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AUTHORITARIAN IMPERMANENCE

Andrew J. Nathan

Andrew J. Nathan is Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science at Columbia University. He coedited *The Tiananmen Papers* (2001), coauthored *China's New Rulers* (2002), and coedited *How East Asians View Democracy* (2008).

There are surely more types of authoritarian regimes than of democracies, even though the latter absorb so much of our scholarly attention. Authoritarian systems have been with us longer, have ruled more people, and for all we know may rule more people in the future than democratic systems. This should not be surprising if one considers that authoritarianism is the residual category of a type of regime that is narrowly defined (free political competition for the highest positions of real power), historically new, and often unconsolidated—namely, democracy. As a residual category, authoritarianism is inevitably vast and encompasses many different subtypes of regimes.¹

The questions of how such regimes stay in power and how they change used to engage students of totalitarianism, corporatism, military rule, bureaucratic authoritarianism, and comparative communism. But these topics went out of fashion in the early 1990s with what seemed to be the historic victory of democracy. To be sure, the Chinese regime was still in place, but it appeared to be liberalizing; smaller communist states were anomalies; and monarchies and theocracies appeared to be withering.

But history retained its cunning—not the Hegelian kind that works its teleological way through blind human action, but the postmodern kind that responds to our interpretations with an ironic turn of events. Twenty years after Tiananmen, the resilience of Chinese authoritarianism still surprises us. After inquiring into the prospects for Chinese democracy in 1998 and 2003, the *Journal of Democracy* decided to take stock once again.² We considered whether the prospects for the regime have changed because of rapid economic growth and polarization, social turbulence, a rising middle class, and the new freedom of the Internet.

If not for limits of space, we could also have asked about the impacts of Western education and culture, environmental degradation, political corruption, Han nationalism, ethnic-minority nationalism, the global economic crisis, and other giant forces that relentlessly test the overall framework of Chinese public order.

The contributions in the preceding pages enrich our understanding of the Chinese system as an authoritarianism of a still poorly understood new type, one that mixes statism with entrepreneurship, political monopoly with individual liberty, personalist power with legal procedure, repression with responsiveness, policy uniformity with decentralized flexibility, and message control with a media circus. The system has remained vigorous for twenty years not by stifling change but by fostering it, not by remaining institutionally static but by shaping Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology and state structures to meet new needs. The system today promotes competent leaders, carries out political succession in an orderly way, generates effective public policies, and recruits popular support. Perhaps the study of its dynamics will help spark a revival in the analysis of comparative authoritarian systems.

The Shadow of the Future

But like all contemporary nondemocratic systems, the Chinese system suffers from a birth defect that it cannot cure: the fact that an alternative form of government is by common consent more legitimate. Even though the regime claims to be a Chinese form of democracy on the grounds that it serves the people and rules in their interest, and even though a majority of Chinese citizens today accept that claim,³ the regime admits, and everyone knows, that its authority has never been subject to popular review and is never intended to be. In that sense, the regime is branded as an expedient, something temporary and transitional needed to meet the exigencies of the time.⁴ Democratic regimes, by contrast, often elicit disappointment and frustration, but they confront no rival form that outshines them in prestige.⁵ Authoritarian regimes in this sense are not forever. For all their diversity and longevity, they live under the shadow of the future, vulnerable to existential challenges that mature democratic systems do not face.

We have been used to dramatic, bright-line transitions to democracy. Might the Chinese system instead reform and adapt, adapt and reform, to the point where it emerges on the other side of the looking glass as more democratic than not? This is the hope of China's rights-protection (*wei-quan*) movement of lawyers, petitioners, bloggers, and journalists, and of the wider circle of civil society organizations and religious groups that have so far kept a low profile in order to avoid repression. They hope that the regime will become enmeshed in the logic of the institutions that it has created as safety valves to preserve its rule, such as

courts and the media. The Party would then find itself forced to coexist with an equally powerful civil society, and China would have become a democracy without a dramatic moment of change. Call it a new type of transition —not breakdown, extrication, or pact, but segue.

The Party resists this scenario. The key lesson that its leaders learned from Tiananmen was to refuse equal dialogue with society. As the pro-crackdown premier Li Peng put it during his debates with the pro-dialogue Party secretary Zhao Ziyang during the crisis, to allow the demonstrating students to “negotiate with the Party and government as equals” would be to “negate the leadership of the CCP and negate the entire socialist system.”⁶ Subsequent events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union confirmed that point for the leadership.⁷ The regime is willing to change in any way that helps it to stay in power, but is unwilling to relax the ban on autonomous political forces. This makes it more likely that regime change, should it come, will occur through some kind of rupture.

But China’s transition will not resemble the Soviet Union’s. China is not in an arms race that it cannot afford. It is not overextended in a security rivalry with the United States. Its minority populations are only 5 or 6 percent of its demographic makeup, not more than half. It is not constitutionally structured as a federation whose units have the right to secede.

Nor will the Chinese transition resemble Taiwan’s.⁸ The Chinese government does not need to integrate a previously excluded ethnic majority. It has not permitted the formation of an organized opposition or trained the populace in competitive elections. The country is not a dependency of the United States.

The most likely form of transition for China therefore remains the model of Tiananmen, with three elements coming together: 1) a robust plurality of disaffected citizens (in 1989 because of inflation and corruption, in the future possibly because of unemployment, an environmental disaster, or some form of national humiliation); 2) a catalytic event that sends a signal to scattered social forces that the time has come to rise up; and 3) a split in the leadership (whether due to personality differences, power struggle, uncertain support of the armed police and military, or ideological division) that renders the response from the top uncertain or weak and allows the challenge to snowball.

That the regime considers itself vulnerable to just such a scenario is evidenced by the massive efforts that it makes to prevent these three elements from emerging. It seeks to shield the public from the impacts of economic instability, buy legitimacy among major social sectors, control bad news, outlaw mobilization, divide and repress opposition, monitor civil society, control networking tools such as the Internet and cell-phones, strengthen the police and paramilitary, and above all, to keep its own internal divisions out of the public eye so that the opportunity structure for social mobilization remains unpromising.

Such efforts have succeeded so far in dealing with the impact of the

global economic crisis on Chinese workers. Dispersed back to the countryside from which they came and given work generated by the government's stimulus package, the peasant workers have not mounted a challenge to the government. And the regime has succeeded in bottling up Charter 08, the most broadly based and intellectually sophisticated challenge to its principles of rule since Tiananmen itself.

But the elements of potential crisis can come together at any time. If one imagines the Chinese system facing the kinds of problems that such countries as the United States, Britain, and Japan have recently gone through—unsuccessful wars, plummeting economies, unpopular leaders, hypercritical media, deep divisions over cultural identity—it is as hard to imagine the Chinese system surviving as it is to imagine the mature democracies collapsing. What keeps such crises of government from becoming crises of the regime are cultures of open dissent, the robust rule of law, and the institutional capacity to change leaders in response to public discontent without changing the system. Had China chosen the other path in 1989, it might have these stabilizing features today. Without them, the authoritarian regime must perform constantly like a team of acrobats on a high wire, staving off all crises while keeping its act flawlessly together. Today, on the evidence of our contributors, the regime is managing to do that. But it cannot afford to slip.

NOTES

1. Amos Perlmutter, *Modern Authoritarianism: A Comparative Institutional Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

2. "Will China Democratize?" *Journal of Democracy* 9 (January 1998): 3–64; and "China's Changing of the Guard," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (January 2003): 5–81.

3. Tianjian Shi, "China: Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian System" in Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin, eds., *How East Asians View Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 209–37.

4. See, for example, "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang dang de zhizheng nengli jianshe de jue ding" ("Resolution on enhancing the governing capacity of the CCP"), 19 September 2004. Available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2004-09/26/content_2024232.htm.

5. Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin, "Asia's Challenged Democracies," *Washington Quarterly* 32 (January 2009): 143–57.

6. Zhang Liang, compiler, Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link, eds., *The Tiananmen Papers* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 118.

7. David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

8. Bruce Gilley and Larry Diamond, eds., *Political Change in China: Comparisons with Taiwan* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2008).