Staying in Power: What Does the Chinese Communist Party Have to Do?

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Democracy is a good thing.

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After some years of relative quiescence, the question of China's possible democratization has once again been raised, both by those in China who hope that progress toward democracy can be speeded up and by observers abroad who believe that democratization is likely to occur quickly and by critics who are frustrated that it has not. Observers note that China's economy is developing rapidly, the middle class is growing ever larger, society is pluralizing, and globalization is bringing external forces to bear on China in unprecedented ways. To this list, one should add generational turnover, which certainly brings new attitudes to prominence among the population and leadership alike. Generational change also raises questions about legitimacy and leadership selection.

Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping could base their legitimacy on their participation in the revolution, but that link becomes ever more tenuous as new generations of leaders take the stage. As a result, economic performance, the maintenance of social stability, and procedural legitimacy have become increasingly important, and these new sources of legitimacy in turn exert increasing pressure for political institutionalization even as many of the old rules about the need to accumulate personal power continue to co-exist.

In short, economic, societal, and political pressures appear to make the

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continuation of Leninist rule impossible, yet the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to hold power. What explains this apparent contradiction?

One answer, explored in chapter 15 of this volume, is that the CCP has very carefully studied political successes and political failures around the world and derived from them a series of policies that aim to maximize the CCP’s ability to retain power well into the future. One outcome of this study was the decision to promulgate Jiang Zemin’s theory of the “Three Represents,” which admitted private entrepreneurs and other “new elements” into the party. As Li Junru, vice president of the Central Party School explained, “One lesson of political parties that have lost their ruling positions in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is that they have lost the support of youthful entrepreneurs and young intellectuals.” Excluding the most dynamic elements of society, in other words, is a sure way to commit political suicide. Although co-optation undermines Leninist organization, co-opted entrepreneurs, whether they have joined the party or not, have so far sought to work with, not against, the party.

The CCP’s ability to maintain power is also related to the changing relationship between the central and local levels. Since the implementation of tax reform in 1994, central revenues have increased dramatically, from some ¥95.7 billion in 1993 to over ¥1.6 trillion in 2005. As a percentage of total revenues, central revenues have increased from 22 percent in 1993 to 52.3 percent in 2005 (somewhat down from their highest point, 55 percent, in 2002). In short, the central government simply has a lot more resources with which to address serious social and distributional needs, increase the salaries of government and party workers, and dispense patronage of one sort or another. The capacity of the central government has increased significantly.

As the economy has expanded, personal incomes have also increased greatly: between 1989 and 2005 urban incomes rose from ¥1,374 to ¥10,493, while rural incomes, though well behind, grew from ¥602 to ¥3,255. The gap between urban and rural residents, and particularly between the very wealthy and the poor, whether urban or rural, has become a major point of social commentary in recent years, and as Dorothy Solinger points out in chapter 13, the attitudes of the poor differ significantly from those of their better-off counterparts. Although this gap in income has contributed to social discontent in

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3 Li Junru, “Zhengque lijie he jianchi dangde jiejixing” (Correctly understand and uphold the party’s class nature), Lilun dongtai (Theoretical trends), July 20, 2001, p. 3.
6 Ibid., p. 347.