

V. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

GOVERNANCE AND RULE OF LAW

Findings

- The Chinese Communist Party continued to advance a governance model that prioritizes political security and social stability at the expense of individual rights. The Party's early intervention strategy in addressing social problems led to overzealous enforcement and an expansion of surveillance within a climate of ongoing suppression of citizens' access to justice—likely contributing to the very anti-social behaviors the government sought to contain. The Party's uncontested power also perpetuated a lack of transparency and public oversight, hampering institutional reforms and enabling persistent systemic corruption.
- The Party framed governance around risk prevention, using stability maintenance measures that draw from the “Fengqiao Experience” policy, a way to exert granular social and political control through neighborhood committees and other grassroots-level organizations. In implementing the policy, authorities expanded early intervention tactics, targeting individuals based on vague behavioral markers using techniques such as artificial intelligence analytics to enable preemptive intervention.
- Parallel to these security-driven measures, fiscal pressure on local governments spurred aggressive revenue-generation tactics such as retroactive taxes, arbitrary fines, and asset seizure. In some cases, authorities arbitrarily detained business owners and conditioned their release on the payment of money, a practice that some critics likened to state-sanctioned extortion.
- Policymakers issued a new five-year plan with the aim of easing rural-to-urban migration restrictions so as to facilitate labor mobility and urbanization. Challenges in resource allocation, however, will likely continue, since the plan does not emphasize the provision of public services for new migrants in cities or for the elderly and disabled residents who remain in rural areas.
- In areas such as food and drug safety, authorities demonstrated a degree of responsiveness following exposés by state-run media, suggesting some space for public discourse. Nevertheless, efforts by independent investigators were censored, underscoring the government's intolerance of unsanctioned scrutiny and its broader resistance to bottom-up accountability.

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Risk Management as a Governance Goal

At the annual meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC) held in March 2025, Premier Li Qiang presented the government's work report, touting steady economic growth within a stable social context and highlighting the government's effective use of risk management measures.³ The types of risks requiring mitigation and prevention included financial, environmental, manufacturing, and social risks, and risk associated with local government debt.⁴ Concerning social risks, the government sought to detect and resolve them early at the grassroots level.⁵ To this end, the report outlined plans to continue to integrate the petitioning system into the legal system and to standardize the "comprehensive management center" system as part of the broader "Fengqiao Experience" policy,⁶ which, according to some observers, is a way to exert granular social and political control through neighborhood committees and other grassroots-level organizations.⁷

Tighter Control over Risk Management

In managing social risk, officials continued to rely on punishment and government-led intervention, rather than on improving access to justice or civil society support as ways to address citizens' grievances. Symptoms of "social risk" that emerged this reporting year include a series of protests⁸ and mass attacks.⁹ One of the nine mass attacks in 2024 documented by *Reuters* took place in November in Zhuhai municipality, Guangdong province, where "[a] 62-year-old man killed 35 people and severely injured 43 by driving a car into a crowd. . . [reportedly because he was] upset about the split of assets in his divorce settlement."¹⁰ General Secretary Xi Jinping issued a directive in response, calling on government officials "to strengthen measures to prevent and control the source of risks and to promptly resolve disputes."¹¹ The Supreme People's Procuratorate characterized the mass attacks as "acts of revenge against society" and vowed to impose heavy punishment swiftly, even in cases from over 20 years ago and past the statute of limitations.¹² Court officials dispatched the Zhuhai case swiftly: the assailant in the attack was sentenced to death in a closed proceeding on December 27, 2024, and was executed on January 20, 2025, about 10 weeks after the incident.¹³ [For more information on the suppression of reporting on the mass attacks, see Chapter 1—Freedom of Expression.]

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Government officials continued implementing the existing policy of early intervention and indicated that these efforts would intensify.¹⁴ Shortly after Xi issued the directive, over a dozen local governments announced responsive actions, identifying broad categories of people as targets for monitoring, including people who are disillusioned with life, people with low social or economic status, and people with disharmonious relationships.¹⁵ In one example, a risk supervision department in Hangzhou municipality, Zhejiang province, cited a worker for not smiling and demanded rectification by the employer within four days.¹⁶

Against the backdrop of the crackdown on rights lawyers and the destruction of civil society since 2015, one scholar speculated that the motivation underlying the mass attacks could be a sense of injustice.¹⁷ Other experts expressed concern that tighter internal security measures and attempts to intervene early in social conflicts could generate additional pressure points and would “do little to reassure people discomfited by the recent high-profile violence.”¹⁸

Comprehensive Management

“Comprehensive management” (*zonghe zhili*, 综合治理) was introduced as a governance approach over four decades ago, and has been institutionalized since 1991; it has reemerged as an important policy-planning strategy in recent years.¹⁹ Early intervention efforts within the framework of comprehensive management are overseen by the Communist Party Central Committee Political and Legal Affairs Commission (PLAC).²⁰ In January 2025, the PLAC outlined its goal of unifying different government functions and processes for handling citizens’ requests in one location—including services relating to litigation, legal consultation, and petition reception.²¹ The plan also aimed to improve information sharing among government bodies and use technologies such as artificial intelligence and behavioral analytics to monitor and give alerts regarding public security challenges.²² The Henan provincial government, for example, established comprehensive management centers consistent with the central government’s plan, with the added emphasis of combating criminal activity.²³ A Henan Party official reported that there was, on average, one such center for each of the province’s 175 administrative jurisdictions at or above the county level, with an additional 23 centers among its 184 development zones.²⁴

According to an official news outlet, the government in Yuhang district, Hangzhou municipality, Zhejiang province, established one of the first neighborhood-level comprehensive management centers in 2004.²⁵ A Party official in the district reported that the center facilitates pretrial settlements and recently saw a noticeable reduction in the number of disputes, including those involving petitioning.²⁶ Despite such claims, authorities in Yuhang have a record of resorting to arbitrary detention to suppress petitioners.²⁷

Petitioning System

The petitioning system (*xinfang*, 信访), also known as the “letters and visits system,” is led by the Party’s Society Work Department and administered by the National Public Complaints and Proposals

Administration.²⁸ The system operates outside the formal judicial system as a channel through which citizens present their grievances in hopes of triggering discretionary involvement of Party officials to provide a resolution.²⁹ Although petitioners rarely see any results, the system remains widely used, especially among people who lack the financial means to file court cases.³⁰

As authorities sought to resolve social disputes, the petitioning system continued to be a source of tension between citizens and the government and in some cases generated additional grievances. This phenomenon is in part due to the deployment of public security forces in suppressing petitioners, a practice motivated by the fact that since 2005 local officials' performance evaluation has been tied to the number of petitions being filed.³¹ Public security officials restrict petitioners' liberty, detaining and returning them to their place of origin, thereby neglecting the underlying social grievances.³² In October 2024, for example, authorities in Jiangsu province detained 72-year-old **Xu Dongqing** and her daughter **Yang Li** in connection with their petitions concerning alleged fraudulent land seizure by the local government.³³ Officials at the Changzhou Municipal PSB Detention Center shackled Yang Li for four days and deprived her and her mother of necessary medications.³⁴ In addition, a police officer and a procurator charged that Xu and Yang were responsible for the large sum of expenses incurred in having to surveil and intercept them during their repeated petitioning attempts.³⁵

Revenue-Driven Law Enforcement

Mounting debt and a slowing economy motivated some local governments to use fines and other law enforcement methods to generate revenue. By way of background, local governments in the 1990s set up financing vehicles in response to a tax reform that allocated more revenues to the central government and away from them.³⁶ These financing vehicles were generally state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that raised money primarily to fund infrastructure projects.³⁷ Given the opacity of this arrangement, the central government prohibited SOEs from taking on additional debt and attributing it to local governments (known as "hidden debt" because it is off the government's balance sheet).³⁸ Some economists estimated this debt to be between US\$7 and \$11 trillion, with a substantial portion being at risk of default.³⁹ While some SOEs were able to adjust their business models to pay down the debt with profits or to shift the debt to the government, some of them had more difficulty, especially those in less affluent provinces.⁴⁰ The central government announced plans in November 2024 to swap some portions of hidden debt with bonds, which could reduce the burden of interest payments.⁴¹ According to one scholar, however, the measure was expected to bring only marginal improvement.⁴²

With debt repayment exceeding revenue, local governments experienced difficulties providing public services and resorted to abusive tactics to generate revenue.⁴³ According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "In cities such as Wuhan, Dalian and Guangzhou, public health-care systems have cut medical benefits. Last year, a bus company in Shangqiu nearly suspended operations due to [a shortage in govern-

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ment subsidies].”⁴⁴ To fill the funding gap, local governments asked companies to pay back taxes, and law enforcement stepped up efforts to collect fines and fees and to seize assets.⁴⁵ Some experts described the tax collection practice as arbitrary, and public sources suggested that there had been nearly 10,000 incidents in which police had frozen companies’ assets in Guangzhou municipality, Guangdong province, alone.⁴⁶ Measures taken by local authorities—such as citing residents for unwashed dishes and issuing traffic tickets based on false claims—had doubled revenue from fines compared to a decade ago, making up at least 10 percent of revenues in some cities across China.⁴⁷ Central authorities reportedly were concerned that excessive fines might spark public discontent.⁴⁸

In some cases, law enforcement resorted to what some called “extortion” to raise money.⁴⁹ One audio recording revealed an official from Shandong province demanding that an entrepreneur pay a substantial fine and threatening to destroy their business by amplifying a small issue.⁵⁰ Some local anti-corruption officials detained businesspeople based on unsubstantiated allegations of impropriety and released them upon payment of money.⁵¹ While a central official assured wronged business owners that the government would offer assistance, authorities censored an economist who wrote about this form of abuse.⁵²

Household Registration Reform

Moving in the general policy direction of gradually removing restrictions on internal migration, the State Council released a five-year plan in August 2024 to relax the household registration (*hukou*, 户口) system to encourage urbanization.⁵³ The *hukou* system designates a place of registration as either urban or rural and ties access to resources (such as medical care, health insurance, and social welfare) to a person’s place of registration.⁵⁴ Under current law, changing address within the same type of *hukou* requires re-registration, and moving a *hukou* from a rural area to a city requires approval by a government body in the city.⁵⁵ The five-year plan proposes to lift restrictions for moving a rural *hukou* to a city with a population of under 3 million and to relax those for a city with a population of between 3 and 5 million.⁵⁶ The plan does not propose to alter the existing restrictions for the 29 cities with a population of over 5 million, but it encourages that the quota for the score-based *hukou* transfer policy be removed.⁵⁷ Moreover, the plan calls on local governments to ensure that their registered residents have access to basic public services, vocational training, and education for the accompanying children.⁵⁸ While *hukou* reform may promote labor mobility, economic integration, and social equity, challenges in resource allocation, such as providing public services for new migrants in cities and for elderly and disabled residents who remain in rural areas, would likely continue.⁵⁹

Food and Drug Safety Concerns and Government Response

Public discourse revealed that the desire of government and private companies to cut costs has negatively affected food and drug safety. The government responded with law enforcement and

rulemaking efforts, but it censored information that undermined the validity of the official narrative.

COOKING OIL SCANDAL

In July 2024, state media outlet *Beijing News* revealed that tankers were routinely being used to transport both fuel and food products such as soybean oil and syrup without proper cleaning, prompting public concern over food contamination that could lead to poisoning.⁶⁰ People involved in the transportation process reportedly were aware of the practice but opted to skip proper cleaning due to narrowing profit margins.⁶¹ Existing standards for transporting cooking oil had limited binding effect, and the inspection procedures were completed in a perfunctory manner, according to the report.⁶²

In response, the National Standardization Administration issued a set of mandatory standards, which specifies that a tank used to transport non-food products should not be used to transport edible oil.⁶³ The Food Safety Commission also launched an investigation with other government bodies, imposing administrative penalties, and the Supreme People's Procuratorate indicated that serious offenses could lead to criminal liability.⁶⁴

GENERIC DRUGS' EFFICACY

At an official meeting held in January 2025 in Shanghai municipality, a group of 20 physicians called attention to the problem of inconsistent efficacy of domestically produced medicines.⁶⁵ For instance, the dosage of one generic anesthetic needed to be increased by three- to fourfold to match the efficacy of the original brand-name drug, and one doctor reported that some patients would regain consciousness prematurely.⁶⁶ Drugs used in the public health care system are purchased through a centralized volume-based procurement process overseen by the National Healthcare Security Administration (NHSA), which favors domestic generic drugs for their cost savings, in some cases to the exclusion of imported drugs.⁶⁷ Some observers noted that the government's monopoly over procurement deprives physicians and patients of treatment options.⁶⁸ Accordingly, the physicians proposed that patients be given the option to be prescribed and pay for brand-name drugs and receive pro rata reimbursement.⁶⁹ While the NHSA said that it welcomed feedback from "whistleblowers," the proposal's main author closed his social media account for unknown reasons, and he was rumored to have been questioned by the government and disciplined by the hospital where he worked.⁷⁰

Writing separately, two physicians raised doubt about the generic drug approval process in online articles, which were soon taken down.⁷¹ To be eligible for procurement, a generic drug must be shown to have efficacy comparable to the original drug.⁷² But the physicians pointed out that the data submitted for different drugs were identical, which was impossible given variations in people's metabolism.⁷³ The National Medical Products Administration claimed that these entries were a result of editorial errors, but it later updated the original data without explaining the reason behind the multiple instances of identical datasets.⁷⁴

Systemic Corruption

Following the sustained anti-corruption campaign that was launched in 2012 and the convictions of 4.7 million government officials, corruption still remained “the biggest threat” to the Party and continued to worsen, as Xi Jinping declared at the Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) held in January 2025.⁷⁵ The plenary session report identified 10 priority areas—including healthcare, state-owned enterprises, and construction—and called for strengthening political supervision, including over officials’ family members in their business dealings.⁷⁶ The report also noted forthcoming legislation for combating international corruption and a three-year reform plan that would institutionalize a “culture of probity.”⁷⁷ According to a report prepared by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), however, the lack of transparency, the absence of external oversight, and incentives for corruption entrenched in the bureaucratic system are among many factors that impede the central government’s anti-corruption efforts.⁷⁸ The ODNI report also highlighted the fact that “as of 2024, Xi’s family retains millions in business interests and financial investments.”⁷⁹

Rulemaking Efforts

In 2024, the National People’s Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) passed 6 laws, amended 13, and adopted 3 decisions during the six sessions that it held.⁸⁰ Continuing a trend that began in 2018, all major legislation passed in 2024—including a new law concerning preschool education—contained language requiring obedience to the Party.⁸¹ Relevant rulemaking efforts include the following:

- **Rural development.** The *PRC Rural Collective Economic Organizations (RCEOs) Law*, effective in May 2025, was enacted by the NPCSC to clarify the role of management and operations of RCEOs in advancing the government’s rural revitalization strategy.⁸² Having roots in a collective ownership model developed in the 1950s, RCEOs are legal entities that perform economic activities on behalf of their rural resident members and that serve as vehicles for implementing rural governance and providing basic public services.⁸³ The law contains provisions that improve oversight and accountability, such as requiring an auditing mechanism and granting members the right to access accounting information.⁸⁴ These provisions may prevent farmers’ land from being unjustly expropriated by local officials.⁸⁵ Some observers, however, expressed concern that the new law would have the effect of augmenting the Party’s top-down control over rural areas, thereby diminishing farmers’ autonomy.⁸⁶ [For information on the law’s potential implications on women’s property rights in rural areas, see Chapter 7—Status of Women.]
- **Public health.** The NPCSC amended three laws relating to public health and emergency response, namely, the *PRC Emergency Response Law*, the *PRC Border Health and Quarantine Law*, and the *PRC Law on the Prevention and Control of Infec-*

tious Diseases.⁸⁷ Drawing partly from the COVID-19 experience, the amendments emphasize central planning, expand provisions for movement restrictions on individuals, and require information sharing (such as health code and contact tracing) to contain the spread of disease.⁸⁸ In particular, the *PRC Emergency Response Law* strengthens control over information flow, prohibiting the spread of false information and requiring the government to provide “service and guidance” to media outlets.⁸⁹ Since the amendment does not outline the specific manner of implementation, it is unclear whether or how the provision will affect press freedom.⁹⁰ The PRC government has a record of disallowing independent media coverage before official announcements are made.⁹¹ A related law on public health emergency response was introduced in September 2024 but remained in draft form as of May 2025.⁹²

- **Delegates law.** The NPCSC amended the *PRC Law on Deputies to the National People’s Congress and to the Local People’s Congresses at Various Levels (Delegates Law)* primarily to require political obedience and emphasize interaction with citizens and other government bodies.⁹³ According to an analysis, the amendment codifies various existing procedural and institutional reforms across different localities, improving uniformity of delegates’ function of conveying public opinion on non-political issues such as education, environment, healthcare, and employment.⁹⁴

- **Constitutional analysis.** As part of the effort to improve implementation of constitutional provisions, the Legislative Affairs Commission (LAC) of the NPCSC in December 2024 reported on its findings that the constitutional guarantee of public assistance for incapacitated people extends to people with a criminal record and that overly broad or arbitrary restrictions on employment are inconsistent with the constitutional principle upholding people’s rights and obligations to work.⁹⁵ One legal expert underscored “the governance implications of the rise in minor crimes” as a policy concern and noted approvingly the LAC’s invocation of specific constitutional provisions in its review.⁹⁶

[For information on the amendment to the *PRC Supervision Law* and revision to the *PRC Public Security Administration Punishment Law*, see Chapter 4—Criminal Justice. For information on the *Marriage Registration Regulations*, see Chapter 7—Status of Women. For information on the NPCSC’s *Decision on Gradually Raising the Statutory Retirement Age*, see Chapter 10—Worker Rights.]

Notes to Chapter 5—Governance and Rule of Law

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⁴Li Qiang, “政府工作报告” [Government work report], *Xinhua*, March 12, 2025.

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²²Hu Ming, “进一步加强社会治安综合治理” [Further strengthening comprehensive social safety management], *Legal Daily*, January 22, 2025.

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²⁶Wang Chun and Lu Jiahui, “做到矛盾纠纷化解‘最多跑一地’” [Achieving dispute resolution with “visiting at most one location”], *Legal Daily*, February 17, 2025.

²⁷See, e.g., “「包子事件」演化侵权害民「血滴子」 杭州36位被拘公民控告市政府” [“Steamed bun incident” evolves into rights violations and a people-harming “flying guillotine”; 36 detained citizens in Hangzhou sue the municipal government], *Radio Free Asia*, May 7, 2014; “倪文伟房屋被拆家人被拘禁殴打” [Ni Wenwei's house was demolished, and his family was detained and beaten], *Civil Rights & Livelihood Watch*, May 6, 2025; “遭刑拘的杭州市余杭区遭拆迁维权访民严忠良、李全女、严忠女三人被取保候审 新增罪名寻衅滋事待审” [Three petitioners from Yuhang district, Hangzhou municipality—Yan Zhongliang, Li Quannü, and Yan Zhongnü—who were detained for defending their rights after demolition, were released on bail; awaiting trial as the charge of picking quarrels and provoking trouble was added], *Rights Defense Network*, November 29, 2019.

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