

China: Xi Jinping's Ideological Dilemma

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There is no doubt that the policy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Xi Jinping , is to further accelerate economic reforms; and at the same time, like the earlier regimes, firmly against political liberalization in the country.

Confirming the policy has been the CCP Fourth Plenum (October 2014) 'Decision' document which, while giving approval to the 'socialist rule of law' in the country, first time to happen in such sessions, did not fail to reiterate the party's supremacy in the Chinese political system. This being so, there is evidence to point out that the CCP has come under pressure to fight against liberal voices increasingly emanating from circles close to the party itself as well as the society at large; this has led to its launch of an ideological debate with the liberals, which is progressing intermittently. Interestingly, some of the arguments from the party side to counter the liberal ideas are being made on the basis of orthodox Marxist class positions which are irrelevant to reforms, thus exposing the existence of ideological hardliners within the CCP. Who are the liberals being targeted by the party in the debate? They include influential and outspoken media representatives, some even working for CCP affiliates and academicians who have come out in favor of full economic liberalization and genuine political reforms.

A prominent subject of the ongoing debate is the concept of 'constitutionalism', which provides for every institution in the country including the CCP being accountable to the constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In essence, the party considers it as a Western inspired one and unsuitable for China. Among the CCP documents on the subject, is one issued by its General Office (No.9/2013), which was made public in the foreign media in June 2013. It chose 'constitutionalism' for attack and asked the cadres to guard against seven political "perils"- constitutionalism, civil society, universal values, media independence, criticizing errors in party history i.e. historical nihilism,

questioning the policy of opening up reforms and opposing socialist nature of China's development. It called on Party members to strengthen their resistance to infiltration by outside ideas.

Catching attention is also a pre-Plenum document of the CCP's central party school itself which raised (October 2014) eight fundamental ideological questions; important among them concerned the CCP's role in market economy, core socialist values, theory of class struggle and the collapse of the former Soviet Union. These questions have not been fully addressed in the plenum the main agenda of which was 'rule of law', not ideological matters; a full answer to them is therefore yet to come and a more lively debate can be in the offing.

Lastly, the already mentioned Plenum's 'Decision' document has made party's official position in clearest terms— *“governance according to law requires that the CCP governs the country on the basis of the constitution and laws and that the party leadership and socialist rule of law are identical. Party leadership is the most fundamental guarantee for comprehensively advancing the rule of law and building country under socialist rule of law”*. Not to be missed is the fact that in the Decision, there has been no mention of “constitutionalism”, a pet word for the liberals, while the term “constitution” appears 38 times. It did not say anything about strengthening the National People's Congress (NPC) and the power of the NPC standing committee for interpreting or applying the constitution.

Echoing the view that the CCP is the supreme political force in China, are also the party and state-controlled media. They have specifically accused some of indulging in the 'secret mission of constitutionalism talk', of attempting to “abrogate the party leadership and to overthrow the socialist regime” (Party Construction journal, 29 May 2013), while asserting that constitutionalist systems “only belong to capitalism and bourgeois dictatorship and not to socialist people's democracy” (Red Flag Manuscript, affiliated to the CCP theoretical organ 'Qiu Shi', June 2013). The party newspaper Global Times (June 2013) denounced proponents of 'constitutionalism' for indirectly negating China's path of development, adding that the concept is a new way to force China to adopt Western political systems.

A Xinhua commentary political (Chinese, 23 October 2014) stated that the Plenum's Decision “clearly and thoroughly promoted the overall objective of ruling the nation in accord with the constitution setting major tasks and making a series of new judgments and new deployments for achieving this objective. In handling China's matters well, the crux lies with the party and in promoting the rule of the nation; the most fundamental guarantee is the party”. Red Flag Manuscript (26 November 2014) attacked those who want to split the party leadership and 'governance of the country in accordance with law'. It added that they “even contrast the two, as if any talk about party leadership means there will not be real law. The party leadership and socialist rule of law are identical. Socialist rule of law must maintain party leadership and party leadership must rely on socialist rule of law”. A People's Daily editorial (4 December 2014) asserted that the fact of revolution, construction and reform having been achieved by people under the party guidance, establishes the CCP's leading status.

Appearing important of late is another 'Red flag Manuscript' strongly worded write-up (26 November 2014) contributed by Zhang Quanjing, former chief of CCP Organization Department. It alleged that in China, international hostile forces are trying for peaceful evolution, color evolution, setting up of a democratic constitutional government and spread of ideas on new liberalism and democratic socialism; these

forces have their agents within China. The article accused some in China of wanting to negate the CCP leadership and socialist system; they in the main attack Mao thought. “We should carry out active resolute ideological struggle against them, strengthen ‘red culture’ propaganda, like what Xi Jinping said, establish supervision over news organizations, internet and TV stations, and bring Marxists to lead the ideological sphere”. It charged some people of slandering party leaders, saying that the harm caused is greater than corruption and asked expulsion of those from the party who do not change through education. On 12 December 2014, the same journal alleged that some in China paint the party black, propagate the view points of negating the party leadership and the socialist system and create all kinds of fallacies, demanding utmost vigil against such ideas. Academicians opposing ‘constitutionalism’ concept included Professor Yang Xiaoqing of the Renmin University who argued that the concept would knock China off its path of socialist development (Red Flag Manuscript, 2013).

At the other end of the debate on “constitutionalism” is the liberal group. It consists of prominent journals, scholars and intellectuals. The Southern Weekend journal (January 2013) through its front page article titled “Dream of China, Dream of Constitutionalism” stressed the need for ‘constitutionalism’ in China, which was ultimately withdrawn by the party authorities. The liberal magazine Yan Huang Chun Qiu (known outside as ‘China through the Ages’), the website of which was closed down by the authorities once and now believed to be having Hu Deping, son of late Chinese leader Hu Yaobang as President, said (2 January 2013) that China’s “constitution is a consensus for political reform”.

Among liberal intellectuals, the group which brought out “Charter 2008” in October 2008 is worth mentioning. It was in essence a manifesto for human rights in China calling for deepening of reforms and recasting the present constitution. Among its signatories was the Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo, who is still in jail in China. Professor Yang Xiaoqing of Renmin University attacked (May 2013) liberal concepts; for him, ‘Peoples Democracy’, not ‘constitutionalism’, is a must for the country. Professor Hu Angang of Qinghua university defended “People’s Society” against ‘constitutionalism’ (July 2013). On 25 August 2013, Zhang Xuezhong, a constitutional expert of East China University of Political Science and Law, was suspended from teaching after he called the government to honour the 1982 constitution, demanding that China requires to build a real rule of law, one to which even the party is accountable. Around the same time, a scholar of the same university Tong Zhiwei demanded a fuller implementation of China’s constitution and a way to “prescribe a limit to the party’s power” and Professor He Weifang of the same university said that “constitutionalism” and the rule of law are best safeguards of liberty and the foundation of good governance in China. In the same category comes Professor Xu Zhiyong of the Peking University School of Law, who is leading a citizen right movement.

The debate is also around themes like the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, ‘class struggle’ and relevance of Mao Zedong thought, taken up in some articles in the CCP theoretical organ, ‘Qiu Shi’, ‘Red Flag Manuscript’ and the party newspaper People’s Daily. Qiu Shi (14 October 2014) glorified the Marxist idea of “People’s Democratic Dictatorship”. Global Times of the same day took care to point out that it was only a theoretical signal and not a political signal. Both People’s Daily and ‘Red Flag Manuscript’ carried in October 2014 an article of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) President Wang Weiguang which said that class struggle would never disappear in China and questioned whether the role of workers and peasants against capitalists was incompatible with the rule of law. The Red Flag Manuscript

article by Zhang Quanjing already quoted above, endorsing the view of Prof Wang, said that in Socialist countries, class struggle exists and emphasized that “we must recognize the long term serious nature of the struggle between the two lines”. The CCP-run Global Times (7 October 2014) , even doubted whether the CASS has become conservative.

Going by data available so far, one finds difficulty in deciphering whether the CCP chief Xi Jinping is a conservative or one with liberal leanings. He is in fact being seen accommodating both conservative and liberal view points. On the subject of ‘constitutionalism’ in the country, Xi originally appeared catering to the liberal opinion, but taking care to use only the term ‘constitution’. An instance has been his speech at the 30th anniversary of promulgation and implementation of China’s constitution (4 December 2012); quoting Article 5 of Chinese constitution on the occasion, Xi said that no organization or individual has the privilege to overstep the constitution and law. He remarked that “Rule of nation by law means first and foremost ruling the nation in accord with constitution (yi xian zhi guo); the crux in governing by laws is to govern in accord with constitution (yi xian zhi zheng)”. For some time, the remarks did not find mention in any of the party official documents. A primer of important speeches of Xi Jinping released in June 2014 did not include them. The remarks however reappeared after a long delay; it was repeated in Xi’s address at the function organized to mark the 60th anniversary of China’s National People’s Congress (September 2014) and in the latest Plenum. The speculation is that the Party’s debate with liberals on the subject and lack of leadership consensus contributed to the delay.

At the same time, not to be ignored are signs that Xi Jinping is not totally ignoring conservative viewpoints. During his speech at the 90th anniversary function held to mark the CCP’s foundation (2011), he formulated the idea that 30 years of Mao Zedong thought and 30 years of reforms were of equal importance and value. This came to be known as the theory of “two irrefutables”. It clearly marked a departure from the 1981 evaluation of Mao. Xi’s call for party purity (March 2012) at his central party school address, also indicated his conservative bias. Under his leadership, party leading subgroups (LSGs) on deepening reforms, National Security Commission and a body for protecting internet security, were formed all directly reporting to the CCP Central Committee; these steps ran counter to the liberal demands for separation of the party from state in policy making. Xi’s ‘mass line ‘ campaign based on Mao model had a conservative character ; so is the case with the book “Collection of Xi Jinping Writings”, published in September 2014, in which Xi connected the party’s survival with Mao thought and reiterated that China’s constitution establishes the leading status of the CCP. Coming under the same category was Xi’s statement (15 October 2014) that arts must embody socialist core values and serve the people and that artists should avoid becoming slaves of the market, close to what Mao had spoken in the past on art and literature in Yanan.

An analysis of the contents of the debate reveals certain important trends.

Firstly, the ongoing discourse on ideological issues, if not properly handled, may lead to permanent intra-party divisions posing a challenge to the CCP leader Xi Jinping who has declared party unity as his goal.

Secondly, Xi with an eye on consolidating his political power is accommodating both conservative and liberal opinions in making decisions.

His carrying out of a crackdown on human rights lawyers, media outlets, academics, and independent thinkers in the country, may placate the former; his reform and opening up push may satisfy the latter. Whether such tight rope walking, will turn out to be a constraint on Xi in future, remains to be seen.

Lastly, prospects for future legal reforms in the country seem to have risen now, considering the Party Plenum's focus on 'governance of the country in accordance with constitution'.

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