

China's New Authoritarianism

Written by Mark Chou

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MARK CHOU, JUL 22 2011

China's inability or refusal to democratize in recent decades has been a constant source of political consternation for the West. Being the world's largest remaining nation that has resisted democracy's global spread, it is perceived by many Western powers as an 'outlaw regime' potentially at odds with liberal democratic values and U.S. hegemony.[1] Even today, many political commentators invoke the horrific events of Tiananmen Square as an emblem of China's continuing resistance towards democratization and its disregard for human rights.[2] This is a position that the Communist Party of China (CPC) seemingly reaffirmed in two separate incidents recently: the first when it publically condemned the Nobel Committee for awarding the 2010 Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo for his human rights activism in China and the second when it cracked down on dissent within the country by detaining a number of the nation's leading activists and dissidents, among them being the well-known artist Ai Weiwei.[3]

These developments do not bode well for China's global image and reputation, particularly in the West. In fact, there remains a strong sense among many Western analysts and states people that, politically speaking, little has changed in China since the time of Mao. As a result, the rise of China as a global power has become more a cause for concern than an opportunity for engagement and dialogue. Many of these sentiments were echoed afresh by the U.S. Democratic Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, during the Chinese President Hu Jintao's official visit to Washington in January 2011. When asked by Jon Ralston in an interview about the Chinese President's visit, Reid responded by saying: 'Jon, I'm going to go back to Washington tomorrow and meet with the president of China. He is a dictator. He can do a lot of things through the form of government they have.'[4] Then, having perhaps realized the callousness of his brazen remark, the Senator backpedaled, but only slightly, adding: 'Maybe I shouldn't have said "dictator". But they have a different type of government than we have and that's an understatement.'

Just how accurate is the Senator's assessment – of President Hu and of China's political system more broadly? Though many of China's official state policies and actions may make Western political commentators seriously question the democratic credentials of China, which they are right to do in a number of respects, can we continue to crudely categorize China and the CPC as a democratic pariah – a totalitarian monolith that enjoys less and less popular support from the Chinese people? Or have the country's ruling party and its political system transformed in recent years into an entity altogether different?

These are important questions, not least because of China's increasing global clout. Yet they are also important because they require international policymakers to sincerely re-evaluate and re-categorize how China should be perceived politically. And this is certainly necessary because traditional conceptions of politics in China may be less and less cogent today. As Peter Foster recently made clear, China may still be 'far from free, but three decades after 150 years of invasions, civil wars and political upheaval finally came to a close, it is a long way from the totalitarian state it has at times appeared to be'.[5] Likewise, scholars like Baogang He have emphasized as early as the mid-1990s that the 'totalitarian paradigm is no longer appropriate' when it comes to understanding contemporary China.[6] It may not be a democracy in the Western sense, and it may still have a questionable reputation when it comes to the issue of human rights, but there are recent developments which suggest that neither is it any longer a traditional totalitarian state.

This is especially the case if we take the CPC's recent official pronouncements seriously. In fact, during the 17th National Party Congress in 2007, Party leaders sent out a clear message: 'to expand people's democracy'.[7] This

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would, among other things, entail a renewed vision of Chinese citizenship that enables the people to 'enjoy democratic rights in a more extensive way' and 'to participate, to express their views and to supervise the administration.' President Hu Jintao affirmed this by stating that in China the people are to become 'masters of the country'.^[8] It is the people's right, he declared, 'to be informed, to participate, to be heard, and to oversee'. The Party, as such, would be subject to greater scrutiny in its exercise of power and in its decision-making capacity. Similarly, Premier Wen Jiabao has said that democracy is a universal value that includes 'the three important components: elections, judicial independence, and supervision based on checks and balances'.^[9] And while he believes that what is best for China is a form of democracy that best reflects its unique history and needs, Wen openly associates democracy promotion with the market liberalism thriving in China, and elsewhere, today.^[10]

What we should take away from these developments is that China, at least through its leaders' rhetoric, has begun to affirm the value of and need for democracy. But what we should also take away, more importantly, is that a country as proud and powerful as China, with a rich history and culture, will not democratize nor adopt a version of democracy completely as other democracies have done in the past. Instead, it will selectively mould and fashion a system of democratic governance to suit its own history, economy and culture – a 'democracy with Chinese characteristics'.^[11] The result may not be the type of liberal or socialist democracy as they have been traditionally practiced within other cultures, rather, it will be a democracy in its own right.

By calibrating democratic initiatives in China to its existing historical, economic and cultural milieu, though, transition will be slow, sometimes infuriatingly so. But what it will not be is ad hoc. Instead, it will avoid the worst of the chaos and uncertainty of revolutionary democratic transformations – something which, as said, the Chinese seem especially fearful of.^[12]

Because – or maybe even in spite – of this we cannot overlook the persistence of state-sanctioned repression and the human rights violations that remain an inescapable aspect of Chinese life.^[13] Though democratization is under way, China remains a one-party state that very infrequently tolerates dissent, openly censors the free flow of information, continues to suffer from political and judicial corruption, and readily displays its nationalistic tendencies in its international relations. In part, this has been due to the dynamic whereby a strong central government – which continues to oversee all aspects of life in China – is met by a largely passive, apolitical and dependent citizenry who have become accustomed to being overruled by a firm, authoritative leadership.^[14] Here, China's Confucian heritage is also implicated, as hierarchy and respect for elders prevent just any one from overruling the decisions of the country's leaders.^[15] And as for those who do actually possess the power to demand political change – China's new middle class – there is a widespread reluctance to rock the boat in which they have been the main economic benefactors.^[16] And so, democratic reforms of any kind will, in this environment, likely come a distant second or be incorporated into China's real political priorities at present: continued economic expansion, social cohesion and national strength.

What seems clear right now then is that China has changed politically. But what has it changed into? Even the brief analysis above has shown that all we can safely say is that China, as yet, is neither fully democratic nor completely repressive. It sits, paradoxically, somewhere between these two poles. Despite the CPC's refusal to embrace pluralism, China has in the reform period become something altogether different than it was under Mao.^[17] It may remain trenchantly a one-party state whose nascent democratic movement will not mirror the development of democracy in other Western nations. But it is no longer a totalitarian or even a traditional authoritarian state. Its political system is a hybrid.^[18]

As such, according to Minxin Pei, the best way to understand China at present is through the paradigm of soft or new authoritarianism – a notion that contains three key features.^[19] The first of which is a noticeable decline in the frequency and severity of political repression. China's human rights record is certainly not ideal, and domestic and international protestors are right to draw attention to the continuing infringements in this respect. But this is not to say that China's has not improved its stance on human rights. More and more, the CPC now tends to target primarily (though not always) prominent political dissidents – something which Pei argues is symptomatic of the move towards soft authoritarianism. Unlike traditional totalitarian states, the use of state violence against its own citizens is no longer seen as an offensive strategy, but rather as a last defense when the tacit social contract empowering the

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regime to rule is breached by those who step beyond the allotted bounds of the personal, political and economic liberties granted. At all other times, as this idea goes, society functions along broadly democratic lines and is governed by a raft of institutions which are increasingly more accountable and transparent.

The second feature of new authoritarianism is the enhanced accountability and transparency that is established to keep intra-elite competition in check and ensure a more equitable distribution of power in society. Here, we can list the increasing number and frequency of elections for leadership positions, the mandatory retirement of leaders and promotion based on merits as empirical examples of developments in this direction. Of course, the institutionalization of formal norms and laws whose purpose is to monitor the use and abuse of power by elites may not bring about democracy as such. But they do assure a more transparent and harmonious leadership that can no longer afford to be detached from or indifferent to the citizens they lead.

Finally, the third feature of new authoritarianism is the move that generally takes place toward greater institutional pluralism. This, though by no means equivalent to Western ideas of the separation of powers, has in China started to produce more institutional freedom, greater legal independence, increasing grass roots political activism, and a growing civil society. The objective is that checks and balances, at all levels, begin to ensure that the dictatorship of the few becomes more and more unlikely.

As this takes place, China's political institutions will undoubtedly become more democratic in nature. Yet the type of democracy that China is currently becoming will continue to be laced with an authoritarian edge. That should not take away from China's democratic achievements. But it should remind us that, at least for now, China's democratic reforms will remain embedded within an authoritarian system that will have been made "more fair, more effective, and more – not less – sustainable." [20]

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Notes

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[2] Dali L. Yang, 'China's Long March to Freedom', *Journal of Democracy* 18(3) (2007), p. 63; Kerstein Klein, "'New Authoritarianism" in China: Political Reforms in the One-Party State', *Telos* 151 (2010), p.32; Zhengyuan Fu, *Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); WJF. Jenner, *The Tyranny of History: The Roots of China's Crisis* (London: Allen Lane, 1992).

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[5] Foster, 'Liu Xiaobo wins Nobel.'

[6] Baogang He, 'Dilemmas of Pluralist Development and Democratization in China', *Democratization* 3(3), (1996), p. 288.

[7] Klein, "'New Authoritarianism" in China', p. 30.

[8] Id., pp. 30-31; Li, 'Introduction', pp. 3-4; Andrew J. Nathan, 'China's Political Trajectory: What Are the Chinese Saying?', in Cheng Li (ed.), *China's Changing Political Landscape: Prospects for Democracy* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), pp.28-29; Yang, 'China's Long March to Freedom', p. 61.

[9] Li, 'Introduction', p. 9.

[10] Fred Bergsten, Charles Freeman, Nicholas R. Lardy, and Derk J. Mitchell, *China's Rise: Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington D.C.: United Book Press, 2008), p. 57; Yang, 'China's Long March to Freedom', p. 61.

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[16] Joseph YS. Cheng, 'Introduction: Economic Growth and New Challenges', in Joseph YS. Cheng (ed.), *Challenges and Policy Programs of China's New Leadership* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2007), p. 29.

[17] Klein, "'New Authoritarianism" in China', p. 36; Yang, 'China's Long March to Freedom', p. 60; He, 'Dilemmas of Pluralist Development and Democratization in China', p. 289.

[18] Wang, 'Hybrid Regime and Peaceful Development in China', pp. 135-136.

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[19] Minxin Pei, 'China's Evolution Toward Soft Authoritarianism', in Edward Friedman and Barrett L. McCormick (eds.), *What If China Doesn't Democratize? Implications for War and Peace* (Armonk: ME Sharpe, 2000), pp. 75-81.

[20] Nathan, 'China's Political Trajectory', p. 39.