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# A Little Spark Kindles a Great Fire? The Paradox of China's Rising Wave of Protest

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**ABSTRACT** *Mass protests in China in recent years have been more frequent and widespread than in other authoritarian settings and have thus become a serious source of concern for the party-state. Many believe that a rising tide of protest has the potential to impose a significant political challenge to the stability of the regime in comparison to the fragile situation of 1989 the Tiananmen incident. However, the motives behind today's protests are clearly not revolutionary. The growing protest movements do not serve as a severe threat to the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party for three reasons. First, the nature of recent protests has not been that of pro-democracy; rather, the participants are aggrieved citizens who have suffered economic losses and who demand concrete and practical rights for unfair and unjust treatments. They are politically weak despite their huge numbers. Second, the characteristics of recent protests do not constitute any of the features that would involve serious political risk. Instead, protests are focused on local issues and target specifically at local authorities. Third, the shifting international environments and China's rise to international power change the political visions of educated Chinese and further undermine their potential to initiate protests that would have more serious political implications.*

**KEY WORDS:** Protest, collective incident, China, political strategic population, appeals system

With the acceleration of market reforms in the 1990s, the Chinese economy and society underwent a series of major changes. The radical shift of economic system records aggregate GDP growth rate of about 10% every year. However, recent waves of mass protest across the country reveal the dark side of China's economic boom. While citizens' standards of living are continuing to increase, income inequality has grown to a factor of threat. Individuals belonging to losing groups amidst these wrenching changes have increasingly protested. According to the official statistics from the Ministry of Public Security, in 2010, there were 180,000 protests, riots and other collective incidents nationwide—a fourfold increase from a decade earlier (*The Wall Street Journal*, 26 September 2011). As a serious source of concern for the central government, many scholars believe that these protests would pose a significant political challenge to the stability of the regime and pale in comparison to the fragile situation of the 1989 Tiananmen movement (Lewis & Xue, 2003; Pei, 2006).

However, the present article holds opposite arguments. The current protest wave, in essence, does not pose as a severe threat to the central government due to the lack of

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involvement of the ‘winners’ of market reforms as well as party functionaries; isolation from China’s premiere business and export sectors; and the absence of large, sustained protests in China’s major cities that might compel the government to consider the use of force against its populous once more. Even if this wave of protest did force the hand of the central government, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is now equipped with riot gear and trained to contain mass protests with measured mixtures of concession and repression, reducing the scale of the bloodshed in this contingency. In addition, the grievances voiced in most present protests are usually not lodged against the central government with abstract conceptions of social justice. Instead, numerous protesters focus on specific and concrete local issues, which largely limits the chances of their success and fragments their movements. In other words, the motives behind today’s protests are clearly not revolutionary.

The present analysis will contrast the streams of protest in 1989 with the composition of unrest in the current generation and evaluate the severity of the current protests to the central government.

### **1989 Tiananmen Movement: A Perfect Storm**

The Tiananmen protests of 1989 symbolized the coming of a ‘perfect storm’ resulting from social and structural changes in post-Mao China. Numerous political leaders including Deng Xiaoping and several of his more conservative colleagues were members of the generation who had served with Mao in his 1949 Revolution. Young people in the 1980s were also in the process of recovering from the Maoist period and most significantly, their experiences in the Cultural Revolution. More broadly, the reform agenda and rapid social changes that ensued in the period created a ‘Crisis of Confidence’ in the CCP and socialism. Students and intellectuals, who were gaining more and more exposure to Western news media including the BBC and Voice of America, became more and more skeptical of political indoctrination and the orthodox Communist ideology. They saw democracy as a key to China’s development and looked to Western models, especially that of the USA, as guides for the future direction of the country.

The policy of ‘Crossing the river by feeling the stones’ proved an effective strategy for drastically raising consumer living standards. This pragmatic mode of economic reform means that the Chinese leadership started cautious economic liberalization in some specific regions or sectors, and gradually expanded successful experiment to other regions and sectors. However, without a clear plan for reform and lacking the precedent of other countries undergoing a similar transition, this strategy increased citizens’ concerns over job security and caused an explosion of inflation, especially in the latter part of the decade. Specifically, the dual price system, which permitted a high free-market price and a low state-fixed price, yielded only a few successful entrepreneurs and left the majority of Chinese citizens who lived on fixed salaries or retirement allotments to suffer from inflated prices. In 1987, the real rate of inflation climbed to an estimated 30%. In 1988, the mounting consumer unrest over surging inflation as well as rumors of impending price decontrol finally triggered a wave of urban buying panic and led to sharply rising prices in the summer (Walder, 1989).

In addition to the rising economic tensions, political reforms stalled following the resignation of reformist leader Hu Yaobang in 1987 and conservatives launched a backlash against ‘liberalism’, with officials such as Li Peng rising to prominence in this period.

Educated Chinese witnessed an accelerated political change in the Soviet bloc and a new wave of democratization in the political arenas of their East Asian neighbors. They grew impatient and were fearful that China was falling behind other socialist countries. Open divisions in the political elite further exacerbated these political reform issues, illustrating clear disunity among China's leaders on economic and political policies, which often led to rapid reversals of government decisions.

The protests in 1989 were directed toward the national leadership, as an attempt to influence elite politics and tilt the balance of power against conservatives. Rural protests and worker protests were rare, with students being the predominant force in protest throughout the decade. As concerns associated with corruption and inflation mounted in the latter part of the decade, workers, professionals and Party functionaries including those of the *People's Daily* began to join and support students in the streets and the Square. Indeed, workers comprised the greatest number of casualties and of those prosecuted after the 1989 events.

Involving a solid support and enthusiastic participation from diversified sectors of China's population, the Tiananmen protests of 1989 comprised a significant threat to the continued existence of the CCP and its hold on power. The rising inflation united the disparate groups of students and workers as it affected all citizens and cut deeply into real incomes. The participation of rank-and-file Party members in these protests compelled officials to the negotiating table. While the sustained protests throughout Beijing in spring 1989 may have had some effect on China's foreign relations, these protests forced the CCP to decide on the use of deadly weaponry against its own citizens. Lacking the equipment or prior training to put down a riot of this sort, the CCP resorted to lethal force to quell the protests in the early morning of June 4, 1989.

### **Current Wave of Protest**

In stark contrast to the unrest in 1989, the current wave of protest does not serve as a severe threat to the continued rule of the CCP for three reasons.

First, recent protest movements are primarily driven by economic restructuring and development. Following Tiananmen, inflation was no longer running rampant. Instead, unemployment has risen drastically, especially as the reforms to the state sector reached completion in the mid-1990s. While this tide of unemployment is problematic, with one-third of all state sector jobs having been eliminated by 2002, it affects only individuals who are laid off (Pan, 2008, p. 119). The rapid industrialization and urbanization has also forced large numbers of farmers to relocate without due compensation. In many cases, local officials appropriated collective ownership rights by allying with business interests. Moreover, city redevelopment and urban renewal projects have evicted many homeowners from their neighborhoods on short notice. In Beijing, for example, between 1991 and 2003, more than a half a million families were evicted by developers (Pan, 2008, pp. 164–165). Greed is often the motivator behind officials' decisions to tear down neighborhoods to build lucrative developments, providing investors and officials with astronomical returns on investment, averaging approximately 60% (Johnson, 2005, p. 114).

Although state workers, peasants and homeowners have all launched dramatic protests in recent years, their criticisms have tended to be structured around material and practical demands, such as economic entitlement and unemployment compensation, rather than reflect the enthusiasm for liberal democracy as shown in 1989. In the spring of 1989, mass

protests clearly demanded for political reforms and Western-style democracy. They built a monumental Statue of Liberty in the name of 'Goddess of Democracy' in Tiananmen Square and hung English banners such as 'For the People', 'By the People' and 'Glasnost' everywhere. By comparison, recent urban protests strike over layoffs, wage payments, pensions and urban development projects, while rural protests over nonagricultural land use, environmental issues, official misconduct, abuse of power and excessive force or torture by police. In this sense, recent protesters have limited political ambitions and ability to take action.

Moreover, recent protest waves express the grievances of those who are currently losing out in the reform process and thus do not involve 'political strategic populations'. Political strategic populations refer to the ordinary Party members and grassroots government functionaries, as well as the beneficiaries and winners of reforms (Walder, 2011). The former constitutes the social basis of regime support while the latter generally supports political stability rather than political reform. In the 1989 movement, large numbers of the Party rank-and-file and basic-level officials joined the demonstration against a government that kept silent while students were dying of hunger strike, and this signaled serious political difficulties for the regime. In contrast, the primary participants of recent protests have been farmers, state unemployed workers, pensioners and urban residents of dilapidated neighborhoods scheduled for redevelopment. The participants have not included current employees of China's growth sectors, or any of the populations that have benefited the most from China's economic transformation, for example, the 'red capitalists' (Dickson, 2003). These beneficiaries have a stake in preserving the political system that has allowed them to prosper. They do not represent a force for democratic change in the country; indeed, they are among the Party's most important bases of support. On the other hand, China's rise has been based on a perceived link between political stability and economic prosperity. This prosperity is absolutely necessary to sustain the regime as it keeps the rank-and-file Party members loyal. Political unity has dramatically increased since 1989, with officials uniting around reform and the commitment to single Party leadership and lacking fundamental disagreements over issues of governance.

### *Focused Target, Localized Nature*

Second, many of the present protests and collective incidents are often isolated in remote regions rather than located in politically strategic regions. Rural protests in vast countryside and labor protests in rust-belt cities and towns are far removed from the leading political and commercial centers of China where protests would have the greatest political risk. The 1989 movement proved that the sustained mass protests in major cities, in particular Beijing, will impose the most serious political challenge to the regime (Walder, 1989). Although it is well recorded that recent protesters sometimes directly approach the petition offices of the central government in Beijing, their efforts are sporadic and could be easily suppressed.

Recent protests also target specific local grievances instead of broadly defined social rights, and were mostly directed against local authorities at the city and lower levels rather than the central government as the case in 1989. For example, the state workers who struggled against privatization had been mobilized only at the firm level and had not yet generated any cross-enterprise labor movement with a broader claim based on the general interests of the working class (Chen, 2006); peasants responded to excessive burdens and

brutal modes of taxation collection by targeting local officials individually and collectively (Bernstein & Lu, 2000); urban middle-class residents revolted against local officials or real-estate developers (Cai, 2005). None of these targeted demands implicates the central government or the regime as a whole. In short, the specific localized nature and narrow focused targets of these disputes greatly lessen their implications for politics on a national scale. In addition, the 'cellular' nature of protest not only makes activism lack a larger regional base of organization, but also makes the motives for participation vary across localities and shift over time (Lee, 2007). Such cellular activism helps lower the risk of spreading, escalating and lasting protest into sustained social movement. This factor significantly contrasts with the 1989 movement, which drew wider support from the populace and led to greater political worries for the regime.

### *Changing International Environments*

Third, in contrast to the 1989, there are no significant international controversies or environments to stimulate protests that would have more serious political implications. The 1989 movement could be partly attributed to the cumulative effects of an accelerated political change in the Soviet Union, Poland and Hungary, as well as Asian democratic movements in the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan in the late 1980s. Political reforms in these countries had rapidly changed the standards by which educated Chinese judged their government. By envying the dramatic political development undertaken in these countries, they became increasingly critical of the regime's conservative objection to political reform and requested a similar liberation in China. By comparison, there are no similar waves of democratic development around the world today. Instead, democratic progress has been slowed by a powerful authoritarian undertow, and the world has, in fact, slipped into a democratic recession (Diamond, 2008). China's integration into the international economic order and rising role in world affairs also make Chinese people, especially educated urban youths, become more proud of their country's national achievements and international rising image. Youth are also exposed to a greater range of information and generally are more knowledgeable about the West. Consequently, the current generation tends to embrace a more balanced view of democratic countries and is less prone to worship foreign models. They also tend to embrace strong nationalistic sentiments in defending China's place in the international community. Therefore, the 1989 'pro-democracy' protests have almost disappeared from the scene. Urban street protests, especially student protests, now focus on patriotic issues. In other words, the shifting international environments and China's rise to power have changed the political visions of educated urban youths and have further undermined their potential to initiate an anti-regime protest.

### **Responses of the Authorities**

Apart from the three major reasons mentioned earlier, we should also consider the changing behaviors of government in dealing with mass protests. In the spring of 1989, the Chinese government used violent and excessive suppression on peaceful demonstrators and thus received numerous condemnations from the international society. By comparison, the state now adopts new coping strategies and tactics to deter the protests. One strategy is to prevent the outbreak of large-scale protests from its source (Cai, 2010).

For example, in the early 2000s, the central government implemented a policy of ‘retaining large state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and letting go of the small ones’ simply because laid-off workers from large SOEs were more able to take forceful and organized actions than small SOEs due to their fewer constraints in mobilization and greater capability to produce organizers. This strategic privatization of small SOEs as the major target of the reform had significantly reduced the frequency of large-scale resistances of laid-off workers. As a result, the workers’ resistance is often individual-firm based, small scaled, noncontentious and short lived.

Another strategy is to institutionalize the citizens’ succession process so as to avoid the political crisis that many had once presumed to be its inevitable fate. The party-state promulgates laws or regulations and adopts various ‘input institutions’, i.e. local elections, letters-and-visits departments, people’s congresses and administrative litigation, to enable peasants and workers to redress their grievances through ‘rightful resistance’ without creating the potential to threaten the regime as a whole (O’Brien & Li, 2006). In contrast to the everyday resisters, rightful resisters tend to use legal tactics and other officially promoted values and principles to assert their claims; defend their lawful rights and interest; and challenge local cadre malfeasance, economic corruption as well as arbitrary rule. The roots of Chinese rightful resistance lie in the central policies, which include not only all formally pronounced authoritative regulations, documents and leadership speeches, but also informally publicized pledges made by officials on inspection tours. Normally, when the local cadres neglect or refuse to respect the implementation of central government policy and rhetoric, protesters will step in and accuse them of engaging in prohibited behaviors against central guidelines.

One of the ‘rightful resistances’ is the use of the appeals system, where citizens can approach higher-level authorities to report problems that have not been addressed by local authorities. In general, higher-level authorities are more concerned with social stability and regime legitimacy, while lower-level authorities are more responsible for policy implementation and local issues (Cai, 2008). When those at the lower level ignore citizens’ interests and provoke their resistance, those at the higher level may have an incentive to intervene in favor of the citizens. The possibility of intervention by higher-level authorities prevents local governments from adopting excessive repression and, thus, becomes a constraint on lower-level authorities, creating opportunities for civil resistance. In many cases, because collective appeals would exert more pressure on the government, they are more likely to be successful than are individual ones. However, appeals still lack credibility and are not necessarily successful, as long as ‘the bird of rule by law’ has remained in the ‘cage of the party-state’ (Lubman, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

The dramatic wave of unrest sweeping the nation in recent years is a significant cause for concern as they include novel grievances resulting from the effects of structural change in China. However, as the present analysis argues, recent protests do not pose an existential threat to the central government as they largely involve politically insignificant populations, are generally located in areas that do not affect China’s major political or economic enterprises and tend to focus on local issues or authorities. Instead protesting central government policy, as in the run-up to 1989, the current wave of protest is often calling for the implementation of central government policy at the local level. The various

motives for protest make it likely that disparate veins of the protest movement will remain disjointed. These ‘losers’ of the recent social and structural changes in China have specific disputes that only seriously affect their particular group or locality, reducing the potential for substantial national impact.

While the current wave of protest may not force the government’s demise, it highlights the fact that ‘China lacks the institutions and credibility that allow modern bureaucracy to function effectively’ (Johnson, 2005, p. 25), and challenge the government to institute domestic reforms such as institution-building or creating an impartial legal system that would allow effective redress of grievances.

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