

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3073
December 3, 2010

Don't Get Your Hopes Up About Chinese Political Reform

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In recent weeks, there has been growing discussion about China's internal political situation. Most tantalizing to the American press was Premier Wen Jiabao's comments about the desirability of Chinese political reform.¹ What both this and speculation over the course of China's 2012 leadership transition highlight is the growing belief among Western analysts that China's political situation is in flux. Some even hold forth the hope that this will lead to changes in its political model.

Don't get your hopes up. Unfortunately, too many Western observers equate Chinese jockeying for political advantage and factional politics with real political reform or even democratization. Instead, for the foreseeable future, there will likely remain firm Chinese Communist Party (CCP) control of China's domestic politics—with all that means for Chinese behavior globally and the resultant impact on American national interests.

Threats to Chinese Political Stability. In reality, the current Chinese political structure is not interested in democratization; it is increasingly concerned with domestic stability. This, in turn, is threatened by rising income inequality, growing regional disparities, and official corruption.

Greater Income Inequality. Winston Churchill is said to have observed that “the inherent vice of *capitalism* is the *unequal* sharing of blessings; the inherent virtue of *socialism* is the equal sharing of miseries.” Under Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao, there was a steady growth of blessings as China's economy continuously expanded, often in

double digits. However, the sharing of those blessings has steadily become more unequal. China today has over a hundred billionaires (based on dollar equivalent),² but at the same time, tens of millions of Chinese are still living in poverty.³

Regional Disparity. Complicating matters is where the rich and poor are located. Many of the wealthier regions have been along the coast; they were the first to create Deng Xiaoping's special economic zones, and they have continued to benefit as the Chinese leadership has emphasized urban over rural growth. By contrast, the inland provinces, mostly rural, contain over half of China's poor.

Widespread Corruption. Exacerbating these concerns has been the problem of endemic corruption. In 2010, China scored a 3.5 in terms of corruption, according to Transparency International. (Denmark, Singapore, and New Zealand, the least corrupt states, scored 9.3, and the United States scored 7.1.)⁴

This combination of factors has created major discontent among the broader population, with a growing number of “mass incidents,” as the Chinese term mass protests. From some 74,000 incidents in 2004, Chinese newspaper reporting suggests that there were nearly 130,000 incidents in 2008. “Put

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3073>

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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in a different metric, these numbers translate into an increase from approximately 24 mass incidents a day in 1993 to over 248 a day in 2006 and 329 in 2008.”⁵

CCP Legitimacy. All of these factors strike at the legitimacy of the rule of the CCP. Even though China is not a democracy, its leadership nonetheless cannot afford to ignore the population—especially without ideology as a rallying point. Thus, CCP rule is consciously and deliberately associated with a steady improvement in the life of the Chinese population, not only in abstract terms as GDP per capita but also the greater availability of material comforts and the promise of a better life for each succeeding generation.

While this succeeded for several decades, the growing disparities and income inequality have raised questions about whether everyone is still benefiting. Corruption by party members exacerbates this issue, since it underscores the idea that only some are benefiting.

For now, the CCP has succeeded in avoiding the perception that corruption and other such problems are rooted in the party itself. This may well have been a major motivation for the decision to clamp down on Google. The problem with Google was not so much the ability of Chinese netizens to see pictures from the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre but the discovery that comparable problems of corruption and inequality exist nationwide—in which case, the problem is not one of local officials but endemic to the party.

The Nature of Reform. In this context, the impetus for reform, as suggested by Wen and others, is not to allow the average Chinese citizen more

access to the levers of power but to promote stability. Nowhere does the idea of the citizenry seeking a greater voice enter the equation.

What, then, is the basis for “reform”? Wen’s comments indicate that the real intent is to somehow increase accountability within the party while retaining power. Only by increasing accountability can problematic party members be identified and corrected if possible or removed if necessary. But this increased accountability is not the same as instituting popular votes, much less multi-party democracy or any other fundamental political reform. Instead, it is similar to the limited efforts for reform that eventually led to the Tiananmen protests in 1989.

Implications for the United States. *American policymakers should maintain a close eye on the political situation in China, especially as it begins the transition from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping.* The impending transition will mark the rise of the last generation of Chinese leaders who personally experienced the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and therefore have firsthand experience of how far China has come. Assuming that previous patterns are maintained, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang will remain in power through the 19th Party Congress (2017) until 2022. Their successors will be drawn from a generation that will have only hazy memories of Mao Zedong’s politics and for whom China’s prestige has always been part of the fabric of international politics.

In this light, it is also essential that the U.S. maintain its network of alliances as the best means of shaping Chinese perceptions. As the next two generations of Chinese leaders rise, they should not be given the misimpression that a rising China will have free rein

1. Li Bin, “Wen Jiabao in Shenzhen Proposes Maintaining Reform and Opening, Places Wreath at Deng Xiaoping Memorial,” Xinhuanet, August 21, 2010, at <http://news.163.com/10/0821/15/6EKBT112000146BC.html> (December 1, 2010).
2. Reuters, “China’s Growing Economy Mints Billionaires,” *The New York Times*, October 14, 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/14/business/global/14rich.html> (December 1, 2010).
3. Jayati Ghosh, “Poverty Reduction in China and India: Policy Implications of Recent Trends,” United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, January 2010, p. 11, at http://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2010/wp92_2010.pdf (December 2, 2010).
4. Transparency International, “Corruptions Perceptions Index 2010,” p. 3, at http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results (December 1, 2010).
5. Andrew Wedeman, “Enemies of the State: Mass Incidents and Subversion in China,” American Political Science Association Meeting, September 2009, p. 7.

to intimidate its neighbors or dictate the future of the region. The only nation that can serve as a counterweight is the U.S. in conjunction with its allies and friends in the region. Washington should continue to coordinate with Tokyo, Seoul, Manila, Canberra, and Bangkok, as well as Taipei, Singapore, and other regional capitals, especially in the face of growing Chinese assertiveness.

Such support cannot be simply rhetorical, however. *A strong American presence requires not only healthy diplomatic ties but also public communications and robust trade ties.* In this regard, the strong support expressed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for a multilateral resolution to the South China Sea issue is a good move; by contrast, failure to effect the Korea–U.S. Free Trade Agreement is a blow to America’s position in the western Pacific, sending the wrong signal to the current and future Chinese leadership. It is to be hoped that this Administration will be able to build upon the former and correct for the latter.

Finally, it is important to recognize the limits of power. The closed, opaque nature of China’s political system limits American impact on China’s suc-

cession politics. But the U.S. *can* influence Chinese policies by *making clear its policies and stances in a consistent fashion.* Instead of vacillating on the conduct of military exercises in international waters or refraining from meeting with major leaders such as the Dalai Lama, the U.S. should make clear that it stands by its principles, including support for human rights and freedom of navigation, by its allies such as Japan and South Korea, and by its legal obligations, such as the sale of arms to Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act.

Keep Reforming and Opening. Deng Xiaoping launched China on a path away from Mao Zedong’s state-centered socialism by promoting the policy of “Reform and Opening.” As China’s new leaders prepare to take power over a growing economy and a more influential nation, it is to be hoped that they will follow in Deng’s footsteps and pursue a policy of greater openness. Such a reform would greatly reassure both the Chinese citizenry and their neighbors as to their ultimate intentions.

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