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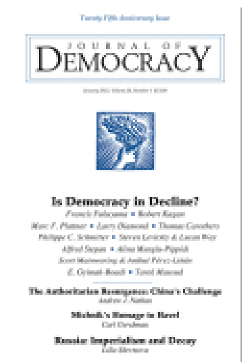

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China's Changing of the Guard

THE LIMITS OF AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE

Bruce Gilley

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The success of the recent leadership transition in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) might be interpreted as evidence that China's authoritarian regime is historically unique. More than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist orders of Eastern Europe, the CCP not only remains in power but has installed a younger, better-educated, even more confident set of successors at its head. And the CCP's Sixteenth Party Congress in November 2002 marked the first smooth leadership transition in a communist regime not to have involved the death or purging of the outgoing leader.

Authoritarian regimes have been traditionally understood by political theorists as being terminally weak at their core, due to the absence of any of the checks on power that the rule of law, the separation of powers, or popular contestability would afford. The view is that the inherent weakness of these regimes will inevitably become more pronounced as the relative balance of resources shifts over time away from the state and toward autonomous social forces, often as a result of such forms of development as economic growth or international opening. At these stages of development, it is generally believed, authoritarian regimes find themselves suffering from what might be called "the logic of concentrated power"—that is, the tendency for power to concentrate in the hands of a few individuals or personalistic factions and to be fatally misused by them, with results that typically include misgovernment, a deterioration of legitimacy, corruption, and weak norms of conduct among governing elites.[1]

But China—whose people represent roughly half of that part of the

world's population which is not allowed to choose its leaders though democratic elections—has so far defied the traditional model. Some have attempted to account for this in terms of a fundamental reconsolidation of the CCP's house following the nadir of the Party's legitimacy after the 1989 Tiananmen protests. The CCP, these observers argue, appears to have effectively solved the democracy deficit without democracy by putting in place mechanisms that have mitigated, or possibly eliminated, the traditional weaknesses of authoritarian regimes. Andrew Nathan nicely sums up the evidence for such mechanisms under the rubric of "regime institutionalization."

I think that this characterization is mistaken, a point I will argue below in reference to three features of authoritarian regimes that have historically been among the most difficult to institutionalize: 1) the process of elite promotions; 2) the maintenance of elite functional responsibility; and 3) popular participation.

Certainly by comparison to the bedlam of the Mao Zedong era, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is today a fairly institutionalized state. But relative to the actual needs of contemporary Chinese society, the PRC falls conspicuously short: Any given feature of a political system can be said to be "institutionalized" only when it is both consistent with a state's normative ideals and effectively implemented. By these standards, the evidence of PRC institutionalization remains faint. Nor does it seem likely that such institutionalization will eventually strengthen. Indeed, since 1949, there have been discernable cycles of consolidation and breakdown in China: The limits of regime institutionalization have been reached before and, in response, the "logic of concentrated power" has reasserted itself. Something similar is likely to happen again and, in due course, weaken the institutionalization apparent at the CCP's recent Sixteenth Party Congress.

Present Institutionalization

Samuel P. Huntington characterizes political institutionalization as the process by which a given feature of a political system acquires the traits of "adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence." The feature in question may be a process, an institution, or a rule. When institutionalization is achieved throughout a political system, Huntington says, it produces government which is "effective, authoritative, [and] legitimate."[2]

Although this definition suffices to explain a government's effectiveness or authoritativeness, Huntington has almost certainly misconceived the particular nature of the problem of legitimacy in an authoritarian context: He fails to grasp that for any of the above mentioned features of a political system to be legitimate, it must be consistent with an overarching normative view of the state. (This condition, it

should be emphasized, is easy to take for granted in a pluralistic state.) If a given feature lacks a broad normative justification, then that feature will undermine the legitimacy of the state itself. This sort of "normative coherence" is distinct from the sort of coherence that Huntington postulates, which consists in a functional understanding among insiders, not a consensus within the society at large.

The ease of the handover at the Sixteenth Party Congress had more to do with the powerful legacy of patriarch Deng Xiaoping than it did with institutionalization.

So, political institutionalization has both *efficacy-enhancing* and *normatively cohering* elements that must obtain in order for a given feature to be institutionalized. By way of negative example, the mass round-ups involved in the Chinese regime's frequent recourse to "Strike Hard" anticrime campaigns have been remarkably "effective" in yielding more convictions, but the violations of due process that the campaigns involve have flatly contradicted the state's commitment to developing the rule of law.

The best evidence on elite promotions comes from a remarkable Chinese-language book entitled *Disidai* (The Fourth Generation) that credibly claims to be based on the internal CCP dossiers from the 2002 leadership transition.[3] The information contained in this book confutes the appearance of an institutionalized promotion process. It shows that the ease of the handover had more to do with the powerful legacy of patriarch Deng Xiaoping than it did with institutionalization. It was Deng who chose Hu Jintao to be the designated heir in 1992, removing the single most contentious succession-related issue from the political arena. Deng and Hu's patron Song Ping also remained healthy long enough to ensure that Hu's succession was assured. Accordingly, the Sixteenth Congress appears to be more of a fortuitous byproduct than a systemic outcome.

In particular, *Disidai* shows that:

• In 1997, as a tactic for ousting his liberal rival Qiao Shi, Jiang Zemin proposed a rule that no person aged 70 or over should be appointed to the Politburo. Jiang, 71 at the time, excused himself from the rule, though he pledged to obey it at the Sixteenth Congress of 2002. Yet from 2001 until the Congress, Jiang allowed a number of military leaders, Party scholars, and close aides to float the idea of his breaching the rule again and remaining in office. This effort failed. He did, however, succeed in purging another liberal, Li Ruihuan, 68, on the ad hoc grounds that he had served on the standing committee since 1989. These challenges to the rule, which remains unwritten and imprecise, have raised widespread questions about its durability.

• Only three top leaders—Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and Zhu Rongji—dominated the selection of the new leadership (with retired Party elders

Bo Yibo and Song Ping playing influential roles behind the scenes). This concentration of influence ran contrary to the formal rule that such decisions should be made by the entire 21-member Politburo, and so represents a failure of the PRC to implement the kind of "collective leadership" that, might mitigate the dangers of centralized power in a communist regime.

• Personal loyalties mattered far more than individual merit. Seven of the nine new members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC)—Hu Jintao, Zeng Qinghong, Luo Gan, Wu Bangguo, Jia Qinglin, Huang Ju, and Li Changchun—were chosen based on factional loyalties and despite their known shortcomings as officials.[4] Only Wen Jiabao and Wu Guanzheng were selected principally on merit. In a pluralistic political system, the appointment of officials based on personal loyalty is both normatively acceptable and easily implemented, because the officials doing the appointing are themselves elected or appointed by those who are. But since the CCP is China's uncontested power holder, it is constrained to espousing a normative ideal of strictly merit-based appointments at every level. Yet this ideal is not effectively implemented, and so transparently bad appointments are liable to prompt dissent and protest.

• Normal promotion rules in the CCP hierarchy have been disregarded when inconvenient for the Party's senior leadership. This was the case for all three of the leading "fifth-generation" cadres due to take over the PBSC in 2012. Li Keqiang was confirmed as Communist Youth League general secretary in 1993 despite failing to win so much as an alternate seat on the Central Committee at the Fourteenth Party Congress of 1992. Bo Xilai was brought to the Fifteenth Congress of 1997 as a "specially invited delegate" after failing to win election as a delegate from his local Party membership. And Xi Jinping was appointed to the Central Committee at the Fifteenth Congress after failing to win election from Congress delegates.

On the question of elite functional specialization, *Disidai* presents the first glimpse at the vast number of contending bureaucratic battles that beset elite politics in China. While PBSC members have traditionally been assigned particular portfolios (economic matters, internal security, foreign affairs, and so on), these divisions remain subject to chronic evasion or disregard—meaning that the "autonomy" required for political institutionalization in the Huntington sense remains abrogated in many important policy spheres.

The breakdown of elite specialization is manifest in several functional areas:

• *Economic issues:* The delegation of economic issues to the premier can be reversed where PBSC members differ. So, for example, in 1999 Jiang Zemin virtually seized the state-enterprise portfolio from Premier Zhu Rongji by convening a conference of state-enterprise officials from four major regions.

• *Personnel and organization:* The importance of this portfolio for factional maneuvering makes it a frequent bone of contention. Between 1993 and 1997, the dominant figure on personnel and organizational issues was Jiang's aide Zeng Qinghong, who was not even a Politburo member at the time. Over this period, the PBSC member formally in charge of these issues, Hu Jintao, accepted the infringement in order to preserve his future succession.

• *Anticorruption:* The processing of high-level corruption cases in the Party remains a matter of political expediency, a smokescreen for factional battles at the top—meaning that the PBSC member in charge of anticorruption efforts is a mere administrator of cases chosen for political reasons. This has become a matter of popular knowledge, for which reason even the apparently genuine prosecution of a high-level corruption case means a step backward as much as a step forward for the legitimacy of the Party.

One feature below the elite level that has a strong potentiality for mitigating the doleful effects of concentrated power in authoritarian regimes is political participation: A democracy deficit can be at least partially offset by a "participation surplus." As evidence of growing institutionalization at the subelite level, scholars have cited village elections, popular petitioning, and the role of local legislatures. Yet in none of these cases are the two criteria of institutionalization—efficacy and coherence—met. To take a few well-known examples:

• Village elections have undeniably proved effective in improving the governance of China's nearly one million villages and establishing the authority of the state in rural areas. But they lack normative coherence: Within a one-party state, political competition must be kept under tight control. At the same time, maintaining that control sometimes means that the Party must subvert the very rules of competition which it has established—for example, by contravening its own policies in village elections, invalidating unacceptable election results, or surreptitiously implanting Party control in maverick villages. The introduction of elections may have been a tactic on the part of some central-government officials to sneak democracy in the back door, but such sneaking can only go so far before it starts to apply acute pressure on the governing normative ideal that the Party alone should hold political power.

• Local and national legislatures suffer from the same kind of normative incoherence in their attempts to assert their role in "supervising" government work. Since the Chinese party-state does not accept the idea of devolved political power, these legislatures are invariably weak. In those rare instances where they manage, for example, to reject a law, a nominee for office, or a government report, there is almost comical confusion about what to do. Unlike in village elections, where devolved administrative powers are permitted at least to be effective, China's par-

liaments remain so tightly controlled by the Party that for the most part they fail the effectiveness test as well.

• There is also the system of popular petitioning *(xinfang),* which may be said to comply with a pervasive normative idea: that people should be allowed to raise suggestions to help the Party with its work. In 2000, a new State Bureau of Letters and Visits was established as a subministry body. Yet the handling of popular petitions remains highly erratic, since the process ultimately depends not on the regular exercise of devolved power but rather the selective acceptance of supervision by the Party itself.

So the evidence of institutionalization appears at present to be decidedly limited. Institutionalization does not consist merely in the absence of bedlam; it entails the positive presence of efficacy and normative coherence. The CCP has moved, then, from political tumult to an ad hoc peace; but it has gone no further. As a result, the problems traditionally associated with nondemocratic regimes—illegitimacy, misgovernment, corruption, and elite instability—remain legion in China. Corruption alone is estimated to amount to the equivalent of anywhere from 10 to 20 percent of GDP. Elite instability has been clearly manifest in the factional and ideological battles that have characterized the Jiang years, including the purging of no fewer than six Politburo members. All this suggests that China's attempts at institutionalization have largely failed.

Future Institutionalization

Perhaps a more pertinent question is what the future will bring. Will the norms so weakly institutionalized in the Chinese state become stronger, or break down? That is, can we look forward to a period of "creeping democratization" that overcomes the ineffectiveness and incoherence of the current system?

All democratic consolidations begin with changes that are, by definition, not yet embedded, and which may be characterized as a *modus vivendi* among the relevant players. Only with time do these changes come to be embedded, come to be seen generally as worthy for their own sake, and so become norms. But there is always the opposite possibility as well, one which I believe is more likely in China's case: that these new processes will break down as a result of "the logic of concentrated power."

On the question of elite promotion, for example, it is certainly easy to imagine that the age-70 rule will become more institutionalized over time. And yet it takes just one or two dissenters to spoil the bargain, as was seen in the Sixteenth Congress succession battle. At the Seventeenth Party Congress in 2007, hard-liner Luo Gan will be over 70, while Zeng Qinghong, a rival to Hu, will be 68. Both represent powerful factions. And when ultimate power is at stake, the maintenance of norms is pre-

carious—as authoritarian regimes around the world have demonstrated time and again. The more jealously held power is, the more volatile such norms tend to be.

Likewise, merit-based promotions have surely helped bring a greater number of capable people into higher office. But at the local level, the promotion process commonly turns on bribery, while at the elite level, the process is still determined by the vagaries of political factions. Changing these patterns would require substantial latitude for monitoring by an uncensored media, anticorruption efficacy, or political devolution, none of which the CCP appears likely to take up. Changing wider patterns of corruption would require similar, and similarly unlikely, developments.

When it comes to village elections, Party leaders will be apt to meet any signs of efficacy on the part of elected village heads with alarm. The emergence of such elected officials, as a group unsusceptible to cooptation or subversion, will inevitably raise the question of whether the Party should revise its norms in favor of sharing political power—which was the path followed by the strong authoritarian regimes of Taiwan, South Korea, and Thailand. But a "voluntary withdrawal" of this kind is unlikely in the case of a weak regime like the CCP's.[5] A more likely course is that the Party will continue to subvert village elections as new political groups begin to compete with more and more success. As Paul Brooker has noted, authoritarian regimes that introduce real local elections "may eventually face the problem of having to find a not too blatantly undemocratic way to hobble a party that is competing too successfully with the official party."[6]

This dilemma also helps to explain why, despite its repeated promises, the CCP has not yet endorsed the expansion of direct executive elections beyond the village level. Scattered experiments in electing township governors have been criticized by the Party leadership, for instance, even though they have been popularly embraced in those places, largely in response to an ongoing crisis of township governance.

As for people's congresses, certainly they have improved governance in many areas. But usually they have done so by seizing power against the wishes of the Party. Where they have improved regime legitimacy, it is only because their members have been fully coopted by the Party: They can improve governance or improve regime control, but cannot do both.

In each case—township elections or people's congresses—the Party is forced to choose between efficacy and coherence. It almost always chooses the latter.

Cycles and Breakdown

Many have written of the cycles of politics in the PRC since 1949. While personal and historical contingencies tend to explain the specific

timings of these cycles, the underlying dynamic that has led to a breakdown after each consolidation is precisely the "logic of concentrated power": In times of political crisis, dysfunction, or succession, any power that has been carefully devolved for the improvement of governance and elite political stability is quickly reined back in. In general, one can see four distinct cycles since 1949:

- Consolidation Phase One (1949–1956): the establishment of the PRC
- Beakdown Phase One (1956–61): from the Anti-Rightist Movement to the Great Leap Famine
- Consolidation Phase Two (1961–66): recovery from famine
- Breakdown Phase Two (1966–76): Cultural Revolution
- Consolidation Phase Three (1976–86): reestablishment and expansion of government and party institutions and laws
- Breakdown Phase Three (1986–94): rise of student protest movements which reflect elite splits on reforms; reimposition of rule by party elders
- Consolidation Phase Four (since 1994): death of party elders and expansion of rule of law and government professionalization; entry into the World Trade Organization

A cursory analysis of the literature on these cycles suggests that scholars of Chinese politics have been all too prone to interpret them at each stage as linear change. In 1978, for example—at the beginning of what I term Consolidation Phase Three—an article appeared entitled "Modernization and Succession Politics in China" which, while offering some warnings of uncertainty about the future, made many of the arguments being made now, in the period of the Sixteenth Congress.[7] The literature after 1989, by contrast, tended heavily to emphasize continued regime breakdown.

There is certainly much to be said for tracing the ups and downs of particular phases and comparing them to earlier ones. The danger lies in believing that those phases are irreversible, which CCP history in particular and authoritarian regime theory in general suggests they are not. Suharto's Indonesia may be the best counterexample—a regime that fell from power just as it had seemingly bucked the trend and consolidated itself through new forms of institutionalization in the mid-1990s, appearing "solid and highly efficient."[8]

If we should have been looking more vigilantly for signs of consolidation after 1989, we should be looking more vigilantly for signs of breakdown now, at the cusp of what would be Breakdown Phase Four in the schema above. Such signs might include the appearance of a more-or-less open split among PBSC members on a key policy issue such as Taiwan or local elections; the reappearance of retired leaders like Jiang or Li Peng in public; or the loss of power by a Politburo member over a functional area such as internal security.

Where a new phase of breakdown might lead is beyond the scope of this paper. But a word of caution by way of conclusion: Institutional breakdown does not portend collapse. The strength of China's coercive apparatus—six million police officers and soldiers—along with the weakness of civil society ensure that the CCP will not fall or be pushed from power. Tragedy in the form of political purges and social repression has been a more typical result of breakdown phases in the PRC.

At the same time, there is an alternative consequence that might rescue China from these political cycles: a democratic breakthrough. Institutional breakdown provides opportunities—often on account of attendant crises of governance—for reformist elites to engineer an extrication of the regime with promises of political opening, which is the first step toward democracy. Ironically then, China's best democratic hope may lie in the very contradictions that make its current institutionalization so troubled.

NOTES

1. The expression "the logic of concentrated power" refers to Robert Dahl's invocation of the "logic of equality"—the drive toward widespread participation and responsible political power that Dahl sees as inexorably resulting from a starting assumption of political equality among members of a society. See Dahl's *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 10.

2. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 12, 2.

3. Zong Hairen, *Disidai* (The Fourth Generation) (New York: Mirror Books, 2002). It is the basis of an English-language book I coauthored with Andrew Nathan, *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002). We address the authenticity of *Disidai* at length in the introduction to our book.

4. These shortcomings are explicitly acknowledged in official party documents. See Andrew Nathan and Bruce Gilley, *China's New Rulers*—for Hu Jintao, 68; for Wu Bangguo, 102; for Luo Gan, 110; and for Li Changchun, 114.

5. I provide a sustained treatment of the likely course of democratic breakthrough in *China's Democratic Future* (forthcoming).

6. Paul Brooker, *Non-Democratic Regimes: Theory, Government and Politics* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 2000), 115.

7. Kenneth Lieberthal in *Journal of International Affairs* 32 (Fall 1978): 239–54. The article noted the "startling results" of post-Mao consolidation resulting from the "strong . . . cohesion" of the leadership and its drive to "reinvest the party with its previous authority and competence." It did, however, warn that it was "too early to say" whether the process was irreversible.

8. R. William Liddle, "Indonesia: Suharto's Tightening Grip," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (October 1996): 70. Cited in Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 262.