Authoritarianism and Contestation

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Journal of Democracy, Volume 24, Number 1, January 2013, pp. 26-40
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/jod.2013.0015

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China at the Tipping Point?

AUTHORITARIANISM AND CONTESTATION

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After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime suppressed the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, there emerged two starkly contrasting views regarding China’s future. One held that the horrific methods the government had used in cracking down would wreck public confidence in the regime and split the CCP, probably causing it to fall swiftly from power. The other view asserted that 1989 and the purges that followed it had so completely flattened the opposition that the forces of contention in Chinese society would never rise again.

The truth lay somewhere in between. The CCP would not split or collapse, and indeed came out of 1989 in a strong position, having dealt oppositionists a massive setback. Not only had the protesters been put down, but the rapid sustained growth that began with the economic opening of 1992 gave the authoritarian regime a cushion as people focused on material gain rather than politics and the CCP drew more professionals, intellectuals, businesspeople, and other elites into its ranks. Economic growth, moreover, gave the party-state more resources to spend on both welfare and its many agencies of social surveillance and control. In these ways, the CCP displayed itself as a model of what Andrew J. Nathan has called “authoritarian resilience.”

Yet the opposition, however far down it may have been pushed by the weight of repression, never allowed itself to be fully quelled. In 1998, within a decade of Tiananmen, prodemocracy activists would try to form a party. The regime crushed them in short order, but within two years dissident intellectuals began giving protest a voice by means of online petitions. These efforts scored their most famous achievement in December 2008, when Charter 08 (www.charter08.com) was released.
After the arrest of its leading sponsor, literary critic and later Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, more people joined. So the opposition is far from dead, even if it remains weak.

At the same time, what the regime calls “mass incidents” have been on the rise. Well-known episodes include the 2008 riots over police misconduct in Weng’an; the unrest that followed the exposure of CCP corruption in Shishou in 2009; and a months-long protest of vote-rigging, local corruption, and land seizures in Wukan during 2011 and 2012. These cases show that the hold the authorities’ have on society is not as strong as is often thought. Public demonstrations with unmistakably political overtones have also drawn wide attention. These have included the successful 2007 protests against the building of a chemical plant in Xiamen; the 2009 rallies against a proposed waste-burning plant in Guangzhou; demonstrations aimed at Peking University psychologist Sun Dongdong for his support of the notion that people who petition officials are usually mentally ill and may merit detention; and gatherings outside courthouses during high-profile trials of figures such as Liu Xiaobo, the muckraking social activist Tan Zuoren, tainted-milk whistleblower Zhao Lianhai, and three Fujian Province “netizens” who had posted online evidence that police had raped and murdered a young girl. Additionally, small-scale and limited acts of “ordinary resistance” have been on the upswing since the 1990s, as have land disputes and protests against forced demolitions.

Examples such as these suggest that, despite the appearance of tight regime control, the forces of contention are alive and well more than two decades after Tiananmen. Although no dissident political movement capable of openly defying state repression has so far appeared, it seems fair to say that the regime’s ability to hold society down is growing weaker.

The CCP has ruled China continuously since 1949 by maintaining conformity within its own ranks, staying in charge of key resources, absorbing nascent elites, and efficiently controlling society. The Tiananmen protests of 1989 had been set in train eleven years earlier, when China emerged from two years of turbulence following the 1976 death of Mao Zedong. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping began a shift from a holistic ideology of total control to a more relaxed stance meant to foster economic growth and social development. Although conditions were still far from ideal, civil society began to flourish and to cultivate the capacity for protest and opposition that eventually materialized in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square at the end of the 1980s.

As bloody and thorough as the 1989 crackdown was, it did not completely reverse the process of social opening that the party-state had initiated. Deng’s famous tour of southern China in 1992 marked the post-Tiananmen CCP’s return to the course that the Party had set back in the 1980s of trying to blend increased openness with continued control. On
the one hand, the CCP still owned the key resources, actively absorbed rising credentialed elites, dominated (or tried to dominate) society, and revealed that it could adapt to new situations. On the other hand, wealth flowed into and from the private sector in ways that both required and allowed ever more people to leave behind their collective work units and communes. The new and more market-friendly economic arrangements spurred huge demands for mobile and technically skilled professionals and freelance workers. Their mode of living could no longer be the closely watched and even barracks-like existence that for decades had been associated with the PRC. The basic change has been this: The individual is no longer under the complete control of a state whose dominance has been eroding in at least four ways:

1) **The coherence, ideological and otherwise, of the ruling elite is weakening.** This elite can now be better described as a mix of interests rather than a unity. The CCP now features within its ranks a variety of ideas and interests that would stun Chairman Mao. Some are simply expressions of localism. The PRC’s revenue-sharing system, adopted in 1994, divides tax proceeds between the center and the provinces. This naturally gives the latter more leeway to make their own decisions on various matters—and at times to passively reject unwelcome decisions coming from Beijing. Moreover, certain of the central government’s resource-management arms (including the agencies in charge of electricity, telecommunications, and petroleum) have effectively monopolized their sectors as state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and begun pursuing their own interests. Lastly, the party-state bureaucracy is no longer informed by Marxism, Maoism, or any other “-ism” except careerism. Corruption is widespread, and many officials focus on nothing but the acquisition of wealth and social status. Certainly few concern themselves with upholding the law or disinterestedly serving the public.

2) **The share of China’s economic and social resources under direct CCP control has been shrinking year by year since 1978.** It is true that since 2003 the state—despite widespread criticism—has expanded at the expense of the private sector, but not by enough to reverse the overall trend. The CCP regime has long relied on economic performance to bolster its legitimacy, but the SOEs, though richly supplied with resources, are all too often low-productivity operations that depend for survival on fiscal subsidies, massive loans from state banks, and monopolistic pricing. They contribute little to the PRC’s bottom line, and indeed have forced a reliance on foreign and private capital to a degree that has curtailed the state’s discretionary powers and even softened its iron fist. Then too, the state’s control of social resources may not match its control of economic resources. For instance, the *China Statistical Yearbook* for 2008 notes that in 2007, SOEs controlled 44.8 percent of the national capital but employed only 21.8 percent of China’s urban population.
3) **The CCP is losing its capacity to absorb rising new social elites.** The CCP cannot survive as China’s sole ruling force unless it brings newly important social groups (such as educated professionals) into its ranks. Its main way of doing this has been to give people jobs. But that avenue is closing. The institutions that are under CCP control—party and state administrations, SOEs, and the bureaucracies that oversee culture, education, scientific research, and health services, for example—are already overstaffed. Each year, very few fresh college graduates manage to become civil servants. Nor is this to say that everyone wants a job with the party-state: As the market-based economy has grown, more members of elite groups (especially if they are younger) have preferred to seek lucrative work in the private sector.

4) **The CCP can no longer control society the way it used to.** Prior to the 1978 reforms, the vast majority of China’s populace lived and worked under the direct control of communes, labor units, or village and neighborhood committees. Social control in that era relied heavily on decrees from the CCP leadership. As the old systems governing residence and employment have loosened, more people have slipped outside the orbit of direct Party control. In recent decades, hundreds of millions of China’s 1.2 billion citizens have left the permanent addresses under which they are registered in order to live and toil elsewhere. The party-state’s watertight control of society has been a thing of the past since the late 1980s; the post-Tiananmen crackdown could not and did not restore it.

The Limits of “Stability Maintenance”

In the organization-chart sense, social control in the PRC before 1978 was the duty of law-enforcement agencies and other armed forces maintained by the state; various departments of government and the CCP (the Ministry of Culture, the Communist Party propaganda office, and so on); and mass organizations or committees for workers, women, young people, and neighborhood or village residents. But what really held it together was the party-state’s domination of politics, the economy, society, and culture, along with a harsh household-registration system that segregated city and country dwellers and prevented citizens from moving around freely.

Deng’s reforms allowed society to make major gains vis-à-vis the state, and have left only the skeleton of the classic social-control system still standing. Social control currently, therefore, has gone from wholesale to retail: It is a matter of the CCP regime focusing special attention on particular individuals and organizations deemed threats to stability. The arms of the party-state dedicated to “stability maintenance” (weiwen) aim to “nip all factors of instability in the bud.” This means controlling (if need be through police repression) the activities
of dissidents; helping local governments to “manage” (which sometimes means block) citizens’ petitions; and making sure that officials at all levels are held accountable for doing their part to maintain stability.

Most stability-maintenance measures are taken after the fact, and consist, in effect, of punishments for various transgressions. Authorities will at times take before-the-fact or “precautionary” measures if the need seems urgent, even though under the party-state’s own laws meting out punishment for acts that have not yet been committed is clearly illegal. Advocates of the authoritarian-resilience thesis like to point out that since 1989 the regime has not shied away from using heavy-handed precautionary measures to enforce stability. Among its other problems, however, this whole effort is very expensive: In 2009, China spent almost as much on domestic-order maintenance as it did on military defense.

The violent post-Tiananmen crackdown plunged China into a miasma of fear, and many people abandoned any idea of facing the regime in a posture of contention. Almost a quarter-century later, that paralyzing fear has faded. Today, no one under 24—or in other words, about 513 million of China’s 1.3 billion people—has any memory of 1989. Ironically, the regime’s own efforts to stifle discussion of what happened during and shortly after that year—like its efforts to throw a veil of silence over its more recent crackdowns on movements such as Falun Gong—have helped to dispel fear by dispelling memory. Less memory means less fear, and less fear means more contention.

Another problem for the CCP regime is that precautionary enforcement conflicts with the rule of law, which the regime has been trying to promote. In recent years, precautions against dissidents and petition groups have included violence, illegal searches and imprisonment, house arrest, stalking, and summoning for interrogations, often in blatant violation of current Chinese law. Such steps have been known to backfire, moreover, by rallying public sympathy to the side of their targets. The lack of underlying legal justification, meanwhile, has left security officials feeling so anxious that in many cases they do little more than go through the motions of bringing the state’s weight to bear against the forces of contention. The police nowadays, for instance, not uncommonly “invite” activists whom they are watching to drop by headquarters to “drink tea”—a process meant to show that potential troublemakers have been noted, scrutinized, and warned by the state. Nowadays, many citizens enjoy posting online about their own “tea drinking” experiences, treating their receipt of such an “invitation” from authorities as an honor and a point of pride. Thus has a measure meant to intimidate become instead an incentive for activism.

As the number of citizens engaging in contentions grows, even punishment is failing to achieve its anticipated effect. People know that pen-
alties are mainly reserved for high-profile leaders such as Liu Xiaobo, Guo Feixiong, and Hu Jia. Followers face much less risk, and there are supportive social networks to assist those who do run seriously afoul of the authorities. Even more than “drinking tea,” being singled out for actual repression has become an honor and even a means to accumulate political capital, so more people are willing to chance it.

Just two years after the government’s 2006 repression of hunger-strike protesters came the even larger and more influential Charter 08 movement. The regime sentenced its most famous member, Liu Xiaobo, to eleven years in jail, but the forces of contention showed no sign of stalling. In 2011 and early 2012, dozens of people tried to visit the blind lawyer and rights defender Chen Guangcheng (since exiled) during his house arrest in Shandong Province. All would-be visitors—including the actor Christian Bale, who made world news by filming himself being confronted by plainclothes security agents—met with official harassment and in some cases physical attacks. No one actually got through the cordon to meet with Chen before he left China in May 2012, but people refused to be intimidated and kept trying. The whole episode underlines the limits of state repression and hence of the authoritarian-resilience thesis.

But exposing the limits of what repression can do is not the same as forming an organized political opposition capable of systematically confronting the regime. What are the prospects that such an opposition will emerge?

**New Society, New Forces**

As one would expect given China’s status as a modernizing, urbanizing country with a dynamic economy based on markets and strong involvement in globalization, the country has become a place where conditions favor the emergence of organized groups devoted to contending against an authoritarian state. The forces of contention are gathering and beginning to point themselves in the direction of political protest. The signs of the times are clear:

1) **The public is gradually putting aside political apathy and fear.**

For a time after the repression of 1989 and the turn to markets and limited openness in the early 1990s, political indifference and a preoccupation with moneymaking prevailed throughout Chinese society. But in recent years, rights-consciousness has risen as citizens become increasingly discontented with the actions of an exploitative state, be they direct (forcible housing demolitions) or indirect (growing income inequality, rampant corruption, and environment pollution). People want to know how the government is affecting them, including whether it is effectively administering public services and honestly providing promised benefits.
The CCP’s own promotion of nationalist feelings has focused people on politics. Those born in the 1980s and 1990s have reached adulthood without memories of personal political trauma or a fearsome state bureaucracy holding sway over them.

2) **There are now market-based media outlets to provide an alternative to the old state-run media.** In the 1990s, the old wall of prohibition around news, commentary, and social communication in general began to crack. Once completely banned, media not run by the state now serve a more diverse society with a growing appetite for all things cultural, recreational, and informational. Although censorship continues, profit-seeking “marketized media” organs (state-owned but not tightly state-run) increasingly adapt their content to the tastes, preferences, and values of the public. Opinion columnists and commentators often examine local officials, national policies, and various social phenomena with critical eyes. There is live television news and in-depth coverage of current issues, including matters that the authorities would prefer to see undiscussed. Burgeoning Internet use likewise spurs portions of the “marketized media”—staffed by people who do not identify with the institutions of the party-state but think of themselves as independent professionals—to grow bolder in presenting controversial viewpoints and reports. China’s “marketized media” outlets still belong to the state, but they nonetheless provide a more open platform for speech that departs from the official line. Count them as another reason why the CCP regime has less control than it used to over what Chinese people are reading, thinking, and saying.

3) **The rule of law and the defense of rights are growing in prestige and prominence.** After 1978, the CCP’s market-friendly reforms led to the disintegration of the communes and the system of “official affiliations” that once placed most of the populace under direct state control. In the 1990s, hundreds of millions of migrating workers and businesspeople further cemented such change. Economic development has produced whole new social classes in the form of tens of millions of entrepreneurs, small-business owners, freelancers, and white-collar workers. The state’s original direct-control system could not keep up. The CCP regime has had little choice but to turn to the rule of law as one of its main methods for managing society and as a major supplement to authoritarian tactics. Thus promotion of law-based rule became official state policy in the late 1990s.

For the party-state, the strengthening of the rule of law is a two-edged sword. It aids in the task of social control, but it also sets up protections for common people that the authorities are not used to worrying about. In pursuit of rapid economic growth, the Chinese state often seizes key resources at below-market prices and suppresses stakeholder groups that might object. The ranks of the discontented are not small. They include laid-off SOE workers who receive scanty
one-time severance payments based on their seniority; peasants whose land is seized without adequate compensation; property owners rendered homeless when the government flattens their houses to make way for a railway or a dam; and the like. Abuses of power by all levels of government, as well as the state’s repression of religious groups, have prompted large numbers of people to join the ranks of shangfang (petition and appeal) movements. In response to having their interests trampled, promised benefits taken away, and voices stifled, people have been turning to new methods of “rightful resistance,” making use of the current legal system as well as more traditional measures such as personal letters of petition. The new term weiquan (rights defense) has grown out of this movement.

The rights-defense movement expresses itself in the form of individuals’ appeals on behalf of their personal interests, but taken as a whole it involves impressive numbers of citizens who span various social classes and speak for a wide array of concerns. The movement has not only given birth to a legal group dedicated to defending rights, but has turned ordinary people who were once concerned only with their own narrow interests into activists who will fight to defend rights more generally. Intellectuals, activists from nongovernmental organizations, and media types have also become involved.

True, there is as yet no single unified rights-defense organization, but many weiquan “micro-ecologies” have germinated and are showing potential. The typical rights-defense micro-ecology brings together petitioners with lawyers (who often work for free), journalists, and NGO activists. Political dissidents can appear among petitioners, as can members of influential elites, whose presence is a particular boon to mobilization. In these loose groups, members reach consensus on values and typically do much of their communicating and mobilizing via interpersonal networks and the Internet. In recent years, the “gatherings” held to protest Sun Dongdong’s speeches or to draw attention to the legal plight of the three Fujian Province netizens have displayed the micro-ecological systems’ growing capacity for organizing and mobilizing dissent.

Despite the CCP’s harsh control efforts, political dissidence endures. The Tiananmen crackdown created a group of dissidents who have kept the flame burning for almost a quarter-century now. Some intellectuals have joined their ranks through self-reflection, as have others who have found themselves on the wrong side of an abusive state and wish to see past injustices righted and future injustices prevented. The Internet has inspired people to become dissidents or at least to sympathize with dissidents. Then there are those on the receiving end of the CCP’s religious persecution. All these dissidents lack identifiable organizations, but they make political claims. They keep in constant contact with one another and stay involved in public affairs and rights-defense
activities. When incidents occur, they issue public position statements. They make the case for reforms of various kinds and sponsor movements such as Charter 08. Dissidents are not vast in number, but some can boast of elite credentials and some even possess charismatic leadership qualities. Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel Peace Prize has brought them intense international interest and attention. The regime regards political dissidents as the most formidable opposition force it faces, and has tightened its control by subjecting many active dissidents to special monitoring and inspection.

5) Second-generation migrant workers now form a more restive labor force. Labor movements are not new in China. Ching Kwan Lee’s work on Chinese labor protest before 2000 suggests that the rise of labor movements is caused by worker resentment of state cadres, managers, and capitalists, and facilitated by new political and institutional spaces conducive to expressions of personal interests and resentment. Since 2009, major strikes at Honda plants and a series of worker suicides at the massive Foxconn Electronics complex in Guangdong Province near Hong Kong have drawn considerable public scrutiny.

The labor force—and with it labor activism—today is dominated by second-generation internal-migrant workers born in the 1980s and 1990s. They have higher expectations regarding individual rights than their parents had. They work not only to feed their families, but to live fulfilling lives. They grew up in cities, but officially still count as rural residents and so often are left out of civic welfare programs and pension arrangements. They live at the harsh intersection where the conditions required for China’s continued rapid economic growth and global competitiveness—ample amounts of low-paid, high-productivity labor—meet dreams of a better life. The realities of long hours working for meager pay in difficult and even dangerous conditions will continually fuel the Chinese labor movement. The impetus for this movement is not political, but as stability-prizing local governments put heavy pressure on restive workers, the conflicts are turning from matters of employee versus employer to showdowns that pit workers squarely against the authoritarian CCP regime.

**A Network of Contention Emerges**

Under current authoritarian conditions, overt contentious activities remain scattered. But various contentious forces have managed to stay connected both online and on the ground, thereby establishing a contentious network with explicitly political views. Within this network, contention is no longer about the concerns merely of individuals or single groups, but draws on the extended network for support. Contemporary contention in Chinese society displays the following unique characteristics:
1) Coalitions are built via the Internet and interpersonal mobilization. The Internet, introduced to the Chinese public in the late 1990s, now has more than 400 million Chinese users. It has multiplied opportunities for expression free of *ex ante* censorship, and has blunted the regime’s use of ostracism and social isolation against citizens deemed to be “dangerous.” The freedom of the online world has emboldened the “marketized media” to engage in freer reportage and comment as well. In the last ten years, the Internet has become the cutting-edge platform for news and information, the medium for the most incisive and audacious speech, and also the most effective tool for mobilization. Since 2009, the tools of choice for talking about and mobilizing contention have been Twitter and Sina Weibo (a microblogging service similar to Twitter), neither of which the state has so far been able to censor effectively in real time.

Political dissidents, rights defenders, and other social activists have been going online to communicate in real time since 2000, when politicized online signature movements began to proliferate. Statements are drafted and spread online; anyone can sign, either directly or by sending information to managed emails for listing. The topics at first were particular incidents, but now all kinds of politically restricted subjects are raised. In 2004, an appeal for accountability in the matter of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown drew more than a hundred intellectuals to affix their online signatures. Four years later came Charter 08, which drew thousands of signatures and made worldwide headlines, timed as it was to fall within the same year as the Beijing Olympics.

In China as elsewhere, many people communicate and become acquainted online, and these interactions can have a political cast. Those active in the causes of dissent and organized contention like to bond, as the online acronym goes, IRL (“in real life”) as well, and do so through meals, seminars, lectures, and other *weiguan* (crowd gatherings). In April and August 2010, artist and activist Ai Weiwei hosted dinners in Hangzhou and Shanghai, respectively. The first drew nearly three-hundred people and the second drew a thousand. More than half were petitioners. In 2009, activists from all over China organized “tours” of Hubei Province’s Badong County out of concern over possible state manipulation of a local murder case in which the victim was an official. (With formal rallies and demonstrations normally banned, activists opted to go as tourists.) This was the first instance of a collective act of contention organized entirely by netizens.

Anxious not to let the freedom of the Internet grow unchecked, the regime has adopted measures such as the infamous Great Firewall of China to prevent activists from accessing sensitive material that could be used to promote political and religious dissidence. Widely available proxy software, however, allows many to “climb over the wall” and view blocked content. Most Chinese netizens may not be actively cir-
cumventing censorship on a regular basis, but they receive much freer access to expression and information online than has ever been possible before. The Internet has made the regime’s desire to control what its citizens may learn or say impossible to fulfill.

Through their daily doings and online interactions, as well as through shared participation in specific rights-defense movements, contentious activists become well known to one another. Circles of acquaintance expand, groups grow, and collective actions become easier to mobilize through personal networks. Influential cases include the 16 April 2010 gathering,13 the 16 June 2010 gathering,14 and the May 2009 seminar organized by nineteen intellectuals in memory of the twentieth anniversary of the 4 June 1989 movement.

Study of the professional and regional backgrounds of Charter 08 signatories reveals that people from many walks of life are willing to openly express their political opinions and bear the consequences. The signers came together through various interpersonal networks with clear and relatively similar political claims and identities—an indicator that a network of social contention is emerging to challenge authoritarianism in China.

2) The forces of contention are becoming less reactive and more proactive. Rapid economic growth and the rise of markets have brought increased income inequality. Many citizens feel exploited in both relative and absolute terms, and a growing number resent the government. The CCP has not been able to alleviate their discontent, and the resentment grows seemingly unchecked. Flare-ups occur in the form of widely covered incidents such as the ones mentioned earlier that took place at Shishou, Weng’an, and Wukan. These protests involved many people whose personal interests were not directly at stake. They were involving themselves proactively by identifying with and supporting movements whose principles they affirmed.

3) A strong economy is not enough to stop contention from breaking out. The CCP regime has overseen some of the world’s most impressive rates of economic growth during the past several decades, but none of that translates into political legitimacy.15 For one thing, even in the area of economics alone, the CCP must keep outdoing itself: No matter how rapidly growth occurs, people’s demands and expectations will outstrip it. Yet woe to the regime should economic progress stall: Discontent aimed directly at the government would quickly escalate until it gave rise to a massive proactive contention that the forces of order would find themselves hard-pressed to contain.

4) Defense of economic rights leads to political contention. Contentions focused on the defense of rights often begin when economic interests are violated, and generally aim to influence local governments. But when the petition route fails and appeals to the rule of law do not avail, rights defenders must change tactics and turn to the cause
of political reform if they wish to safeguard their economic rights. Meanwhile, proactive contentions making direct political claims are also growing under the influence of Charter 08 and the 16 April 2010 gathering.

The authoritarian regime that rules China has nearly exhausted all the stability-maintenance measures at its command. The measures themselves are declining in effectiveness yet rising in cost. Collective contentions continue to increase as the forces of contention coalesce. The government can manage small-scale social movements led by middle-class urbanites, but beyond that it is mostly at sea and unable to adapt its response mechanisms to deal with large-scale contentions.

The Politics of Contention

We do not pretend to own a crystal ball and will venture no firm prediction as to whether China is likely to become democratic or not. Yet we do propose that the key to understanding China’s near-term political future is to grasp the dynamic between the authoritarian state and civil society. The regime has been successful so far at using direct control to stunt the growth of opposition groups. Yet as the regime’s control weakens while emerging networks of contention become stronger, how will the dynamic evolve?

First and foremost, the state’s continuing will and ability to wield the stick of repression remain the most important factors. Activists can be (and have been) willing to stand against the regime’s punishments and deterrents, but the scale and intensity of repression matter. The recent upheavals in the Arab world have made the CCP highly alert to the danger of possible democratic diffusion effects. The security apparatus is more thoroughly institutionalized, and its organization and practices have been overhauled to improve coordination among its various departments. Were the regime to opt for more selective and severe repressive tools (as in some cases it already has), dissidents could face higher hurdles as they seek to organize contentions.

With adequate funds and an increasingly sophisticated network of security officials, China does not seem to suffer from any lack of means to enforce repression. Yet the regime’s resolve to repress may become complicated by the increasing political prominence of the security apparatus. In 2002, the CCP placed the PRC’s Ministry of Public Security (China’s national police) under a member of the CCP Politburo. One seat on the powerful Politburo Standing Committee had also been assigned to the national head of internal security (the secretary of the CCP’s Central Commission for Political and Legal Affairs). At the local level, police chiefs have received higher administrative ranks and in many cases head the entire local security apparatus.
Has the increased political power that security cadres now enjoy, not to mention the concentration of so much authority in the hands of the police, made the “strongmen” the most potent force within the ruling party? The fall amid scandal in 2012 of Bo Xilai, a powerful Politburo member from Chongqing whose trademark policy, or so he claimed, was using that city’s police force to fight organized crime, may hint that his fellow CCP higher-ups are now worried about keeping the state-security establishment under control. Before the opening of the Eighteenth Party Congress in early November 2012, most local governments rearranged their internal lines of authority so that senior judicial-branch officials (procurators-general and court presidents) now stand on the same level as the police chief.

In the newly formed CCP leadership, chosen at the Eighteenth Party Congress in November 2012, the rank of internal-security leader has been demoted to general Politburo-member status (instead of going to a member of the Politburo’s more elite Standing Committee). Moreover, the Central Party Secretariat, the political body in charge of coordinating CCP affairs, now includes no figure from the security sector. This should have the effect of making the security apparatus—placed as it now is under a larger array of decision makers—less arbitrary and less likely to launch bouts of violent repression.

Last but not least, the emerging network of contention will play its own role, despite the state’s strong repressive machine. This network’s importance lies in its decentralization and “flatness.” The popularity of Sina Weibo has made it even easier for citizens to form contentious groups and otherwise spontaneously organize themselves. Leaders matter less since people no longer need political entrepreneurs to mobilize and connect them; the contention networks (whether online or interpersonal) can do that. This means that the state will not be able to shut down contentious networks by striking at a handful of central figures. Ordinary members (in a sense, everyone in a flat network is an “ordinary” member) will remain aware of and available for contentions, and arresting a few people will not change that. Without obvious targets for repression that it can single out, the security apparatus will be of less use. Or so it would seem, at any rate. The authoritarian regime that rules China has shown itself highly adaptable in the past, and perhaps its police officials will come up with new ways to adapt to the flat-network and speed-of-Twitter problems as well.
The relationship between the CCP regime and China’s networks devoted to democratic contention will continue to be a high-powered standoff. The state apparatus is slipping a bit but still strong, while civil society groups have limited power but greater organizational flexibility and the will to make persistent political demands. When resilient authoritarian state meets resilient contention network, who will rise most effectively to the challenge: a new party-state leadership or an ever-evolving and dynamic Chinese society?

NOTES

The authors thank Dingxin Zhao and Dali Yang of the University of Chicago for many valuable insights. They also thank Yu Xunda of Zhejiang University for reviewing and commenting on earlier drafts. Zhenhua Su recognizes the University of Chicago Political Science Department for aiding him in the revision of an earlier version of this essay when he was a visiting scholar in 2010–11.


4. Petitioning is the administrative system for hearing complaints and grievances from individuals in China. Under the system, the State Bureau for Letters and Calls and its local branches are commissioned to receive letters, calls, and visits from individuals or groups bearing suggestions, complaints, or grievances. Staffers are then supposed to forward these appeals to the appropriate departments and monitor the progress that is being made to settle them, which progress the staffers are then supposed to report to the filing parties. The Letters and Calls Bureau is often the last legal resort that people have to resolve their conflicts with the government, and it has attracted tens of millions of active petitioners.


6. Guo Feixiong is a social activist who regularly offers legal assistance to rights-defending petitioners. He was detained and tortured from 2006 to 2007, and in November of the latter year received a five-year jail term. Hu Jia is a Chinese activist and dissident who has focused on the Chinese democracy movement, environmentalism, and HIV/AIDS prevention. Hu was detained after Christmas 2007 and sentenced to three-and-a-half years in jail the following spring.

7. Merle Goldman, *From Comrade to Citizen*.


13. On 16 April 2010, many contention activists from across China gathered around the courthouse of Mawei District, Fuzhou City, the capital of Fujian Province, where the three netizens were being tried. These activists gave out leaflets and peacefully demonstrated to protest the trial. The campaign drew much online coverage.

14. On 16 June 2010, rights-defending activist and lawyer Ni Yulan, who had recently been released after serving two years in jail for protesting the state’s eminent-domain seizure of her house, was again detained by police while she was attending rallies with other activists. The activists on the scene, along with others mobilized via Twitter, quickly gathered around the Donghuamen police station where Ni was being detained, and confronted the police while protesting.