

**Testimony for the Hearing, “15 Years After Tiananmen:
Is Democracy in China’s Future?”**

Congressional-Executive Commission on China

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the impact of Tiananmen on China’s future.

Regime theory holds that authoritarian regimes are inherently fragile because of weak legitimacy, over-reliance on coercion, over-centralization of decision-making, and the predominance of personal power over institutional norms. This authoritarian regime, however, has proven resilient.

After the Tiananmen crisis in June, 1989, many observers thought the Chinese communist regime would collapse. Instead, it brought inflation under control, restarted economic growth, expanded foreign trade, and increased its absorption of foreign direct investment. It restored normal relations with the G-7 countries that had imposed sanctions, resumed the exchange of summits with the United States, presided over the retrocession of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, and won the right to hold the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. It arrested or exiled political dissidents, crushed the fledgling China Democratic Party, and seems to have largely suppressed Falungong.

We have not seen fundamental improvements in civil and political rights since 1989. Human rights is a multidimensional phenomenon. Some human rights in China have improved thanks to the growth of the economy – for example, fewer people are living in poverty. Some human rights have retrogressed due to the breakdown of socialist institutions – for example, subsidized medical care is no longer available in the rural areas. But in the area of civil and political rights which most people think of when they think of human rights, there has been essentially no change since 1989. The regime continues to deny people the right to organize politically, and decisively crushes any political or religious movement that challenges its hold on power.

In my judgment, the Chinese government is not engaged in a gradual process of political reform intended to bring about democracy. Rather, the political reforms that we see – the use of village elections, greater roles for the local and national people’s congresses, wider leeway for media reporting, the administrative litigation system – are aimed at improving the Party’s legitimacy without allowing any opposition to take shape.

The causes of authoritarian resilience are complex. They include:

- Economic growth and constantly rising standards of living.
- Achievements in the foreign policy realm which give the government prestige among the people.
- Building of channels of demand- and complaint-making for the population, such as the courts, media, local elections, media, and letters-and-visits departments, which give people the feeling that there are ways to seek relief from administrative injustices. These institutions encourage individual rather than group-based inputs, and they focus complaints against specific local level agencies or officials, without making possible attacks on the regime. Thus they enable citizens to pursue grievances in ways that present no threat to the regime as a whole.

- A constant and visible campaign against corruption, which has sent the signal that the Party as an institution opposes corruption.
- Increasingly norm-bound succession politics and increased use of meritocratic as contrasted to factional considerations in the promotion of political elites.
- The Party has coopted elites by offering Party membership to able persons in all walks of life and by granting informal property-rights protection to private entrepreneurs. It has thus successfully constructed an alliance between the Party and the class of rising entrepreneurs, pre-empting middle-class pressure which elsewhere has contributed to democratization.
- Maintenance of unity on core policy issues within the Party elite, so there is no sign of a serious split that would trigger a protest movement.
- Resolute repression of opposition activity has sent the signal that such activity is futile. There is no organized alternative to the regime thanks to the success of political repression.

While these developments do not guarantee that the regime can solve all the challenges that face it, they caution against arguing too hastily that it cannot adapt and survive. In contrast with the Soviet and Eastern European ruling groups in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the new Chinese leaders do not feel that their model of rule has failed. To be sure, since the Mao period the Chinese Communist regime has changed greatly. It has abandoned utopian ideology and charismatic styles of leadership, empowered a technocratic elite, introduced bureaucratic regularization, complexity, and specialization, and reduced control over private speech and action. But it has been able to do all these things without triggering a transition to democracy.

Although such a transition might still lie somewhere in the future, the experience of the past two decades suggests that it is not inevitable. Under conditions that elsewhere have led to democratic transition, China has made a transition instead from totalitarianism to a developmental authoritarian regime, one that has widespread popular legitimacy among its own people, that has gained the support of its own middle class, and that for now appears stable.