as they limit their exposés to scandals at the county level and below.

Leadership Politics¹¹

After Tiananmen, China’s leaders were determined to never again let their internal disagreements spill out into public view. They had learned their lesson: If they don’t hang together, they could hang separately, as the Western saying goes. If the leadership group remains cohesive despite the competition that inevitably arises within it, then the Communist Party and the security police can keep social unrest from spreading out of control and the regime will survive. Unless people receive some signal of “permission” from the top, protests are likely to fizzle out before they grow politically threatening. But if the divisions among the top leaders come into the open as they did in 1989, people will take to the streets with little fear of punishment.

Beginning with Deng Xiaoping, CCP leaders have tried to reduce the risk of destabilizing leadership splits and the rise of another tyrant like Mao Zedong. They regularized leadership competition by introducing fixed terms of office, term limits, and a mandatory retirement age to regularize leadership competition. Leadership politics have become more institutionalized and less volatile. The oligarchs do everything they can to prevent divisions among themselves. The practice of having the top leader hold three key positions—general secretary of the CCP, president of the PRC, and chairman of the Central Military Commission is designed to prevent destructive cleavages among the leaders.

Leadership succession is the Achilles heel of authoritarian governments, the moment when it is most difficult to keep the competition for power within the black box. When Jiang Zemin, having reached the age of seventy-seven, retired as Communist Party general secretary (2002) and President (2003), it was the first time that a leader of a large communist country had ever peacefully handed down power while still alive. Jiang managed to hang on to his job as chairman of the Central Military Commission because it did not require retirement at seventy. But without the institutional authority of the top Party post, Jiang's influence diminished, and two years later in 2004 he retired completely. During the two years when Jiang and Hu shared power, subordinate officials felt uneasy. The last time China had two different voices coming from the leadership they caused the near disaster of the 1989 demonstrations. Anxious to prevent any threats to stability, senior and retired leaders reportedly convinced Jiang that the best way to preserve his legacy was to retire completely.

At the Communist Party National Congress in October 2007, the current leaders faced the challenge of coming to agreement over the next generation of leaders, in particular who would succeed Hu Jintao as China's top leader five years later in 2012. Although the formal authority to choose China leaders—the Politburo, Standing Committee of the Politburo, Secretariat, Central Military Commission, and general secretary—rests with the 371-member CCP Central Committee, the incumbent leaders hammer out the slate in secret.

Hu Jintao lacked the power to hand-pick his own successor (in contrast to Mao, Deng, or past Mexican presidents). He was forced to choose an individual who would be acceptable to the other oligarchs. Everyone in the collective leadership wants to avoid the risks of an internal power struggle. One way of settling the issue would have been to let the Central Committee hold a genuine competitive election with open nominations, as Vietnam does now. But the leaders were not prepared to give

up their monopoly of power and make themselves accountable to the larger body.

In the lead-up to the Party Congress, policy advisors and other experts publicly promoted the notion of intra-party democracy as the first step toward fuller democracy. They had high hopes that the Congress would provide the occasion for Hu Jintao, having consolidated his authority during his first term, to finally emerge as the genuine political reformer they believed him to be. In the end, however, they were disappointed because despite all the talk, the actual changes to institutions and practices within the CCP were trivial.¹²

Instead of letting the Central Committee exercise its full authority over the succession, the incumbent leaders cautiously adopted a half-way measure reminiscent of the way they have handled local elections—trying to be responsive without risking the loss of control that formal accountability would imply. Four months before the Party Congress in June 2007, they held a special expanded meeting of the 16th Central Committee. Hu Jintao gave an important speech in the morning to try out the themes he planned to present at the upcoming Party Congress, and in the afternoon the body held an informal straw poll (some people have called it a *hai xuan* or sea election similar to the informal votes taken at the village and township level to determine the popularity of nominees) to consider the names of people who might be nominated to the 17th Central Committee. Reportedly Xi Jinping's name rose to the top which helped the oligarchs converge on him as the likely heir apparent.¹³

Achieving consensus among the oligarchs required a package deal. Four new faces were promoted to the Standing Committee of the Politburo. Xi Jinping, who came out on the stage first in the position of potential successor, does not have particularly close ties to Hu or to anyone else for that matter. Hu's presumed favorite, Li Keqiang, had to settle for the number two position. Although Li or someone else might challenge Xi for the number one position over the next five years—Xi's position may

not be all that solid in view of the fact that he has not yet been given a position on the Central Military Commission—an open contest is something that all the leaders have an interest in avoiding.

We know very little about the political views of this new generation of leaders. Xi Jinping or Li Keqiang may favor some political reform but they have hidden it up to now. Compared to the previous generation of technocrats, more of the new generation have been educated in law, management or economics; but their graduate degrees were obtained in part-time executive programs and their knowledge may not go very deep.

Looking Toward the Future

Despite the leaders' collective interest in preventing open splits, individual politicians have moments of temptation when an interest in acquiring more power for oneself might lead one to exploit a crisis situation and reach out to mobilize a following of ordinary citizens or rank and file Party members. Large protests increase the risk of a split by showing leaders that a following is already in place. Social unrest actually can create schisms at the top. The danger is not a matter of the particular personalities in the oligarchy at any one time, but is built into the structure of authoritarian politics. Changes in the mass media heighten the risk of the public being drawn into elite disagreements. Leadership splits telegraphed to the public over the Internet have triggered revolutionary upheavals in other authoritarian regimes. In a society undergoing explosive change, political outcomes are unpredictable because the political game is evolving too. Every day new opportunities and challenges present themselves to ambitious politicians in China. Keeping leadership competition under wraps is becoming increasingly difficult as the media and Internet compete for audiences by testing the limits of what they can report.

But for the near term, the important news is that China's oligarchs have figured out a

way to bargain out their individual interests in a way that allows them to hang together and maintain the closed politics of the Communist Party. The intense competition among them hasn't yet forced them to open up the process to broader participation within the Communist Party (as Vietnam has done) or to the society at large. We should plan on dealing with China's communist leaders for some time to come.

As a rising power that wants to reassure the world that it has benign intentions and isn't a threat, China cares more about its international reputation than any other country in the world today. Chinese policy makers are very attentive to our views of its international behavior. When we criticize their actions in Africa, they start to change them. But American calls for political reform in China are likely to fall on deaf ears or, worse, provoke a popular nationalist backlash.

One way of getting leverage on China's stalled political reforms is to press on issues such as food and pharmaceutical safety where our own interests are clear. The Chinese recognize our right to demand better systems of regulation and transparency to guarantee the quality of what we import from China. China's hierarchical system has proven inadequate for monitoring the behavior of local officials and firms without the oversight that real elections and a free press would provide. International demands for improved monitoring of exports could reinforce domestic demands in China for improved democratic accountability.

- 1 This essay will address only the first two. For a fuller discussion see Susan L. Shirk, *China Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 2 The timidity of Chinese political reforms is highlighted by comparison with the recent changes introduced in Vietnam, see Eddy Malesky, "Vietnam through Chinese Eyes: Vertical and Horizontal Accountability in Single-Party Regimes," (with Regina Abrami and Yu Zheng). Presented Conference on Communist Resilience, Dartmouth College, May 25-26, 2007..
- 3 Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Remin chubanshe, 1993), p 220.

- 4 Lianjiang Li, "The Politics of Introducing Direct Township Elections in China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 171 (September 2002), p 721.
- 5 Jiang Zemin, "Hold High the Great Banner of Deng Xiaoping Theory for an All-Round Advancement of the Cause of Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics into the 21st Century," *Beijing Review*, Vol. 40, No. 40 (October 6-12, 1997).
- 6 Lianjiang Li predicts a possible future clash between local legislatures who have the formal authority to select township leaders and the CCP organization bureaus that actually make the selection decisions. One way to resolve such a conflict would be to introduce direct township elections. Lianjiang Li, p 721.
- 7 Tony Saich and Xuedong Yang, "Innovation in China's Local Governance: 'Open Recommendation and Selection,'" *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Summer 2003), pp 805-208.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Some Chinese officials have enthusiastically embraced the "deliberative democracy" approach developed by American political scientist James Fishkin which involves communities discussing in town meetings how to spend their budgets instead of electoral representation. Ethan J. Leib and Baogang He, eds. *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- 10 Scott Kennedy, *The Business of Lobbying in China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- 11 This section draws on material in the author's book, *China Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp 35-78.
- 12 Local Party committees will start taking votes on major issues and appointments; the Politburo will report regularly to the Central Committee and local standing committees will do the same to local Party committees; local Party congresses will meet more often instead of just to select Party committees. The tension between top-down control and bottom-up responsiveness within the Party was reflected in the proposal that "candidates for leading positions in primary Party organizations are recommended both by Party members and the public in an open manner and by the Party organization at the next higher level." Xinhua, November 1, 2007, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/gyzg/t377262.htm>.
- 13 Joseph Fewsmith, "The 17th Party Congress: Informal Politics and Formal Institutions," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 23 (2007), p 7.