

China's Desperate Need For Political Transparency

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In America, a momentous transfer of power recently occurred. Yet despite the public's oft-expressed disgust with the candidates, there was nothing secret about the process.

China offers a sharp contrast.

An important transfer of power impends there too. A larger-than-usual number of Chinese Communist Party leaders will retire later this year. Assuming mandatory retirement ages do not change, 85 of 205 Central Committee members, 11 of 25 Politburo members, and 5 of 7 Politburo Standing Committee members will ride off into the sunset.

Other selections also will be made. The biggest prize of all is the presumed re-election of President Xi Jinping.

These contests are as momentous as those in America, but the process in the People's Republic of China is utterly opaque. August is when the leadership elite traditionally leaves the Beijing heat for the nearby seaside resort of Beidaihe to continue its deliberations in more pleasant circumstances.

Nevertheless, much difficult bargaining undoubtedly remains. Why any particular figure advances or falls remains almost impossible to determine.

It's a bad system for the PRC and the rest of the world.

Set aside issues of democracy and human rights. China has the world's second-largest economy. Beijing now ranks second on the planet for military spending. The PRC has growing financial and political impact around the globe. What happens in China matters everywhere.

Thus, stability and predictability are important virtues. Of course, open political systems often yield unexpected results.

Nevertheless, in the case of both the United Kingdom's Brexit and America's Donald Trump, the possibilities always were there. Polls placed Brexit within striking distance of victory. The possibility of a Trump victory steadily increased as primaries occurred.

The respective publics also knew how to influence the political process. People generally were invested in the elections and perceived the opportunity to hold an unpopular political leadership accountable. In fact, that desire helps account for the unexpected electoral outcomes.

No such possibility exists in China. And that's dangerous for the PRC's future, particularly the nation's stability.

The Chinese people are growing more sophisticated. They are better educated and have more contact with the outside world. An increasing number travel overseas. People are less likely to accept injustice at the hands of local authorities; some even make the lengthy trek to Beijing to demand justice.

Although the Xi government's broad crackdown against political dissent and human rights activism may temporarily strengthen the CCP's hold on power, repression is unlikely to long suppress popular aspirations for greater participation in the political process and increased accountability for political leaders. The surest route for future conflict and instability would be for the party to attempt to ignore an increasingly dissatisfied people being governed.

Such a system also frustrates outsiders interested in investing in or dealing with the PRC. Investment and trade have become more difficult. Multinational companies have been targeted for unclear reasons and absent recourse. Fear of prosecution also slowed the wheels of government and commerce by ending the corruption that traditionally lubricated the political process.

The lack of clarity and predictability also afflicts international relations. Much is at risk in Asia. North Korea is under sanction, Taiwan leans toward independence. The recent international ruling placed greater pressure on the PRC over its expansive territorial claims.

How will Beijing's upcoming leadership transition affect these issues? No one knows. At least foreign leaders are aware of the critical differences between, say, Clinton and Trump, even if their exact policies might evolve once in office.

Of course, no nation has an obligation to create a political system to satisfy foreigners. But here the interests of the Chinese coincide with those of outsiders. And if Beijing aspires to global leadership, it is likely to find a warmer welcome if the rest of the world has a better sense as to who it is deciding what.

The operation of government seems to inevitably frustrate, irrespective of country. But politics is not always mysterious. Other dominant one-party states, such as Singapore, have been more open and accessible than is China. Such an approach better accommodated increasingly wealthy and sophisticated publics.

The ongoing Chinese leadership change will be orchestrated under the old rules. Which means no one outside of a chosen few will know what is going on. But the new set of leaders should think beyond the present.

China is a great nation with extraordinary potential. However, it faces equally significant challenges. It will fare better in the future with a more transparent political system. Ultimately the PRC's leaders will find it ever harder to hide their most important decisions from public view.

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