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Journal of Democracy, Volume 14, Number 1, January 2003, pp. 60-65 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2003.0023>



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China's Changing of the Guard

THE RISE OF THE TECHNOCRATS

Gongqin Xiao

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Since reform began in the early 1980s, China has had opposing political camps of reformists and leftists. The reformists were democratically inclined students, intellectuals, and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members who wanted to promote political participation, human rights, and freedom, including economic freedom. The reformists' ideas resonated favorably with the Chinese public, seemed in line with the larger global trend toward democracy known as the "third wave," and by the late 1980s were stirring intense activism among college students.

The mainstays of the leftist¹ camp were CCP bureaucrats who insisted on adherence to traditional communist ideology. Leftists took as their ideal the bureaucratic system of Maoist China in the 1950s, and demanded preservation of the CCP's power, privileges, and strong grip on social life.

For two decades or so, these camps engaged in a struggle in which the future of the world's largest country was seemingly at stake. Among the leftists' most powerful weapons was their authority to interpret the official ideology. They also tended to have substantial political experience, effective networks, and skill at elite-level bureaucratic politics. Some of them were patronized by Deng Xiaoping, to whom they portrayed themselves as defenders of the CCP's interests. Reformists competed with leftists for Deng's favor, arguing that the latter in fact opposed many of Deng's own policies. The story of the fight between these two factions has in many ways been the story of Chinese politics since 1978.

Where has it led? The possible outcomes are as follows:

- 1) Reformists sweep the board and eventually bring about the total

collapse of the old totalitarian system. The chain of events that Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms started in the former Soviet Union is an example.

2) Leftists win decisively and stop or even reverse the reform process.

3) The two opposing camps battle to a draw and become opposing parties in a budding pluralistic society.

4) Both camps get pushed aside by a third force of market-friendly, authoritarian technocrats who determine the future of China.

The fourth possibility is the one that actually seems to be happening. The reformists can date their marginalization to the Tiananmen Square massacre of 4 June 1989 and the crackdown that followed it. The leftists' influence began to wane three years later, when Deng used an inspection tour of Southern China as an occasion to denounce them for opposing his reforms. Since the end of the 1990s, State President Jiang Zemin and the technocratic authoritarianism that he represents have dominated the political scene and carried China into a "postpolarization" era in which reformists and leftists alike find themselves relegated to the sidelines.

Marginalizing Ideology

The events of spring 1989 represented the culmination of the reformist-leftist conflict that had been brewing since the early 1980s. After the shootings in Tiananmen Square on June 4, the leftists knocked the reformists out of the political game. In time, however, the leftists would find themselves outmaneuvered by the rising technocrats under Jiang (then the CCP chief in Shanghai), who replaced Zhao Ziyang as CCP general secretary on 24 June 1989. In the tense atmosphere of China after Tiananmen, the new technocrats' air of moderation and competence made them seem like an important force for stability and greatly strengthened their hand.

The crackdown years of the early 1990s were a time of burgeoning leftist influence. The leftists aimed to restore the supremacy of traditional communist ideology and negate Deng's policy of "reform and opening." Deng neatly parried them in his "South China speech" of 1992. Deng implicitly recognized that in the wake of Tiananmen most liberal intellectuals had embraced a politically cautious and quiescent "moderation," meaning that a leftist counterweight against them was no longer needed. In his South China speech, therefore, he invoked his personal authority to call for an emphasis on "opposing the leftist ideology" and to demand an end to debate about whether his "reform and opening" policy was "capitalistic" or "socialistic," thereby silencing the leftists who then controlled the regime's media and propaganda organs.

By the mid-1990s, the gerontocrats of the revolutionary generation had largely passed from the scene, robbing the left of its key political patrons. Meanwhile, Deng's market-based reforms and the massive

changes that they brought had captured the imaginations of a whole generation of young people and deprived the leftists of successors to whom they could pass on their ideology. Having lost their protectors among the old and their replacements among the young, the leftists faced their twilight just as the new century dawned.

The New Middle Force

The decade of growth that followed Deng's South China speech led to the emergence of a new middle social stratum composed mainly of government technocrats, private entrepreneurs, university professors, lawyers, white-collar employees of companies backed by foreign capital, journalists in the state-owned media, and so on. The stake that these people held in the booming economy hardly made them adventurous political reformists. On the contrary, they worried that too much political change too fast would cause social upheavals and endanger their material interests. Wanting neither a return to socialism nor a leap into the uncertain future of radical political change, they gravitated to the pragmatic authoritarianism of the new technocrats, perhaps comforting themselves with the belief that economic development would eventually lead to democracy and the rule of law. Whatever their motives, they formed the main power base for Jiang and his new technocrats. For intellectuals, too, the South China speech was a watershed. Marginalized politically after Tiananmen, they learned from Deng that their knowledge and mental skills were special types of nonmaterial capital that could be employed for material gains.

The drastic changes that the 1990s witnessed in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and the tremendous costs and side effects of economic "shock therapy" there also prompted Chinese intellectuals to shift toward moderation. Meanwhile, the declining salience of ideology and the sharpening competition for jobs turned college students' away from politics. The spread of markets and with them commercial values promoted a new materialism that displaced many deeply rooted convictions both left and right.

By now, the middle social stratum that emerged from the market economy has grown into a middle class whose willingness to support political authoritarianism is contingent on its understanding of the historical phase through which it believes that China is now passing. As economic growth continues and middle-class values continue to spread, this expanding new bourgeoisie will come to see itself as the country's dominant political force, and to identify the adoption of democratic processes and institutions as keys to its own empowerment. In the end, this class will form the social engine driving China's democratization as middle-class citizens impose ever more stringent tests of legitimacy on their government.

As I have already suggested, this likely trajectory sets China apart from the former Soviet world. China's recent history of reform and opening, mounting conflict between leftists and reformists, and the subsequent elbowing-aside of both by technocratic authoritarians is markedly different from the Soviet Union's journey from polarization to revolution to collapse.

The depolarization process that began in China in the early 1990s enabled the country to avoid the "explosion of political participation" frequently witnessed in totalitarian countries that are heading toward transition. Such explosions of participation should be regarded as "exceptional" side effects of the highly charged ideological character of totalitarian systems. If for no other reason than the desire to survive, people living under totalitarian systems tend to be deeply concerned about and sensitive to political affairs, and are used to seeing heavy emphasis placed on state-generated campaigns of ideological propaganda and sociopolitical mobilization. In the typical developing-world authoritarian society, by contrast, the populace generally views politics with indifference. A socialist mammoth like the former Soviet Union—or China—is just the sort of place where one would expect to see rapidly expanding political participation as reform gathers steam. What happened in the Soviet world between the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the failed hard-liners' putsch of August 1991, and what happened in China during the months leading up to the Tiananmen confrontation were typical examples of this. Each period was a time of ideological polarization leading ultimately to crisis. In China since 1989, however, the transition from totalitarianism to authoritarianism has seen the "abnormal" political sensitivity of the 1980s give way to the more "normal" political indifference characteristic of the 1990s.

Depolarization has also left the new technocrats, now liberated from entanglement in ideological squabbles, free to make more or less independent decisions based on functional rationality and cost-effectiveness as they seek pragmatic ways to handle various problems arising from modernization. The "Three Represents" slogan that Jiang Zemin announced after firming up his bourgeois-technocratic power base draws on this same confidence in functional rationality.

History provides grounds for hope that depolarization will help move Chinese society toward true pluralism. Multiple interest groups formed on the basis of a market-based division of labor are mutually dependent and will find it a matter of shared interest to agree on a set of rules for the game. Depolarization and the decline of ideological militance make it all the more likely that this process of calculation and accommodation will occur.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that depolarization can have adverse effects too. First, the disappearance of external critics and challengers may mean that official corruption will increase as effective

monitoring wanes, and that government leaders will find it easier to tighten social control without fear of provoking strong reactions. With the emergence of a liberal middle stratum, however, the values of new political technocrats are likely to change with time and thus to limit this authoritarian tendency. Then too, the existence of ideologically polarized groups at least implies a concern with ideals, while people in the postpolarization society are preoccupied with material desires. In such a society, politics revolves around narrow competitions for economic advantage amid the jostling of diverse interests, and broader ethical concerns are pushed to the sidelines.

Authoritarianism Rising

What impact is depolarization likely to have on China's political structure? Since Deng launched his reforms, China has gone through two distinct periods. The first began with the Eleventh Party Congress in 1978 and ended just over a decade later when soldiers attacked the unarmed student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. This was the age of the "socialist-totalitarian New Deal." Its hallmark was the political center's use of the socialist-totalitarian organizational apparatus and structures of legitimacy to institute new policies that were themselves meant to ease totalitarian restrictions. Communist ideology continued to dominate social life and there was no real pluralism, although intellectuals enjoyed an environment of "policy freedom."

The second period, beginning in the mid-1990s, was the time of post-totalitarian technocratic authoritarianism. Unlike their predecessors who tried to achieve utopian goals through political action guided by egalitarian dogma, the new technocrats who consolidated their rule in the late 1990s were intent on achieving pragmatic modernization, albeit often through compulsory policies. Behind the push for modernization and markets lay the hand of the ruling strongman (first Deng, then Jiang), while limited pluralism became a regular feature of social life and ideology was pushed aside.

In contrast to their authoritarian counterparts elsewhere in East Asia or in Latin America, China's new rulers had at their disposal a totalitarian state apparatus and all the control over society that implies. While totalitarian means and institutions remained in place, however, the goal was not to enforce communist egalitarianism but rather to speed the transition to a market economy. The totalitarian state machinery was kept because of its functional value, while communist ideology hung on as a kind of ceremonial protocol honored more in the breach than in the observance.

China today is governed by a type of regime that we might call "technocratic authoritarianism" or—overlooking the oxymoron—"limited totalitarianism." Under such a system, ideological politics gradually loses

its appeal and ideology itself, which used to be the main determinant of social goals, is neutralized and hollowed out. Ideology's only function now is to serve as a deterrent against possible political challenges; it no longer orients the regime toward the egalitarian goal of communism. This is the fundamental difference between totalitarianism and authoritarianism in the Chinese case.

What does all this imply about the prospects for meaningful movement toward democracy in the world's largest country? There are good reasons to believe that, having disencumbered themselves of totalitarian ideology, those in power will adopt a functional and more pragmatic approach to democracy—not out of any commitment to democratic ideals, of course, but simply for reasons of expediency. In assessing the necessity and timing of democratic reform, they will probably be guided by the following four criteria:

- *Usefulness*. Can a democratic or quasi-democratic innovation effectively replace some dysfunctional element of the existing system and thereby improve governability?
- *Safety (or Controllability)*. How risky will a given democratic innovation prove? Will it lead to challenges against the existing political order and the power of the ruling class? Can the measure be expanded, limited, or dropped as circumstances dictate?
- *Feasibility*. Will the proposed democratic innovation work within the existing system and without causing structural conflict?
- *Legitimacy*. Can the new measure be justified according to Marxist principles in a manner convincing enough to preclude challenges from the marginalized left?

Although the rulers' use of the above criteria will limit democratic innovation and thereby fail to appease the public's demand for reform, it remains likely that the rulers—pressed by the growing middle class—will nonetheless allow at least some steps toward government by consent. Still, no one should be under the illusion that in the depolarized but still authoritarian China which has been taking shape, movement toward democracy will take anything less than enormous persistence. The democratic idea has just emerged on the horizon, and is still a very long way away. But it is no mirage, and chances are that the country will keep gradually drawing closer to it.

NOTE

1. Before Deng's reforms began in 1978, the official political trend was characterized as the "leftist" line. Those who have continued to identify with such thinking have become known as the "leftist conservative force." The school of thought that has advocated freedom and opening up to the outside world has been dubbed "rightist" in both official and popular parlance, and is also known as the "progressive" camp. To simplify matters, I will generally refer to these two opposed groups as "leftists" and "reformists," respectively.