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Why Chinese Communism Could Be the Final Casualty of the Coronavirus

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The Maoist totalitarian state is being reborn in China under Xi Jinping, who is constructing a personality cult akin to that which surrounded the late “Great Helmsman.” Xi is determined to strengthen his and the Chinese Communist Party’s authority. However, the response of the Chinese government to the COVID-19 virus has undermined the CCP’s credibility—and ultimately may threaten the party’s hold on power.

Despite the modern world’s many extraordinary medical miracles, the potential of a pandemic, an easily transmitted disease with a high fatality rate, continues to worry medical professionals. Most people have heard of the Black Death, when bubonic plague killed between 75 and 200 million people in Eurasia in the mid-1300s. A century ago the Spanish Flu infected a half billion people and killed between 20 and 50 million worldwide, more than the number of deaths in World War I.

The worst pandemic in recent years was Ebola between 2014 and 2016: there were about 28,600 cases and 11,300 deaths, an average 40 death rate, though the fatality rate of specific outbreaks ranged between 25 percent and 90 percent. SARS, severe acute respiratory syndrome, infected almost 8,100 and killed roughly 800 people in 2002 to 2003.

SARS is particularly relevant because it also was a coronavirus that originated in a Chinese “wet market” that featured the sale of live and wild animals. Beijing’s response to that health crisis was heavily criticized. In 2004 a report from an Institute of Medicine forum accused the Chinese government of a “fatal period of hesitation regarding information sharing and action.” The regime was more concerned about presenting an atmosphere of calm and stability during a leadership transition than preventing the spread of a disease of unknown potency and transmissibility.

Luckily, SARS fell short of past pandemics. However, the Chinese government is making similar mistakes in its response to what is now being called COVID-19. The latter appears to be much less deadly than SARS, though apparently more easily spread. As of mid-February, the number infected exceeds 73,000, with some 1,900 deaths, assuming Beijing’s statistics are accurate. Some doctors and outside researchers estimated that 100,000 or more Chinese actually have been infected.

Nevertheless, the Xi government’s obvious concern belies its official confidence. Vice Premier Sun Chunlan denounced “quarantine deserters,” indicating that people were evading the government’s harsh control measures. The regime just announced that anyone returning to

Beijing from elsewhere in the People's Republic of China must report to local authorities and self-quarantine for two weeks. Obviously, a pandemic in the nation's capital would have significant political and economic implications.

Handling a medical crisis of this nature will never be easy, irrespective of the form of government. The PRC faced an additional challenge because the epidemic hit amid the Lunar New Year, during which tens of millions of Chinese traditionally travel. Many of those on the move are migrant workers, who leave the countryside to work in cities. The circumstances could hardly have been worse.

Nevertheless, the government's response has fallen short of that necessary to slow if not stop the disease's spread. Initial blame rested with the Wuhan provincial government. Wet markets continue to operate, despite the evident risk of transmission of diseases from animals to people, the genesis of both SARS and COVID-19.

Moreover, as the disease first emerged, the province was reluctant to acknowledge reality. Officials failed to admit person-to-person transmission and sponsored a Lunar New Year public potluck dinner with more than 10,000 families intended to set a world record.

"Having a big event like this at a time of an epidemic amounts to a lack of basic common sense," observed Shanghai physician Li Xinzhou.

The province also failed to report a single infection during the first half of January, which coincided with a local party congress, so as not to discourage attendance.

Beijing decided to lock down the entire city of 11 million. But the Xi government gave advance notice that it was closing the airport and train station, enabling a flood of people to escape while the door was still open. Five million Wuhan residents ended up elsewhere in China and beyond.

Even with much of its population missing, the city lacked the essentials to combat the epidemic. The lack of beds caused hospitals to send patients home to self-quarantine without professional care. That the authorities had not stockpiled masks, hand-sanitizer, and more to respond to an unexpected pandemic was perhaps understandable. But refusing to acknowledge let alone confront the swiftly swelling tsunami of infections made it impossible to catch up.

Although Wuhan's CCP leadership deserved censure—and the party chief since has been removed—the increasing centralization of power orchestrated by Xi discouraged local leaders from taking responsibility. That is a natural and predictable consequence of shifting power upward to the national leadership. Xu Zhangrun, a law professor who last year lost his position at Tsinghua University for criticizing Xi, argued that the monopoly of power "has served to enable a dangerous 'systematic impotence' at every level."

Jude Blanchette of the Center for Strategic and International Studies argued that: "Xi's leadership style has effectively instilled a 'wait and see' attitude within the bureaucracy," which "is leading to slow and hesitant responses from government officials as they wait for pronouncements from Beijing before taking action."

Obviously, the slower the government's reaction, the less effective its response. Indeed, Wuhan's Mayor Zhou Xianwang refused to accept blame, telling China's CCTV: "As a local government official, after I get this kind of information [regarding human-to-human transmission] I still have to wait for authorization before I can release it."

In taking control, the central government seemed uncertain whether to advertise Xi's role. Having placed him at the "core" of the party and affirmed his omniscience and omnipotence, it was not easy to limit his responsibility for handling COVID-19. Nevertheless, for a time Xi disappeared from public view. Speculation on the reason ranged from protecting Xi from infection to insulating him from blame. Some compared the episode to 2012, when the then-vice president similarly vanished, apparently to confront party challenges centered around provincial chief and politburo member Bo Xilai, who was ousted and imprisoned.

Instead, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, who has been marginalized by Xi, was sent to Wuhan to show Beijing's concern. Apparently, Li was seen as expendable—though there was no word on whether he was quarantined on his return. Li also was publicly placed in charge of the CCP's "leading small group" on the epidemic. Most LSGs operate without public attention and at least half are chaired by Xi, presumably to tighten his control of the party and policy apparatus. But not for COVID-19.

Finally, after much speculation, the president and party general secretary ventured onto Beijing's streets, with facemask, to highlight the regime's concern. Xi was said to be "personally leading and directing" efforts to control the virus, and people were told to "rally around the party with Xi Jinping at the core." Said to be in "personal command," he issued "important directions" on the issue. He was in full apparatchik-speak: "We should fight bravely" and "resolutely contain the spread of the epidemic, and resolutely win the people's war, an all-out war, a resistance war to prevent and control the epidemic."

Still, the regime was quick to blame the US and other Western nations for banning visitors who had been to the PRC. The Foreign Ministry accused America of having "unceasingly manufactured and spread panic." Yet Hong Kong and Russia tightened travel restrictions before America did so.

Official Chinese media complained about the lack of American aid, after refusing US offers. At the time the US was preparing a shipment of materials in short supply. Beijing long refused access to foreign scientists and refused to furnish the virus to other nations' laboratories. The Xi regime defended itself by citing flu deaths in America, even though far more Chinese die of that infection.

In any case, despite its best efforts, Beijing could not offload blame for such obvious failings as lack of beds and medical equipment. Indeed, the Xi government's attacks on Washington occurred with the backdrop of increasingly coercive measures being applied in China. For instance, there currently are more than 80 Chinese cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Shenzhen, as well as several provinces, under some form of lockdown/quarantine/isolation—more than 45 million people.

The regime's mistakes appear to have damaged its reputation for competence. Nevertheless, so long as the number of infections and deaths do not race wildly out of control, and economic activity soon resumes without a new rush of infections, the consequences of such inefficiency might have only limited political impact. However, these are major hedges. The economy was slowing even before the epidemic and the new restrictions imposed in Beijing suggest that relief remains weeks and perhaps months away.

A soft landing also presumes that the Xi government's existing figures can be trusted. Lack of transparency and honesty may be the regime's greatest weakness in fighting COVID-19. The CCP previously gained a reputation for covering up the party's role in disasters, such as earthquakes and train accidents. The regime also lost credibility attempting to limit the political fall-out during the SARS crisis.

Current skepticism exploded after the death of Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist who sounded the alarm when he observed the rise in suspicious infections. He was detained by the police and accused of spreading "false information." He and seven other doctors were threatened with arrest and forced to admit that they had "severely disrupted the social order." He then treated patients, catching the virus and dying at age 34. The government sought to defuse public hostility by claiming that he was still alive and being treated even after his death.

Li's death set off a social media explosion. In the hours after his death, millions of comments poured in through Weibo, the Chinese Twitter, and other social media platforms. Before he died Li told an interviewer: "A healthy society should not have just one voice." Many posts declared "I want freedom of speech," which the government removed as quickly as possible. Even some Chinese inclined to trust the government went online to express their anger over his treatment.

Alas, Li was not alone in being silenced. Numerous ad hoc bloggers and citizen journalists plied Wuhan's streets and hospitals, filing reports and posting videos. These activists reported nonexistent test kits and full hospital beds, people turned away by hospitals, underreported hospital deaths, uncounted deaths of undiagnosed patients, and increased cremations. These suggested that infection and death rates are higher than officially stated.

In late January the government relaxed control of private reporting, but that ended quickly as Beijing took control of the disease narrative and especially infection statistics. Accounts of doctors, video bloggers, and ad hoc reporters were deleted. Some bloggers, such as lawyer Chen Qiushi, welder Fang Bin, and human rights activist Hu Jia, were detained. The latter two were later released, but the former officially remains in government quarantine.

The regime also distributed its new media line: "Sources of articles must be strictly regulated, independent reporting is strictly prohibited, and the use of nonregulated article sources, particularly self-media, is strictly prohibited." Social media providers were told they were under "special supervision." Moreover, the regime sent a legion of official journalists to Wuhan and surrounding Hubei province to "report" on the virus. Cheng Yizhong, a newspaper editor fired for reporting on SARS, nearly two decades ago, opined: "All Chinese are suffering the bitterness of CCP monopoly over papers, resources and truth."

This self-serving censorship has highlighted the more fundamental problem of tyranny. Chen Guangcheng, a lawyer and human rights activist who escaped to the US, wrote: "The Chinese Communist Party has once again proved that authoritarianism is dangerous—not just for human rights but also for public health." He charged that the CCP "has succeeded in turning a public health crisis into a health rights catastrophe."

Similar was the judgment of fired law professor Xu Zhangrun: "The coronavirus epidemic has revealed the rotten core of Chinese governance, the fragile and vacuous heart of the jittering edifice of state has thereby shown up as never before." The result, he added, is to abandon "the

people over which it holds sway to suffer the vicissitudes of a cruel fate. It is a system that turns every natural disaster into an even greater man-made catastrophe.”

Ominously, Zhangrun has not been heard from since his article appeared.

A successful conclusion to the epidemic—if infections and deaths soon plateau and start to fall—might minimize memories of the Xi government’s inadequate preparation and slow response. However, economic losses already are huge, in the tens of billions of dollars. And there appears to be no early end to the crisis.

Zhong Nanshan, an 83-year-old epidemiologist respected for his role in combatting the SARS epidemic, predicted that COVID-19 infections would peak this month and end by April. However, he admitted: “We don’t know why it’s so contagious, so that’s a big problem.” The government’s failure to level with people at risk, share information with health care professionals to enable them to respond effectively, and justify to all the tough measures required may not be easily forgotten.

Some observers compare the pandemic to the impact of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union, when Moscow lied to its own citizens and foreign nations with equal enthusiasm. However, that blow was delivered to a regime already in a state of advanced decay. The PRC does not look as vulnerable. Nevertheless, Beijing’s reputation and prestige have suffered.

Xi and the CCP justify an increasingly authoritarian, even totalitarian regime on the basis of caring for the Chinese people. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed that claim to be a lie. Popular skepticism toward other self-serving government claims will rise in the future.

Similar failure in a future crisis, with regime credibility already damaged, could force political change today considered to be unthinkable. Ironically, Mao likely would understand the regime’s peril: “A potentially revolutionary situation exists in any country where the government consistently fails in its obligation to ensure at least a minimally decent standard of life for the great majority of its citizens.”

Although he was speaking of people at a “subsistence level,” the principle has broader effect. Which ultimately could be the PRC’s undoing.

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