Roots of Protest and the Party Response

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Hearing on China's Internal Dilemmas

Introduction

The roots of protest in China rest in the systemic weakness of the country's governance structure. A lack of transparency, official accountability, and the rule of law make it difficult for public grievances to be effectively addressed and encourage issues such as inflation, forced relocation, environmental pollution, and corruption to transform from otherwise manageable disputes to large-scale protests. As a result, the Chinese government has contended with an estimated more than 90,000 protests annually, in each of the past three years.[1]

Moreover, the nature of protest in China is evolving. Traditionally, most protest has been rural-based. In the past few years, however, the urban middle-class has demonstrated a new-found willingness to advance its interests through protest. In addition, the Internet has become a virtual political system with individual complaints able to go viral in a matter of minutes, gaining widespread popular support across gender, age, profession and provincial boundaries.

The government response to this endemic social unrest is multifaceted and case dependent. Arrests of corrupt local officials are often accompanied by arrests of protest leaders. Particularly vocal protestors may be

detained or put under house arrest without prior warning or specific cause. Broad-based middle class protest has generally been met with warnings to protest leaders but also a degree of responsiveness to the demands. In response to Internet-based protests, the Chinese government deploys both Internet police to monitor traffic and insert government opinion, as well as the full range of technical solutions to shut down websites or blogs that the party views as particularly destabilizing. The party has also used public security forces to harass online activists.

The Nature of Protest

Chinese protest is typically rooted in a failure of the political system to protect the rights of the people, whether the issue at hand is related to land, environment, labor, or general official corruption.

Land disputes are particularly common; they are reportedly responsible for up to 65 percent of all protests.[2] In some instances, local officials expropriate land illegally; in others, they fail to compensate citizens adequately. In one case in July 2010 for example, officials in Gangkou, Jiangxi Province, offered to relocate villagers away from a heavily polluted site that had sickened them but provided only minimal compensation. When police beat two female petitioners into a coma, thousands of angry citizens used bricks and stones to smash windows and overturn police cars.[3] In urban areas, forced eviction has become increasingly common as local officials seek to develop older residential areas into more profitable office space and expensive apartment complexes. In Shanghai, a group of women housing activists were repeatedly detained—some as many as almost 100 times—as a result of their efforts to stave off eviction in the run-up to the 2010 Shanghai Expo.[4]

The environment is also an issue that provokes substantial social unrest. Rates of environmental degradation and pollution in China top world charts. For the Chinese people, the failure of local officials and factory managers to enforce environmental regulations translates into crop loss, poisoned fish and livestock, and serious public health concerns. During the summer of 2010, for example, thousands of villagers in Guangxi province protested against a plan by a heavily polluting aluminum company to build a new highway. The plant had ruined their drinking water and caused their crops to suffer. When the factory brought in workers armed with sticks, villagers from nearby towns came to support the villagers. Three migrant workers were killed, and a number of villagers wounded. According to one report, as many as 10,000 villagers were involved.[5]

Labor issues are also an increasingly common source of protest in coastal China. Labor shortages and better-educated workers contributed to a rash of strikes during the summer of 2010, with workers calling for higher wages and improved working conditions. Local officials and plant managers generally met these calls with raises and promises to improve living conditions.

Most challenging for the government, however, is the pervasive sense of unfairness within Chinese society. As a result, seemingly small incidents flare up to engage thousands of people. For example, a mourning ceremony for a small boy who died in a hospital in Jiangsu (where another child had recently died from the same treatment) garnered thousands of people and turned violent when police and other security forces massed.[6] A dispute over a motorcycle parking issue in Sichuan similarly engaged thousands in violent protest with police after the couple was beaten by local officials. [7]

While the Chinese government has been relatively adept at "putting out the fires" of traditional rural-based protest, in the past few years, a new form of protest rooted in urban areas has also emerged. These protests are

significant because they represent an effort to change the outcome of the policy process, thereby preventing an injustice, rather than being primarily a response to an injustice already committed. In May 2007, for example, in Xiamen, the local government agreed to site a large petrochemical plant near the city center, in contravention of Chinese regulations.[8] Local university professors and students rallied between 7,000 and 20,000 people for a weekend-long peaceful protest and successfully staved off the development of the plant. At the next site proposed, a similar set of protests occurred and the plant was once again relocated, this time to a poorer region with weaker political capacity. Protests there were ignored.

A Virtual Political System

No aspect of contemporary Chinese life has the potential to be as politically transformative as the Internet. There are 450 million Internet users in China[9] with the capacity to inform themselves, organize, and protest online. In effect, the Internet has become a virtual political system.

To date, the Internet in China has often been associated with providing an arena for expressions of Chinese nationalism. Over the past decade, Internet nationalism has been associated with a number of perceived challenges to China's sovereignty or dignity, such as the EP-3 incident over the South China Sea in 2001. Nationalism has also been expressed via anti-Japanese protests and boycotts of Japanese stores and products in 2005, anti-CNN and western media protests during the Lhasa riots in 2008, and most recently during the flare-up between Japan and China during September and October of 2010. In the last instance, a number of Chinese Internet sites were filled with anti-Japanese postings, and QQ instant messaging was used to organize protests.[10]

Yet expressions of nationalism occupy only one small corner of Internet life. The Internet has begun to play a critical role in building transparency and enhancing the flow of information throughout Chinese society. A Baidu webpage scientifically ranks Internet searches based on their frequency. In 2010, the most powerful and widespread roots of discontent were unaffordable urban real estate followed by inflation (specifically rising commodity and food prices). While the government may try to downplay the challenge of inflation or report specious numbers, postings by concerned citizens ensure that information is available from a number of sources. As one posting on a Chinese website noted, "As a whole, food prices have risen 10.3 percent since this time last year. The price increases, however, are not uniform across the board. The price of wheat has risen 15.1 percent, the price of meat 10.9 percent, eggs 20.2 percent, water 11.1 percent, vegetables have risen 2 percent and fruits have shot up over 34.8 percent."[11] In response to such concerns, in January 2011, Beijing announced an increase in the minimum wage by almost 21 percent, while Guangdong had earlier raised the minimum wage by about 19 percent. [12]

In other cases, environmental activists post pollution maps online that detail which factories have yet to address their pollution problems. Rankings of some municipal environmental practices are now also being posted online, much to the chagrin of many local officials.

The Internet has also become a means of trying to ensure a degree of official accountability and the rule of law. In one case, a journalist sought by police on trumped-up charges of slander took his case to the Internet. Of the 33,000 people polled, 86 percent said they believed he was innocent. The Chinese newspaper the *Economic Observer* then launched a broadside against the police, condemning their attempt to threaten a "media professional." The authorities subsequently dropped the charges against the journalist.[13]

The most infamous case to date involves a young man, Li Qiming, in Hebei province who killed a young woman and injured another while driving drunk. He fled the scene of the accident, in the process shouting, "My father is Li Gang! Try to get me, I dare you!" The incident instantly went viral on the Chinese Web, with "My father is Li Gang" becoming synonymous with government corruption and the privileged lives of officials' children. Despite the father's efforts to protect his son by apologizing on television and paying the family of the victim to drop its suit, Li Qimin was sentenced to six years in jail.

At the same time, the Internet can move beyond virtual justice to rally people in physical protest. As the blogger Qiu Xiubin writes: "When the interests of the people go unanswered long term, the people light up in fury-like sparks on brushwood. The Internet is an exhaust pipe, already spewing much public indignation. But if the people's realistic means of making claims are hindered, in the end we slip out of the make-believe world that is the Internet and hit the streets."[14]

In July of 2010, for example, bloggers provided first hand accounts of a large-scale pollution disaster in Jilin Province, contradicting official reports. Thousands of people ignored government officials, angrily accusing them of a cover-up and rushing to buy bottled water. In Guangzhou, in late 2009, a protest against a planned incinerator began with peasants living near the proposed site. However, they were soon joined by nearby workers and apartment dwellers. Some young activists used Twitter to spread the word and posted pictures on the Internet. While they were not directly affected by the plant, they wanted to use modern technology to spread the word and "show a protest in real time." With the engagement of the middle class and the use of the Internet, local officials soon promised not to pursue the project until an environmental impact assessment had been completed. [15]

The social network site Twitter, despite being blocked in China, has also become a particularly politicized Internet venue. According to the popular netizen Michael Anti, Twitter is the most important political organizing force in China today.[16] He notes that more than 1.4 million yuan was raised for the beleaguered NGO Gongmeng (Open Constitution Initiative) via Twitter. He also points to the uncensored discussion held between the Dalai Lama and Chinese citizens in May 2010 as an example of the political influence that twitter can exert. According to Anti, the people who participated stopped referring to the Dalai Lama as Dalai and now call him by the more respectful Dalai Lama. Anti reports that there are over 100,000 active users, and he anticipates that there will be 500,000 or more within the next two to three years.

Anti's claim of the importance of Twitter as a political force is supported by others. A poll of 1,000 Twitter users in China found that of the top twenty reasons why people access the site, almost a third of them are political: "to know the truth and open the horizon"; "no censor here, this is the taste of freedom that I enjoy"; "it allows me to keep my independent citizen conscious"; "feel that as a party member I should learn more about this world"; "it is an inevitable choice for a journalism student".[17] Moreover, according to the media critic Hu Yong, as Beijing has moved to strengthen its censorship efforts, Twitter has become more political in its orientation. He sees Twitter as particularly important because it brings together opinion leaders from around the world to sit at a virtual table. There public intellectuals, rights advocates, veterans of civil rights movements, and exiled dissidents can all converse simultaneously.[18] Recent calls for a "Jasmine Revolution" in China began with a Twitter post.

The Chinese Government Response

The Chinese government has managed through a range of incentives and coercive means to keep protests isolated and prevent unrest from directly challenging Party control. Responding to workers' needs for wage increases and improved living conditions, addressing middle-class concerns over quality of life issues, aggressively monitoring and responding to web-based protest, detaining and arresting protest and potential protest leaders, and dramatically increasing government expenditures for public security have all enabled the regime to keep social discontent from boiling over in a manner that threatens the stability of the country.

Yet the threat to stability remains. Central Party School official Gao Xinmin raised several issues concerning the challenge posed by the Internet in an off-the-record speech that was later made public on the web: "Against a backdrop of a diversity of social values, new media have already become collection and distribution centers for thought, culture and information, and tools for the amplification of public opinion in society. They are a direct challenge to the Party's thought leadership and to traditional methods of channeling public opinion. Traditional thought and education originates at the upper levels, with the representatives of organizations, but in the Internet age, anyone can voice their views and influence others. Many factual instances of mass incidents are pushed by waves of public opinion online, and in many cases careless remarks from leaders precipitate a backlash of public opinion."

In the wake of the protests throughout the Middle East, moreover, China faced its own calls for change. A Twitter posting called for a set of protests to be held in major Chinese cities on February 20—a "Jasmine revolution." While the protests largely fizzled, the government's reaction was instructive as thousands of police were mobilized, prominent dissidents were arrested, and edicts were issued to keep university students from leaving campuses. Only the day before, President Hu Jintao had delivered yet another speech on the need to control society more effectively through means such as a national database to cover every Chinese, more effective use of the Internet, socialist education, improving the Party's leadership, etcetera.

Outside China, analysts often portray the country as a model for other developing countries to emulate—a uniquely successful authoritarian regime. Yet it is evident that the Chinese leadership itself is not confident about its continued ability to manage the pervasive social unrest and discontent it confronts. Unless the Party is prepared to address the fundamental roots of such unrest—the lack of transparency, official accountability and the rule of law—pressure from below is only likely to grow, with new forms of protest from the urban, middle class and the Internet making Party control even more tenuous.

Endnotes

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