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Loosening Controls in Times of an Impatient Society: Chinese State-Society Relations during Xi Jinping's Honeymoon Period

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The new Chinese leadership's recent loosening of controls and reactions from social forces follow an established political playbook. The question is whether a seemingly more assertive society will continue to play by the rules.

Now that Xi Jinping has been leading the Chinese Communist Party for a good four months, it may pay off to review the new leadership's initial performance in light of a distinct pattern in Chinese politics. Following major power reshuffles over the last two decades, the ruling elites have initiated several phases of more relaxed political controls (*fang*, in Chinese) during which they convey a blend of reformist and populist signals. Newly enthroned leaders may display this tendency in order to establish their authority over the party and their rivals by gathering support from reform-minded intellectuals and ordinary citizens.

In a system in which political life still revolves around deciphering the leadership's latest "ways of putting things" (*tifa*), it is not surprising that social forces respond when avowals from the top suggest more leniency. Intellectual elites tend to regard reformist gestures as an opportunity to push the boundaries. Many ordinary citizens interpret an intensification of populism as a signal to bring their grievances with local officials to Beijing's attention. In the past, such societal repercussions eventually prompted the central authorities to re-tighten the political climate (*shou*).

Subsequent to patriarch Deng Xiaoping's death in early 1997 and the Chinese Communist Party's 15th Party Congress later that year a breeze of change blew through Beijing. The top leader Jiang Zemin made vague remarks on "rule of law" and "democratization" and condemned official corruption while intellectuals circulated reform proposals. By late 1998, however, the tide began to turn towards a renewed tightening of the screws. The leadership became unnerved by popular unrest that had increased by leaps and bounds. Moreover, some dissident groups had overstepped the Communist Party's comfort zone and harsh repression campaigns were unleashed in response.

When Hu Jintao came to power in 2002 he began to espouse his brand of populism. Hu reinterpreted his predecessor's elitist theoretical inclinations and made "putting people first" (*yi ren wei ben*) his guiding principle. By eventually breaking an information blockade during the SARS crisis and doing away with the inhumane custody and repatriation system (*shourong qiansong zhidu*) in response to the [Sun Zhigang Incident](#) in early 2003, the Hu-Wen leadership team further established populist credentials and raised expectations for its willingness to embark on reforms. However, when petitioners, hopeful that the new leaders would respond to their plight, entered [Beijing en masse](#) and the news media dug up a series of scandals, the centre responded with a return to conservatism. Measures to prevent aggrieved citizens from reaching the capital and restrain investigative journalists were unveiled. Intellectuals' hopes for political reform were disappointed.

On this background, Xi Jinping's start into office does not come as a surprise. Emulating his predecessors, Xi too has started out with the typical mixture of reformist and populist gestures. Right after his inauguration he put the fight against corruption at the top of his [agenda](#). Since then his administration has followed up with investigating a number of officials and more strong words. Xi also [embarked](#) on a campaign to make party cadres' "work style" (*zuofeng*) and "communication style" (*wenfeng*) less formalistic and more accessible. On New Year's Day 2013, the state media published his nebulous call for more "[political courage](#)" (*zhengzhi yongqi*). Later Xi nebulously suggested that power would need to be "[shut into the cage of the system](#)". In addition, the new security chief, Meng Jianzhu, surprised many when he announced in January 2013 that the notorious re-education through labour system (*laodong jiaoyang zhidu*) was "[expected to come to a stop this year](#)."

Although framed in characteristic party mumbo jumbo, these signals amount to a noticeable political thaw. And predictably, social forces have begun to respond. Netizens have put Xi Jinping's words into action by intensifying an online [anti-corruption campaign](#). Around Christmas 2012 a group of academics published a proposal with a modest sounding, but nonetheless

significant, demand to avert a “[violent revolution](#)” by governing in accordance with China’s constitution. Before the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress in March 2013 concerned intellectuals [published a call](#) to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Moreover, 2013 began with a fury when reporters from Guangzhou’s [Southern Weekly](#) went on strike to protest a radical change of the paper’s New Year edition by the propaganda authorities. Although similar acts of collective media worker resistance had happened before (e.g. in 2005 staff of [The Beijing News](#) went on strike to protest the removal of an editor), what is new this time around is the strength of societal response. The whole affair immediately spilled over to the internet, intellectuals published an open letter in support of the media workers, and a few hundred citizens, some of them brandishing slogans against censorship and for “[media freedom](#)”, took to the streets. Remarkably, given the open articulation of such demands, the police were apparently ordered to show restraint and a commentary with mild criticism of over-zealous censorship was published in the [People’s Daily](#). Simultaneously, however, an editorial that portrayed the incident in very hostile terms was published in the more hawkish [Global Times](#) and [propaganda authorities](#) reportedly instructed the news media to republish it. These severely mixed signals did not intimidate the supporters of the [Southern Weekly](#). Yet, they may have contributed to the mobilization of conservative citizens who confronted [liberal protesters](#) on the day after the [Global Times](#) editorial had been published. Eventually, however, compromise over the underlying conflict managed to defuse the stand-off.

What does all this mean? First, if Xi Jinping is serious about his stated intent of reining in the officialdom, he will need to, in one form or another, curb official power and grant the public more institutionalized access to local politics. Up to now, however, the Chinese ruling elite has consistently shied away from significant changes to the system that guarantees almost absolute authority for local party secretaries. Hence, such a move would require, in Xi’s own words, great political courage. So far the Xi administration has not demonstrated that it has this resolve. The [parliamentary session in March 2013](#) revealed virtually no trace of measures that might sustainably curb arbitrary official behavior. If this suggests that the new leadership follows the footsteps of its predecessors, then a series of conservative signals to indicate that the reformist-populist honeymoon period is over can be expected in the not so distant future.

Second, besides these unpredictable elite inclinations, a variable to watch closely is societal reaction. In the reform scenario, ordinary citizens’ apparently much stronger appetite for activism than just a few years back, plus liberal intellectual elites’ seemingly growing displeasure with the status quo, suggest that Xi would have a hard time maintaining a momentum of reform while preventing social forces from rocking the boat. In the return-to-conservatism scenario, the same conditions could imply that society would not as easily fall back into line as it had in previous times. In any case, the leadership knows that disappointing citizens’ expectations can be a risky business. In 2004, for instance, a group of peasant leaders, who failed to get the attention of the central authorities when they petitioned in Beijing, eventually turned to more [disruptive tactics](#). They organized the [Hanyuan Incident](#) in which tens of thousands of farmers clashed with security forces over a dam building project in Sichuan’s Hanyuan County.

Extrapolating from the robust trend of rising contentious activism in China, societal response to signals from the top may well be stronger this time around than it had been during the previous post-transition thaws under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. In addition, the [Southern Weekly](#) row indicates that different social forces can now also be mobilized against each other. Thus, regardless of which direction the leadership decides to take, Chinese state-society relations look like they are headed for a considerably more intricate future. To manage them, Xi Jinping will have to attain mastery in the skill of governing popular emotions. Yet, it is this craft in which Chinese Communist Party leaders have traditionally excelled in.

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