Peaceful Evolution in China and the World Wide Web. Part IV: The Internet as the Bulwark of Chinese Democracy?

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Peaceful Evolution in China and the World Wide Web. Part IV: The Internet as the Bulwark of Chinese Democracy?

By Jeffrey Barlow

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Introduction

This is the fourth and concluding editorial in a series, “Peaceful Evolution in China and the World Wide Web”. ¹ To summarize the arguments thus far:

1. I have argued that a system with stable political factions functions very much like a system with two or more political parties, usually thought to be a critical element of a democratic political system, though not the only one.
2. In the Chinese system, consistent factions have been visible over recent years. At present, there are two important ones. First is the Tuanpai, a group associated with past leadership in the Chinese Youth League, the most dominant of Chinese mass organizations.
3. The second recognizable faction is the Princeling’s faction. This is less well organized than the Tuanpai. It is formed not of those who have come up via a common political path, such as leadership in the Youth League, but of those who have descended from politically powerful or wealthy families.

In the Chinese political system, both contemporary and historical, the most useful weapon wielded by factions was to charge that an opponent had violated core agreements on values, usually through personal corruption.

In this fourth and concluding article, we examine the probable successors to the two most important posts in China, the Presidency, now held by Hu Jintao, and the Premiership, now held by Wen Jiabao. We argue here that important changes are occurring in China, and that due in large part to the Internet as a conduit for Chinese popular voices, democratic interests will be much strengthened in this new era.

The Presidential Succession

Chinese leaders usually gain experience and reputation by proceeding through the bureaucratic structure, gaining experience first at local levels, then higher posts, usually heading up a province and often being entrusted with particularly sticky problems or ambitious plans. This has been the pattern for all major leaders since the death of Deng Xiaoping. As a result, the pool of probable successors to the two key posts, President and Premier, have been identifiable for some time. As the time to appoint new leaders will be during the meeting of the People’s Consultative Congress in 2012, the front-runners become more apparent.  

We begin with the Presidency as it is widely recognized as the more important of the two offices, and thought to be the top position for which a Chinese political figure can aspire. This position evolved from the all-powerful Party Chairmanship of Mao Zedong. It is currently a position elected by the largest of China’s legislative bodies, the People’s Consultative Congress, composed of elected officials who have risen through a narrow electoral process, which in a broad sense is dominated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Its decisions are clearly often the result of factional politics. It has at times overridden the Party in important matters; at other times it has been reminded of its subordinate position to the Party. Hu Jintao now serves as both head of state (President) and as head (General Secretary) of the Chinese Communist Party.

Most analysts assume at present that Xi Jinping, a member of the emerging younger generation of leaders, will succeed Hu Jintao, the current President, though this is by no means inevitable.  The reasons usually given for this

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2 Note that we focus upon two such leaders here. However, there is a pool of at least 6 such leaders, any one of which could be considered qualified potential candidates.

3 The New York Times, in “China Grooming Deft Politician as Next Leader” by EDWARD WONG and JONATHAN ANSFIELD January 23, 2011, refers to this succession as a result of China
assumption revolve around the fact that Xi Jinping is clearly close to Hu, has been given ever-greater responsibilities and introduced on important world stages over the last year or so. It is also held to be in his favor and that he has good connections in the army, having served in a number of military posts. These indications, while suggestive, might be said to obscure the fact that, above all, Xi Jinping is a very competent individual with considerable experience, education, and expertise in fields associated with economic growth and development. 4 It is no longer enough for a political figure to rise to power through CCP politics alone.

Xi Jinping is widely regarded as a member of the Princeling faction because his father, Xi Zhongxun, was a Deputy Premier and once the Governor of Guangdong province. Zhongxun was reportedly purged for criticizing the government for its handling of the events at Tiananmen in 1989. This makes Xi Jinping particularly interesting to Western analysts, always seeking some fissure in the Chinese leadership.

The Succession to Premier

Another very powerful position is that of Premier. This was formerly the position of Zhou Enlai in the early days of the government of the Peoples' Republic (PRC) following 1949. He was widely regarded as the more popular and accessible right hand of the dictatorial Chairman Mao. The Premier also serves at the will of the National People’s Congress, and like the President/Chairman, is subservient to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Each of these posts is selected every five years and each can serve for only two terms or ten years.

This position is quite powerful and more deeply rooted in the Chinese civil bureaucracy than is the Presidency as such, though the Presidency is usually regarded as the more powerful of the two positions. The current Premier is Wen Jiaobao.

The fact that Wen Jiaobao is a member of the Tuanpai faction is important. He came up through the most broadly based of Chinese political groups and is responsible for the office with the broadest influence in the bureaucracy. During

This is, in my opinion, nonsense. The succession was a result of a long-term process wherein a number of strong leaders came to the top of the political process in a process which consisted largely of showing their abilities to accomplish important tasks. As stated above there at least six such potential candidates, though there may be frontrunners as in any political transition.

4 A very well sourced Wikipedia article is found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xi_Jinping
the Cultural Revolution for example, Zhou Enlai was often credited for protecting
the bureaucracy from the excesses of extreme Leftists, who were often urged on
by Mao himself.

Li Keqiang, it is widely believed, will succeed Wen Jiaobao. Like Wen Jiaobao, Li
Keqiang came up through the Youth League and is thus a member of the Tuanpai
faction. He has unusual credentials: a law (LLB) degree from Beijing University
and a Ph.D. in economics. He has spent a great deal of time in, not only,
organizational work, but also in the management of the Chinese economy. He has
represented China at the highest-ranking international economic organizations,
including at the Davos World Economic Forum in 2010. 5 Like Xi Jinping, then, he
has been introduced to the world over several years.

Li Keqiang, like Xi Jinping, is committed to reform in China, and is exceptionally
experienced, well educated, and also like Xi Jinping has specialized in issues
dealing with growth and development. Neither of these individuals is by any
means a stereotypical Communist Chinese leader; both are extremely competent
and well qualified for either of the two highest offices. Li Keqiang is usually
thought to be much more engaged in social reform than is Xi Jinping.

**Chinese Democracy?**

Although I have chosen to follow the conventional wisdom in assuming here that
Xi Jinping will become President, succeeding Hu Jintao, and Li Keqiang Premier,
succeeding Wen Jiaobao, in fact either man is clearly well qualified for either
office. These forecasts depend in large part upon the fact that the Chinese
political system is factionalized. Xi Jinping is closely associated with Hu Jintao,
and Li Keqiang seems to be following smoothly in the train of Wen Jiaobao, the
current leader of the Tuanpai.

These factions do not constitute major fissures in the Chinese leadership.
Individuals commonly cross over factional lines. Hu Jintao, for example, who is
apparently favoring the Princeling Xi Jinping as his successor, is usually thought
of as a member of the Tuanpai as well as is the Premier, Wen Jiaobao. It is the
process of interaction between these two factions that should interest us.

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5 See his performance at Davos on You Tube
at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybzXrKw6rPk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybzXrKw6rPk)
He began there by quoting Confucius before Marx or Mao, if he ever did quote them. For a variety
of very reformist positions taken by Li see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Keqiang](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Li_Keqiang). Though this
is a Wikipedia article and based in Chinese sources, its content agrees with widely published
reports and I find it satisfactory.
There is still a year or more before the selection process will be finalized, and either man would remain loyal to the system, is unlikely to scream that the other is a traitor or a secret capitalist, or to imply darkly that violent action would be an appropriate response to an unexpected twist in history.

Of the two men, Xi Jinping is the more frangible candidate. As a Princeling, his selection somewhat violates the usual expectation that all Chinese leaders will be “men of the people” and there is certainly a deep suspicion on the part of many Chinese of those who “take a helicopter” ---rise suddenly and unexpectedly---or who “walk through the back door”---use personal connections to attain a goal. Xi Jinping, however, presided over a political house cleaning in notoriously corrupt Shanghai, demonstrating his ability to get tough with power, and is a noted nationalist who has lectured foreigners on the error of their ways in criticizing China. Like Li Keqiang, he was “sent down” during the Cultural Revolution to work in the countryside.

It is certainly possible to see a political system that has produced two such qualified leaders as a successful one. But is it democratic? Not in the American sense of being the result of an electoral process dominated by two parties who produced candidates who regularly have undergone competitions at the ballot box.  

However, they did come up through mass organizations at which leadership was chosen through electoral processes, albeit restricted ones. If they were not in that sense popular, they would not be where they are today.

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6 I will forego any of the many qualifications that this description of an ideal American political process brings to my own cynical mind. Provide your own.

7 It should be noted that there is a troublesome drawback to widespread electoral democracy in China. Where elections are held, local figures almost always win them. This is the same group which is largely responsible for local corruption. It is the central government which prosecutes corruption, and yet outsiders to a local area, who would have more interest in supporting central government policies, because posted into that area by the central government, will rarely win such elections.
The Internet and the Future of Chinese Democracy

The Internet has acquired a steadily increasing influence upon the Chinese political system. We often make a great deal of Chinese attempts to block information. However, Chinese who care can quickly learn how to evade such censorship and quickly acquire the necessary means to do so. Chinese who do not do so are unusually loyal, particularly timid, or more often, simply apathetic.

The coming era of new leadership further increases the leverage of Chinese public opinion. Local abuses of power or conspicuous examples of corruption have been the subject of many Internet campaigns over the past several years.

Charges or corruption or abuse of power not only quickly go viral on the internal Chinese net, but also international once they reach a certain level of impact domestically. The Internet also serves to advance factional political positions, especially the common and very serious charge that a leader is abusing his power for personal gain.

Such factional issues and divisions will also have the inevitable consequence of furthering another element of democracy currently being strengthened in China, the rule of law. Abuses of power and corruption are already illegal in China, but the laws are inadequately enforced and too often political influence allows miscreants to avoid prosecution. Once corruption becomes a political issue, however, it too will easily become a wedge issue between the factions.

It is noteworthy that both Li Keqiang and Xi Jinping have studied law in formal contexts. Li Keqiang studied in Beijing University’s Faculty of Law as an undergraduate; Xi Jinping holds a doctoral degree in law.

There is one overriding question: will Li Keqiang, as Premier, and as leader of the Tuanpai faction, serve to push forward the process of social reforms such as strengthening health care, workers rights, and social security in China? Will he consistently advocate democracy and rule of law in China? There are several reasons to expect that Li Keqiang will also do so. An important one is that it is in

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8 I recognize, of course, that well-known dissidents often are punished or intimidated for being notorious and consistent opponents of the government. This is, however, a separate issue, I believe, from the question of whether or not there are competing factions within the leadership.

9 An excellent example is the trope now being used to shame abuses of power, “My Father is Li Gang!” To fully understand this issue with all its relationships to the criticism of abuse of power via the Internet, go to: [http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/10/22/china-my-father-is-li-gang/](http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/10/22/china-my-father-is-li-gang/)

10 [http://www.chinatoday.com/who/x/xi-jinping.htm](http://www.chinatoday.com/who/x/xi-jinping.htm) It should be noted that many Ph.D, degrees held by Chinese political figures were attained through part-time study and are widely regarded as not equivalent to a full-time degree, whether Chinese or Western.
the interests of the Tuanpai to do so. Here is, reprinted, a paragraph from a previous editorial:

“The Tuanpai might be said to be the most broadly representative of Chinese factions in that the Youth League is the largest of the mass organizations which combine to shape the CPC. It is also the organization with the closest ties to grass roots groups as it is present at every level where large numbers of youth are found, including all educational institutions, reaching right down to the lower grades if we count the groups of younger students organized by the League. It is also found among peasant and labor organizations, among women’s and other special interest groups.”

The Tuanpai or Youth League, then, is the most broadly representative of all the mass membership organizations that feed into the CPC. It will most directly reflect the opinion of the bureaucracy and of many leadership types distributed throughout Chinese society.

Another reason to believe that Li Keqiang will be active in supporting reform is that recent leaders who have come out of the Tuanpai are often associated with pressures for reform toward a Chinese version of democracy. These include Hu Yaobang, former General Secretary of the CPC, who was removed by Deng Xiaoping, because of Hu’s attempt to protect student protestors prior to Tiananmen; current Premier Wen Jiabao, and current President Hu Jintao.

If prognostications of the succession are correct, and the Princeling Xi Jingping is elected President, and the Tuanpai faction member Li Keqiang becomes Premier, then the Tuanpai might be regarded as having been relegated to a secondary role in the upcoming transition. The Tuanpai has both Presidency and Premiership in the current government. This relative demotion could be an indication that the CPC itself is uneasy at recent moves toward a more open society in China.

Indications are, however, that the Tuanpai heritage and its ties to Chinese style grassroots democracy will continue. At the time of this writing (January 2011), Premier Wen Jiabao “…appeared at the nation’s top petition bureau in Beijing, where people go to file grievances, and encouraged citizens to criticize the government and press their cases for justice.” The visit was widely reported in China, and thousands of postings approving of the visit quickly appeared on the Internet. 11

Assuming that Xi Jinping is chosen as President, as a Princeling, he will be particularly vulnerable to grassroots campaigns because he is a member of the Princeling faction. Charges that the President is not dealing with what is widely recognized as the most serious problem facing China, corruption among officials at local levels, would acquire new resonance while a Princeling is the head of government.

Another wild card in this process is the National People's Congress (NPC) itself. It is widely regarded as a rubber stamp for the CPC, but in recent years it has asserted increasing autonomy. Even the CPC Party Congress, which will meet prior to the NPC, has often failed to elect Princelings to its key governing bodies, perhaps out of a populist antagonism to such leaders. 12

Conclusion

It is important to understand what I am not saying here. There is a consistent trope in the American press and amongst many citizens that regimes regarded as oppressive over the world, are continually on the verge of an overthrow and presumably, would move toward an American democratic model. This hope in part fueled American actions in Iraq and is always in the background of our attitudes toward Iran. At present, we are making comfortable assumptions about political turmoil in Egypt and Yemen which implicitly place them into such a context.

China is not such a case. All indications, and certainly my personal experience in living and working in China a month or more each year for the past six years, suggest that the great majority of Chinese people are unusually content and comfortable with their government and their political system. Its economic progress has made it the envy of the world.

Certainly China has, like every rapidly changing social system, many problems crying out for better solutions. This is particularly true of relations between majority Han and ethnic minorities, and in relations between the central government and minority political regions, especially Tibet and Muslim areas. Certainly many Chinese people hope to see even faster progress, but China is far from violent outbreaks that might threaten the system itself.

Therefore, I am not arguing that factional politics will overthrow the Communist Party of China and usher in a new age dominated by American style democracy. Rather, I believe, factional politics, bolstered by electronic communications, will inevitably cause the Communist Party itself, and the state, to advance the cause

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of Chinese democracy, eventually producing another interesting variant among the many international versions of democracy.

As Americans, we may choose to ignore this process, to compare it unfavorably to our own very troubled and dysfunctional democracy, but other democracies will not care much about that. Neither should they.