

NOTE

Reforms and Authoritarianism

A correspondent writes :

Those who are optimistic about the future of the People's Republic of China point to the economic growth and progress that has been made since the reform-minded Deng Xiaoping grabbed power three decades ago. China has indeed come a long way in this period, but that is precisely why the country's one-party state is today in such jeopardy. Sustained modernisation invariably undermines authoritarian systems, as has been seen in countries such as South Korea and Taiwan. Instability occurs under many conditions, but especially when political institutions do not keep up with the social forces unleashed by economic change. And today, there is unimaginable societal transformation taking place in China at unheard-of speed, thanks in large part to Deng's reforms.

One of the results of this rapid social transformation has been the widespread defiance of authority. In 2008, one of the country's most popular heroes was Yang Jia, who was ultimately executed in November. On 1 July, Yang entered a police compound in Shanghai and killed six officers while wounding four others; 1 July, it should be noted, is the anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China. Outside his trial, middle-class Chinese citizens chanted "Down with the Communist Party", and carried banners emblazoned with "Long Live the Killer". Even among the relatively prosperous sections in the important coastal cities – among those who have benefited the most during the last three decades of reform and 'opening-up' – the country's ruling organisation is fast losing legitimacy.

After Deng abandoned much of its economic ideology, the party's primary source of legitimacy has become the delivery of seemingly never-ending prosperity. Therefore, it is natural that recent economic troubles have coincided with a wave of protests, starting last summer. Since then, citizens in various locations have ransacked government offices, attacked police and burned official vehicles. Specifically, unemployed workers in the major manufacturing hub of the Pearl River Delta have been taking to the streets and engaging in sit-ins in their factories to demand back pay. At first the protests were small, as only marginal factories were going out of business. The larger demonstrations – a few of them numbering in the thousands – began when the largest toy manufacturers began to collapse in late 2008, due in part to declining orders from major companies such as America's Mattel and Hasbro.

Protests in coming months are bound to become larger, more frequent and more violent as the economy continues to weaken and as workers begin to feel safety in numbers. Chinese workers, even poor migrants, are starting to think they can get what they want by defying local authorities. As Guo Cheming, a Communist Party cadre, noted late last year as he watched a workers protest in southern China, "When times are bad economically, a small incident can rapidly become a big one." □□□