Demography and Legitimacy: A Balancing Act in the Future of the Communist Party of China

The Communist Party of China (CPC), which has celebrated the 70th anniversary of its rule over China on 1 October 29, is to the outside observer a behemoth whose members constitute a monolithic group that controls essentially all aspects of life in the People’s Republic. It is a political force that monopolizes and dominates the rule of the People’s Republic of China, but at the same time it is a body politic that is increasingly in search of new ways to legitimize itself, largely by playing into the trend of rising nationalism. The rising rate of action shown by the CPC leadership about legitimizing itself shows that this issue is of utmost importance to the party and it would appear that as things stay put, the situation will only get worse. However, this crisis is not just tied to the collapse of communism but to larger demographic changes that the party must negotiate.

Since the opening up reforms of Deng Xiaoping beginning with the landmark year of 1978, the Chinese society has seen a rising number of changes to its life and demography. Economically, a disparity has emerged between the traditional inland peasant-worker base of the CPC and the newly emerging and growing coastal middle-class groups. These groups have come to be positioned at odds, not only in receiving the economic benefits of the modernization but also in the way in which the party has responded to their growing needs. Economic reform has also produced a group of indigenous capitalists such as Jack Ma of Alibaba, euphemistically called “entrepreneurs”, to emerge in the political landscape of China whose voices and prerogatives could not be ignored because they furthered Chinese growth and power. Urbanization has also created grand urban centers with millions of inhabitants, whose needs to navigate and survive the urban landscape brought its own novel challenges to the party.

Other changes and challenges also followed. Years of high, at an average of 10% of the gross domestic product (GDP), growth also brought about environmental problems, which
especially hurt the urban dwellers in the form of smog. Welfare systems suffered, and the proverbial “iron rice bowl” came close to cracking and bringing about unrest with it. The rise of the internet and its spread throughout China created a new space which allowed the people greater civil and political engagement and found the CPC scrambling to suppress and control it.

All of these developments have found their reflection in the current state of intraparty demographics and factionalism of the CPC. Demographically, the peasant-worker base of the party has shrunk from being a majority to being the largest group within the party. The rising urban-coastal middle-class has seen its numbers within the ranks of the party surge, not only because their numbers in Chinese society at large rose but also because they inhabited political spaces which the CPC sought to protect and promote. In terms of factions, the “princeling” or “elitists” as they been called, who favor prioritizing the needs of the rising urban middle-class and production centers and economic development, of whom Xi Jinping is a member, are positioned against the “populists” who favor prioritizing the needs of the old agrarian-proletariat guard of the party and economic equity, of whom Li Keqiang is a prominent member.

What becomes apparent from this, is that the CPC has seen the rise of two groups whose needs and policy objectives contain more room for divergence and antagonism, than they do for convergence and cooperation. Furthermore, the prioritization of the CPC – on the national level – of the urban middle-class newcomers over the peasant-worker vanguard, in the way they invest policy and capital, makes sure that his situation will be sustained. Thus, emerges a continued demography-based challenge to the legitimacy of the CPC, but this has less to do with the internal divisions of the party – which is lost in the authoritarianism inherent in the CPC – and more to do with the way in which the leadership will come to translate these divisions to policy. The direction of the People’s Republic, at the national and international levels, is one that the
leadership of the CPC cannot solve through experimentation. These is only one nation at hand and it can take only one macro-level position, and regional schemes will ultimately be overridden by national policy. It appears that the option of eating your cake and having it, which the CPC has been carrying out so far to the astonishment of observers, will eventually come to an end and the party will be forced to carry China to the future on the back of one of these emerging demographic groups.

In order to protect its legitimacy, and subsequently its hold on power, the CPC must increasingly engage in a balancing act between these two increasingly antagonistic demographic groups, their needs, and the political and economic initiatives which will sustain them. If the party takes the path of promoting greater economic growth, liberalization, and development, it must do so at the expense of the rural peasant-worker base, whose greater interests lie in greater economic equity, welfare, and state support. However, the pursuit of policies to strengthen the CPC outreach, and expand economic equity and welfare to the people being “left behind” by the growth of the Chinese economy must come at the expense of the urban middle-class base, who will find themselves under an increasingly overbearing party. Thus, whichever direction will be pursued will come with costs to in terms of happiness, unrest, and loyalty of one group relative to the other and affect the legitimacy of the party.

Looking at the situation from today, it would be impossible to know which group the CPC would be more willing to sacrifice in order to maintain the well-being of the party, the state, and the economy. Of course, one can reach the conclusion that since the economic reforms continue, and international engagement and interdependence of China increases with each passing day, the urban middle-classes have a greater chance of coming out as the beneficiaries of this demographic shift. Given their growing numbers in society and within the CPC, as well as
their position as the drivers of the economy in productive regions, the CPC might turn to prioritizing policies which will give them greater immediate legitimacy with the urban middle-class. The rural peasant-workers, whose numbers and importance appear to be shrinking might then be managed with increased oppression and control of their lives and activities or, given that their numbers shrink low enough, through a well-managed welfare campaign. However, it will be increasingly hard for China to find its legitimacy on even ground unless it can manage the needs and prerogatives of both demographic groups – unless one is completely oppressed or politically disabled. For the foreseeable future, demographic shifts will continue forming the basis of a crisis of legitimacy for the CPC.