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# The Uncertain Prospects for Political Reform in China

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## Summary

Since the late 1970s the rapid growth of China's economy and its increasing interconnectedness with the outside world have fostered greater economic and social pluralism. This has not been matched by advances in political pluralism. China remains an authoritarian one-party state, with voices of dissent tightly controlled. Assessing political developments in the past few years, this article concludes that recent conceptual innovations—including Jiang Zemin's "three represents" and Hu Jintao's "harmonious society"—have done little to resolve China's basic political dilemma—namely, how to empower ordinary citizens and increase CCP accountability without triggering massive socio-political unrest.

**Key Words:** Political reform, Democracy, Pluralism, Authoritarianism, Communist party, Dissent, Harmonious society, Civil society, "Three represents"

China today suffers from an advanced case of political sclerosis. While the expansive, effervescent 1980s witnessed an upsurge of progressive political thinking and new hopes for a more open, pluralistic political order, the crackdown against student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square put an end to expectations of early reform, ushering in a prolonged period of regime insecurity and political intolerance.

When China's new leaders emerged from Jiang Zemin's shadow in the early years of the new millennium, hopes were rekindled that the long-stalled process of political reform might soon be jump-started. With the risk-averse Jiang out of the picture, it was reasoned, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao would no longer be constrained to keep a low profile and would be free to promote their own, ostensibly more progressive policy agenda.

It did not take long for Hu Jintao to deflate such expectations. In a September 2004 speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the National People's Congress, Hu made it clear that the Communist Party would not relinquish its 55-year monopoly of political power:

The Communist Party of China takes a dominant role and coordinates all sectors.... The leading position of the Party is a result of long-term practice and is clearly stipulated by the Constitution. People's congresses at all levels and their standing committees must consciously put themselves under the Party's leadership.... The role of Party organizations and Party members in government departments should be brought into full play ... so as to realize the Party's leadership over state affairs.<sup>1</sup>

Fifteen years after Tiananmen, China thus remains a one-party authoritarian state. Policy-making remains non-transparent. The mass media (including the Internet) remain under tight political control. Unauthorized organizations remain subject to intimidation and repression. And the Party's top leaders remain unaccountable to anyone other than a small coterie of their equally unaccountable comrades. To be sure, Chinese citizens are now freer than ever before (subject to resource limitations) to choose where to live, where to work, where to go to school, and where to travel, among other things. These are no small matters. But beyond a narrow spectrum of officially approved alternatives, they are not free to choose their

political affiliations, their bargaining agents, their news sources, or their leaders.

### **The Problem of Fingers and Thumbs**

Although heightened socio-economic expectations are normally accompanied by increased demands for political participation, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown, by virtue of their stunning success in fostering rapid economic growth, China's leaders have managed to avoid the instability inherent in demand-driven political reforms. In this respect, economic openness and opportunity have seemingly trumped political closure and control; the wish to get ahead has trumped the need to be heard; and personal freedom has trumped political freedom. With urban incomes quadrupling in less than two decades, and a new middle class emerging (whose growing material affluence is neatly embodied in 280 million cellphones; 130 million Internet users; 15 million private automobiles, 42 million satellite dishes, 130,000 lawyers, and 1700 KFC and McDonalds outlets), China's leaders have been afforded the luxury of kicking the can of political reform ever further down the road.

While rapid economic growth has thus enabled China's leaders to avoid making painful political choices, the combination of rapid socio-economic change and minimal political-institutional adaptation highlights a major difficulty confronting China's Communist regime as it struggles to accommodate to the new social forces and pressures unleashed in the process of economic reform. Charles Lindblom once observed that Leninist systems are particularly well suited to inducing social change from above; that is, they have muscular, well-developed statist "thumbs" capable of exerting powerful, highly concentrated pressure on society. By the same token, however, Leninist systems have weak, insensitive "fingers." That is, they have great difficulty accurately gauging and responding to dispersed societal signals.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Lindblom observed, pluralist democracies have relatively weak thumbs, rendering them incapable of generating concentrated coercive force; but they have sensitive, well-developed fingers, enabling them accurately to gauge and respond to changing environmental stimuli. In short, Leninist systems excel in *mechanisms of force*, while market democracies excel in *mechanisms of feedback*.

And therein lies the rub. For as Chinese society becomes more economically affluent, occupationally diverse, socially complex and information-rich, the need for enhanced sensitivity in the system's political sensors—or "input institutions"—increases markedly.<sup>3</sup> In the economic sphere, the market mechanism—Adam Smith's "invisible hand"—has begun to perform this function, enabling Chinese producers and consumers to respond quickly and effectively to shifting market signals. But there is a growing need for equally sensitive, responsive feedback mechanisms in the political sphere. In democratic societies this function is normally performed by interest groups, a free press, public opinion, and—ultimately—competitive elections. Lacking such independent, articulated input institutions, however, China's Leninist polity remains seriously insensitive. In effect, it suffers from being "all thumbs."

To compensate for the lack of autonomous socio-political interests and organizations, the CCP has traditionally adopted various "united front" techniques. Designed to link the party more closely with key non-party socio-economic constituencies and occupational groups through "mutual consultation and supervision," the most important united front organs have included the elitist Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, mass organizations such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions and the All-China Women's Federation, and the eight officially recognized "democratic parties." The problem with such organizations is that, despite their nominal commitment to mutual supervision and consultation, they are almost entirely creatures of the Communist Party. Closely controlled and supervised by party officials, such "corporatist" bodies are ill-suited to perform the vital, autonomous input/feedback functions needed to foster effective governance.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, because of their careful cultivation, tending, and periodic weeding by the CCP, these organizations are often cynically referred to as "flowerpots."

Implicitly conceding the inability of the CCP's traditional united front bodies to incorporate and The Uncertain Prospects for Political Reform in China represent the interests of all sectors of China's

increasingly complex, pluralistic society, Jiang Zemin lobbied hard in his final years as China's top leader to broaden the CCP's socio-economic base and thereby "keep abreast of the times." In February 2000 he stated that "Only if the party [represents] the development of China's advanced social productive forces, the forward direction for China's cultural advancement, and the ... fundamental interests of China's vast population will the party always be able to maintain an invincible position."<sup>5</sup> This rather awkward formulation was subsequently refined and repackaged as the "theory of the three represents" (*sange daibiao*). At the 16th Party Congress in 2002 the "three represents" were incorporated into the party's constitution.

Perforce, the constitutional inclusion of the "three represents" reflected the CCP's growing recognition of the urgent need to strengthen its societal "fingers." But it was only a first step, and a rather small one at that. For while the "three represents" arguably permitted a greater diversity of opinions and interests—including those of China's *nouveaux-riches* entrepreneurs—to be expressed *within* the 70 million-member CCP, in the absence of corresponding institutional changes this has done little to empower China's 1.2 billion *ordinary* citizens, who remain without an authentic political voice. While village elections, introduced in the 1980s, have enabled millions of rural dwellers to exercise a modicum of choice over their local leaders, village heads are not considered state officials; and their job performance is subject to periodic evaluation by the (wholly unelected) township governments above them.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Urgent Need to "Enhance Ruling Capacity"**

Notwithstanding Jiang Zemin's upbeat "theory of the three represents" and Hu Jintao's clear determination to maintain the Party's traditional monopoly on political power, the official Communiqué of the Fourth Plenum of the 16th CCP Central Committee, issued on September 19, 2004, was unusually candid and forthright in its assessment of the perilous state of Communist Party rule:

China's reform and development has reached a critical stage in which new problems are mushrooming.... The CPC's ruling status ... will not last forever if the Party does nothing to safeguard it. ... We must develop a stronger sense of crisis ... and enhance our ruling capacity in a more earnest and conscientious manner.<sup>7</sup>

The sources of the Party's deepening concern were not hard to find. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, a series of mounting socio-economic problems were allowed to accumulate, their political effects masked by continuing high rates of aggregate economic growth. The problems included rising urban unemployment (estimated at over 30 million in 2003); a growing urban-rural income gap, exacerbated by the predatory behavior of large numbers of village officials; widespread cadre corruption; a teetering banking system; rampant environmental degradation; and a looming HIV/AIDS epidemic, *inter alia*.<sup>8</sup> While the country's new leaders appear committed to dealing pro-actively with these (and other) challenges, it is by no means clear that the institutions of governance at their disposal are adequate to the task at hand.

Since the Tiananmen crackdown, "muddling through" has been the regime's political strategy of choice. Steady, high rates of economic growth in the 1990s, underpinned by a massive influx of foreign direct investment, helped make this strategy viable, taking the edge off socio-political discontent. When problems arose that could not be ignored—farmers protesting excessive extractions; laid-off workers demanding payment of embezzled wages and pensions; outraged parents demanding investigation of an explosion that killed several primary school students—they were handled on an *ad hoc*, individual basis. So long as such incidents were localized, isolated, and unorganized they could be dealt with by a paternalistic government determined to keep the lid on social disorder. If necessary, village elections could be held to remove corrupt rural cadres; government officials could launch high-profile investigations into the causes of a school fire (or coal-mine collapse); and money could be found to pay off angry workers and pensioners.<sup>9</sup>

In this connection, it has been noted that the regime has at least partially succeeded in shoring up its fragile popular legitimacy by encouraging individual rather than group-based inputs and by focusing complaints against local-level agencies or officials, thereby “diffusing possible aggression against the Chinese party-state.”<sup>10</sup> Such a strategy of localized anger displacement and redirection is most effective when discontent is small in scale and widely dispersed, and when communication among aggrieved groups is difficult. What began happening in the late 1990s, however, was the *mobilization* and *aggregation* of discontent by disadvantaged groups possessing modern means of communication—fax machines, cellphones, pagers, personal computers, short text messaging, and the Internet. As socialized manifestations of discontent became larger in scale, their potential political threat to the regime became greater.

It was under such circumstances that the CCP Central Committee, at its Fourth Plenum in September 2004, frankly acknowledged the fragility of Party rule in China and pledged to conscientiously “enhance ruling capacity.” What did Party leaders have in mind? In the Plenum’s official Communiqué, a number of measures were proposed that appeared aimed at improving the strained relations between the Party and the people:

- “The Party will promote the institutionalization, standardization and regularization of socialist democracy....
- “The Party will guarantee that the people carry out democratic election, policy making, management and supervision according to law, while improving the People’s Congress system and the system of multi-party cooperation and political consultation under CCP leadership....
- “The Party should support judicial and procuratorial organs to exercise their power independently and justly according to law....
- “A system to track down responsibilities for wrong decisions should be established....
- “The Party should continue to enforce and further improve existing rules and practices of democratic recommendation, multi-candidate selection, opinion solicitation on newly appointed official post, decision making through a vote by all members of a Party committee instead of arbitrary decision making by head of the committee, as well as democratic assessment of incumbent officials....
- “Weak, slack and impotent Party committees must be reshuffled in a timely manner, and unqualified Party members must be severely dealt with....”
- “Combatting corruption is an issue of life or death for the Party....”

While some observers welcomed the Fourth Plenum’s manifesto on “strengthening ruling capacity” as a harbinger of long-awaited institutional reforms, a careful reading of the remedies proposed in the Communiqué reveals that most of them—including those calling for expanded “democratic election and policy making”—were minor variations on the familiar united front themes of mutual cooperation, consultation, and supervision under the leadership of the Party. Although the scope for democratic “recommendation,” multi-candidate “selection,” and opinion “solicitation” was ostensibly broadened, all decision-making functions were to be exercised under the watchful eye of Party committees. Moreover, no mention was made of the need for autonomous input or feedback mechanisms to articulate the needs and interests of citizens *below* with the policies of the state *above*. On the contrary, the decision of the Fourth Plenum firmly reinforced the longstanding principle of party control over the means and media of opinion formation and expression: “The Party will firmly hold the direction of public opinion and correctly guide public opinion.... The principle that the Party controls the media must be upheld, so as to enhance the capability to guide public opinion.”<sup>11</sup>

As if to underscore the essential continuity of the Fourth Plenum’s prescriptions with long-established principles and policies of Party governance, a lengthy commentary by Politburo Standing Committee member Zeng Qinghong (a protégé of Jiang Zeming), published shortly after the Plenum, spelled out the dominant role to be played by the Party in all spheres of political life. Among other things, Zeng called for strengthening the Party’s control over legislative process and content; blurring the functional distinction

between Party and state leadership; and preventing the emergence of interest-based The Uncertain Prospects for Political Reform in China pluralism:

- “Upholding rule by law requires strengthening the Party’s leadership of legislative work and being good at turning what the Party advocates by way of statutory procedures into the national will....
- “The Decision proposes ... increasing to an appropriate extent the overlap in the duties and positions of Party and government leaders....
- “Creating sound supervisory channels ... will prevent the formation of vested interest groups.”<sup>12</sup>

Not coincidentally, each of these three imperatives directly contradicted reform proposals advanced by Zhao Ziyang in 1987. In this and other respects, the Fourth Plenum’s call for “strengthening ruling capacity” seemed less a manifesto for serious political reform than a call for patching up and applying a fresh coat of paint to the CCP’s stress-damaged institutional façade.

### The Quest for “Societal Harmony”

A good illustration of this is the emphasis in recent party propaganda work on creating a “harmonious society”. Since 2004 Party theorists have begun to promote a renaissance in Confucian philosophy, centering on the quest for a harmonious society. The cornerstone of this renaissance was laid by Premier Wen Jiabao on March 5, 2005, in his Report to the National People’s Congress. “We must,” said the Premier, “build a harmonious socialist society that is ... fair and just, trustworthy and friendly, full of vigor and vitality, secure and orderly, and in which man and nature are in harmony.” While there was nothing particularly onerous or alarming about the Premier’s exhortation, subsequent media commentaries gave a more problematic political spin to the quest for organic harmony. A few weeks later, On March 23, an article in the overseas edition of *People’s Daily* by a Vice-Chairman of the CCPCC defined the political goal of “harmony” as a desire to “reach unanimity after taking many things into consideration.” The author went on to say:

“When the five tones are harmonious, their sound is audible; when the five colors are harmonious, they become a set or well-designed pattern; when five flavors are harmonious, they are edible. When this logic is [applied] to administration, we must harmonize various kinds of interests, synthesize different opinions and defuse complicated contradictions.”

While this language is idealistic and even inspirational, it should not be forgotten that in Imperial China, a self-serving version of this same neo-Confucian value system was adapted by dynastic rulers as their official *ideologie d’etat*. As such, it was used, among other things, to impose upon a powerless, voiceless peasantry a paternalistic conception of political authority, embedded in a ritualized ethos of conformity, consensus, and compliance. While it is too early to draw conclusions about the likely impact of a neo-Confucian revival on the nature and quality of governance in contemporary China, in the absence of authentic political pluralism and institutionalized accountability, efforts to achieve organic unity and harmony under one—Party auspices are more likely to result in suppression of heterodox opinion than the spontaneous blending of complementary colors, flavors, or tones. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.

### Notes

- 1 Hu Jintao, “Speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the National People’s Congress” (September 15, 2004), in [http://english.people.com.cn/200409/15/eng20040915\\_157073.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200409/15/eng20040915_157073.html).
- 2 Charles Lindblom, *Politics and Markets: The World’s Political-Economic Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).
- 3 See Andrew Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 14:1 (January 2003), pp. 13–16.
- 4 See Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, “China, Corporatism, and the East Asia Model,” *The China Journal* 33 (January 1995), pp. 29–53.

- 5 Yu Yunyao, “Fully Strengthen Party Building in the New Era In Accordance With the Requirements of the ‘Three Represents.’” Translated in FBIS-CPP20010824000143 (August 24, 2001).
- 6 See Susan V. Lawrence, “Democracy, Chinese Style,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 32 (July 1994), pp. 61–68 and Kevin J. O’Brien, “Implementing Political Reform in China’s Villages,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 32 (July 1994), pp. 42–44.
- 7 An abridged Chinese text of the Fourth Plenum Communiqué, entitled “*Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu dangde zhizheng nengli jianshede jueding*” (Resolution of the CCP Central Committee on Building the Ruling Capacity of the Party) (September 19, 2004), appears in *Xinhua Wang Online* (Beijing), September 26, 2004. A lengthy English language commentary on the communiqué appears in [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200409/26/print20040926\\_158378.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200409/26/print20040926_158378.html).
- 8 The economic impact of these worsening stresses is assessed in Charles Wolf, Jr., et al, *Fault Lines in China’s Economic Terrain* (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 2003). The political impact is assessed in David Shambaugh, ed., *Is China Unstable?* (NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000).
- 9 According to a recent report by researchers at the CASS Institute of Sociology, the central government made one-off, *ad hoc* transfer payments totaling US \$3.1 billion to aggrieved urban workers in 1999, up almost 65% from the 1998 level.
- 10 Nathan, “Authoritarian Resilience,” p. 15.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Zeng Qinghong, “A Programmatic Document for Strengthening the Party’s Ruling Capacity: Study and Implement the Spirit of the Fourth Plenum of the 16th Party Committee, Strengthen the Party’s Ruling Capacity, /People’s Daily/ (internet edition), October 8, 2004; translated in FBIS CPP20041008000029 (October 8, 2004).