



## CHINA: SIGNS OF NERVOUSNESS ?

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Leadership transition is a sensitive phase for all governments. This is especially the case with dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. China is in the penultimate stages of leadership transition at the highest echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which is expected to culminate in October 2012 and its authorities are, therefore, presently at a high state of vigilance. The winds of change blowing relentlessly across the Middle East and, which have already seen the downfall of some long-entrenched regimes, provide cold comfort.

Certain developments of the past few months have given cause for added and serious concern to China's leadership. Uppermost are the rising prices of food and essential items, the steadily increasing consumer price index and, growing inflation. Cereal prices increased 14.7 per cent by end November while China's consumer price index (CPI) rose to 4.6 per cent in December, down from 5.1 per cent in November, but still in the entire year the CPI touched 3.3 per cent or .3 per cent more than the official target. The severe drought this year, the worst in sixty years, that has affected large swathes of northern China has added to the leadership's woes. An officially estimated 5.16 million acres of crops have been adversely affected till now and 2.57 million people are suffering from drinking water shortages. Beijing has taken steps to ease the suffering of the people and allocated US\$ 334 million as drought relief aid and an additional US\$ 2 billion to combat drought. If the drought continues till March/April this year, almost 10 million tonnes of crops will be lost. This has generated fears of a rise in global food prices, though these have been dismissed as unfounded by

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official Chinese spokesmen who assure that China has abundant reserves of grain to meet the nation's needs. Inflation is having an impact on the common people too and immediate relief is not yet in sight. Zhou Xiaochun, President of the People's Bank of China, recently warned that inflation is higher than expected and could still go up a little. Beijing has initiated a series of monetary tightening measures to rein in consumer prices and tame runaway house prices, but it will take a while before these begin to show results.

The leadership's concern at the popular dissatisfaction caused by inflation, unemployment etc was manifest in the Twelfth Five Year Plan targets outlined at the Fourth session of the Eleventh National People's Congress (NPC) in Beijing on March 5, 2011. The session was attended by almost 3,000 NPC Deputies and 2,000 members of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). The Plan proposal said that the growth rate of GDP would be sought to be kept at 8 per cent and the target for economic growth would be 7 per cent over the next five years. The Consumer Price Index would not be allowed to exceed 4 per cent with top priority given to stabilising prices. Efforts will be made to create at least 9 million jobs a year and keep urban unemployment at 4.6 per cent or lower. Reports in the official media similarly emphasized that stabilizing of commodity prices and grain prices would be the focal points for 2011.

These factors have all contributed to the growing popular discontent reflected in the escalating incidence of public protests

across China. A survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Laboratory of Shanghai's Jiao Tong University disclosed that "public crises" occurred every five days in China in 2010. The report conceded that the number of events had decreased in 2010, but were still

numerous. Of the seventy two "relatively influential" public crises examined by the laboratory, 18 percent related to the judicial system and law enforcement while 15 percent had to do with diseases and accidents. Other official reports attributed the causes for protests to delayed payments, land expropriation, building demolition and labour disputes. Corruption is another major cause.

The visit on Jan 24, by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to the State Bureau for Letters and Calls in Beijing was widely reported by the official Chinese media. Offices of the State Bureau for Letters and Calls, popularly referred to in China as 'petitioners offices', are located throughout the country and people frequent these to present their problems and seek redress. Described as a "rare" visit, some newspapers pointed out that it was the first time since 1949 that a Chinese Premier had a face-to-face communication with the people. The visit was in contrast to media reports of petitioners being forcibly dispersed by the police prior to sensitive anniversaries, festivals or a visit by a senior cadre to the county or provincial headquarters. This New Year's Eve, for example, seven hundred petitioners were rounded up and sent to the Xu Jiujiangzhuang detention centre, or 'black jail'. Later, on Feb 2 and 3, enthused by the Premier's apparent show of empathy hundreds of petitioners tried to approach Premier Wen Jiabao's residence, but were detained by police.

Reports in the official Chinese media have also mentioned a number of instances of public protests throughout 2010 and the current year. These have included protests by workers, 'ultra-Left' political activists, farmers etc. On Jan 16, 2011, five persons were shot when the police opened fire in Wuzhou City, capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, when workers were demonstrating to demand payment of salary arrears. Five hundred workers struck work in Shenzhen, Guangdong, on Jan 18 to protest the non-payment of bonus for three years by a Japanese-invested plastics firm. 'Left' political activism

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reprieve and released. He was arrested in August 2009 for organizing a hundred retired workers to petition officials of the Trade Union office of Shaanxi province.

Significantly, the Jiao Tong University's survey report also touched on the role of the 'new media' and highlighted that it is becoming increasingly prominent in such crises. It noted that 67 percent of the cases recorded by the survey were publicized by 'new media'. This represented a 14 percent increase over the previous year. A commentary in the Party mouthpiece 'People's Daily' more bluntly warned of the threat of internet manipulation which 'spreads viruses of public opinion to stir up public sentiment'.

Aware of the dangers of exposing the Chinese people to reports of the popular disturbances in the Middle East, the Chinese authorities had promptly imposed strict controls on the Chinese media. Reporters and Editors of major newspapers in Beijing, Shanghai and elsewhere were instructed to use only reports disseminated by the official news agency, Xinhua, and the internet was strictly policed. Pictures of bloody street protests and army tanks in Cairo's Tahir Square were banned. Microblogs are being heavily censored while access to Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and LinkedIn have been blocked.

Dissident Chinese elements have nevertheless been able to bypass intense censorship and send out seemingly innocuous messages — avoiding the use of words like jasmine, demonstration or protests — to citizens in Beijing and 26 other cities to stage protests on two consecutive

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Sundays so far. The messages have been intercepted by the authorities who have deployed numerous plainclothes policemen to successfully disperse and round up the activists. The authorities have additionally quietly picked up and detained the more prominent dissidents. Separately, the Beijing, Shanghai and other dailies have front-paged commentaries criticizing calls for protests like those in the Middle East as

calculated to bring about chaos. These have bluntly accused "...people inside and outside the country with ulterior motives..." of wanting to create instability and chaos. Later, in mid-February, the People's Daily and its English-language subsidiary Global Times, said instability was caused by wanting to profit from social allocation of benefits, exploitation of others, social injustice etc.

Notwithstanding the stringent security precautions taken by the Chinese Communist leadership, dissident elements have succeeded in registering their unhappiness. On Feb 12, a group of dissidents in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang province, gathered to celebrate the 'success' of the Egyptian revolution. A group of civil rights activists in Guiyang, capital of Guizhou province, similarly displayed materials about Tunisia and Egypt. In both cases the demonstrators clashed with the police and were arrested. On Valentine's Day on Feb 14, scores of people in Beijing tried to send flowers to the Egyptian Embassy to 'congratulate the Egyptian people', but were prevented by the police. In what would have been an unpleasantly sharp reminder to the authorities, a photograph showing the Chinese characters "6" and "4" written in snow covering the ground of Tiananmen Square in Beijing was recently widely circulated on the internet. The figures "6" and "4" represent the bloody crackdown on students in Beijing on June 4.

The restive autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang continue to be a cause for serious concern. Earlier in 2010, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership for the first time in many years convened a work forum each for Tibet and Xinjiang. The main theme of the forums was the maintenance of stability and ethnic unity. Large sums of money were set aside for development plans for both regions in a bid to improve the peoples' living conditions.

In moves suggestive of some relaxation, the authorities replaced Wang Lequan, who had been Party Secretary for fifteen years, with Zhang Chunxian, who was moved from Hunan province. Internet services in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region were also restored after almost 312 days in May 2010. Simultaneously the public security apparatus in both the autonomous regions was strengthened. Funding for public security in the Xinjiang\_Uyghur Autonomous Region was doubled in 2010 with RMB 2.89 billion (US\$ 423 million) being allocated. The Xinjiang People's Armed Police (PAP) Corps was also

expanded. In addition to the couple of hundred thousand closed-circuit security cameras already installed in trouble-prone cities and areas across the autonomous region, additional cameras are planned to be installed. The Municipal Government of Urumuqi has decided to bring the entire city under camera surveillance by augmenting the 17,000 cameras already installed in 2010 with tens of thousands more by the end of this year. Instances of violent protest against the Beijing regime, however, continue to occur. In Aksu city on 19 August there was an explosion in a market place when seven people were believed killed and 14 injured. Official reports stated that in 2010, Xinjiang tried 376 crimes of "endangering national security", including those related to the 'July 5' violence in Urumuqi and Kashi.

Tibet has been similarly restive with intermittent reports of sporadic violence. On May 21, 2010 in the Kham region's Pelyul County, some Tibetans from Sokchen Village in Namling County of Shigatse Region went to the village government to protest against a mining company from Weifang, Shandong province. They protested that mining causes ecological damage, drinking water pollution and problems for cattle etc. The local authorities reportedly deployed a thousand People's Armed Police personnel who arrested a number of protesters including some

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Tibetans. Later last year at least two incidents occurred. In one incident, fifteen Tibetans including five monks were arrested by police in a crackdown against protesters in Tamo township in Shigatse. Earlier on Nov 22, hundreds of Tibetans had tried to disrupt mining activity near Linka monastery in Tamo. A report of an official study group sent to examine implementation of the recommendations of the Fifth Tibet Work Forum, and presented to the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), indicated that Tibet continued to be a disturbed region. The report stressed the need to 'further strengthen' rapid development and 'long-term stability in Tibetan areas' and called for a 'high degree of strict political discipline' where 'Party members and cadres maintain a high degree of consistency with the Party Central Committee with firm belief and faith'. It asserted that it was 'important to discover and severely punish various violations of political discipline in a timely manner'. It warned that there cannot be 'fuzzy understanding or the slightest wavering attitude'

in safeguarding national unification or ethnic unity and recommended intensification of education and publicity among the masses. The Tibet Autonomous Region Party Secretary, Zhang Qingli, on the sidelines of the ongoing NPC session on March 5, said that Tibet is still facing “very grave challenges” in the fight against separatist activities this year, when the region will mark the 60th anniversary of its peaceful liberation. Meeting the delegation from Tibet attending the NPC session, PRC President Hu Jintao reinforced this message.

In this backdrop the Chinese Communist Party leadership has accorded high priority to internal security. The focus, as discernible from Premier Wen Jiabao’s work report,

will be on cyber security and internet policing, monitoring of wireless communication platforms, the public security apparatus and its capacity for responding to emergencies and, the hardening of public safety infrastructure. The current top Party leadership as well as the emerging leaders are firmly wedded to the preservation and continuance of the CCP’s pre-eminent position in China. They will reinforce efforts to strengthen the internal public security apparatus. It is not surprising, therefore, that the budget presented on March 5, at the ongoing Fourth session of the Eleventh National People’s Congress, or China’s parliament, proposed an allocation of US \$ 95 billion for the internal security apparatus—even higher than this year’s considerably boosted defence budget!



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