

2010/256-524

Short Term Policy Brief 22

Social Unrest in China

Date: November 2011

Author: Jude Howell

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of ECRAN and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.



This project is funded by the European Union



This project is implemented by a Consortium led by Steinbeis GmbH & Co. KG für Technologietransfer

Background Brief: Social Unrest in China

Executive Summary

According to most accepted measures, social unrest - which ranges from individual acts of protest to large-scale collective action - has increased in China since 2006. Social stability is a top priority for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders. The contradictory impulses of the Chinese Party/state in dealing with social unrest point to deep-seated pathologies of governance, which will need to be addressed both to ensure social stability and sustainable processes of democratic institution-building. This paper examines the nature of social unrest in China. It reflects on the availability of regular and reliable statistical information. It analyses the different types of unrest, the major trends over the last four years and the causes underpinning unrest. It considers the threat posed by recent unrest to the central leadership and concludes with key recommendations for the EU.

Statistical information on social unrest is incomplete, fragmented and irregular. Such information is considered politically sensitive and the CCP tightly controls the reporting of social unrest. Definitions of social unrest are imprecise, making comparisons across time difficult.

The main types of social protest relate to forcible evictions, land seizures, labour disputes, ethno-religious grievances, corruption and abuse of power, excessive use of state force and discrimination against migrants. Social protest has taken the form of strikes, riots, protests, individual suicides, bombing and petitioning.

Several trends in social unrest can be observed over the last four years. Social unrest is rising on all fronts. Most social protest is geographically limited, uncoordinated and spontaneous. The new generation of migrant workers are more organised, vocal and better educated and there is some evidence of demands for workers' elections of representatives, independent trades unions and participation in collective-bargaining. Online media has become an important channel for exposing social injustices, government corruption and for venting frustration by disgruntled netizens, aggrieved workers and urban citizens with grievances against the local public officials. The CCP is trying to expand its repertoire of measures to deal with unrest, making greater use of conciliation and mediation to address grievances emerging out of rapid economic development.

The main causes of social unrest are rapid economic development, rising inequalities and unmet expectations; lack of independent, legitimate and effective channels for resolving conflict; lack of government accountability and transparency; and absence of independent watch-dog organisations.

The CCP fears social protest that is co-ordinated on a nation-wide basis and is suspicious of destabilisation by external actors. Continuing rapid economic development, high growth rates and tight controls over society mean that the CCP is not on the brink of collapse. However, there is always the element of the unpredictable in the conjuncture of events.

The EU should continue to support China to establish robust and legitimate mechanisms and structures for the redress of grievances through the provision of professional training, exchange and secondments of government officials and civil society organisations, through joint research, and through diplomatic channels.

Main Points

- Statistical coverage of social unrest is fragmented, incomplete and irregular. The extent of social unrest is underestimated in official figures.
- The main types of social unrest relate to labour disputes, forcible evictions, land seizures, ethno-religious grievances, government corruption and abuse of power.
- Social unrest has been increasing over the last four years. Most protests are locally confined, spontaneous and uncoordinated. A new generation of migrant workers is more organised, vocal and demanding than their parents' generation. However, there is no enduring movement leadership or organisation around labour or other issues, or sustained emergence of political opposition groups.
- Online media play an increasingly important role in venting anger, exposing government corruption, and providing a channel for free expression. The CCP continues to harass social activists and tighten controls over the media and internet, with new directives to increase censorship issued in October 2011. It is devoting increasing amounts of resources to social stability.
- Social unrest is caused by political, institutional, economic and social factors. These include growing resentment at inequalities; indignation at social injustices and government corruption; increasing access to the internet enabling the rapid mobilisation of alternative opinion and analysis; lack of effective, legitimate and independent institutional channels for resolving conflicts and grievances.
- The CCP is highly sensitive to social unrest. High economic growth and the CCP's tight control over communications and society make it unlikely that the CCP is about to collapse. Nevertheless, as seen in the Middle East, unpredictability and contingency should not be underestimated.
- The EU should provide support to China to establish robust, legitimate and effective institutions for addressing social instability.

Introduction

Social unrest, ranging from individual acts of protest to large-scale collective action, has increased in China over the last four years. Social stability is a top priority for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders. This paper examines the nature of social unrest in China. It reflects on the availability of regular and reliable statistical information. It analyses the different types of unrest, the causes underpinning it, and the major trends over the last four years. It considers the threat posed by recent unrest to the central leadership and concludes with key recommendations to the EU.

Assessing the extent of social unrest: statistical challenges

The statistical information on social unrest is incomplete, fragmented and irregular. Such information is deemed politically sensitive and is thus veiled in secrecy. The Ministry of Public Security from 1994 up to 2005 has occasionally released information on social unrest. For example, the Ministry reported that there were 87,000 'public order disturbances' in 2005 compared with only 10,000 such incidents in 1994. There have since been sporadic reports from different sources within China of 90,000 mass incidents in 2006, 127,000 in 2008 and 180,000 in 2010, pointing to a substantial increase in social unrest.

It is likely that figures that are released underestimate the extent of social protests, not just because of the difficulties of aggregating data but also because there are incentives that encourage central and local governments to under-report the extent of unrest. Added to this, the government has issued directives to the media not to report on mass incidents and intervenes to control the internet and any publicity about other kinds of unrest. Data on particular kinds of protests such as religious, environmental, labour and land-related grievances have to be gleaned from local newspaper publications, academic studies, and external, issue-based monitoring agencies such as environmental networks, overseas religious organisations and labour monitoring NGOs.

It is thus not easy to compare changes in social protest over time or neatly distinguish the issues driving protest. For example, not only are the definitions of 'mass incidents' and 'public order disturbances' unclear, but there is also confusion as to whether 'mass incidents' are a sub-set of 'public order disturbances' or whether the two terms are interchangeable. The term 'mass incidents' makes a statement about the large-scale character of an event, while 'public order disturbances' could include anything from mobs and riots to gambling or organising churches, according to Criminal Law.

Types of social unrest

The types of social unrest and the causes underpinning them have become increasingly complex and varied in the reform decades. In the past four years, social unrest has surfaced around several key issues, including ethnic-religious grievances, labour disputes, house demolitions, land seizures, environmental concerns, discrimination against migrants, corruption, and police brutality. Social unrest has taken the form of more radical types of action including large-scale strikes, riots, protests,

attacks on government buildings, sleep-ins, individual suicides and bombings, to more established forms such as petitioning.

Social unrest related to ethnic grievances has occurred in Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang. In May 2010, following the killings of two Mongolian herders involved in separate protests against coal companies, there was large-scale unrest in Mongolia, spreading to six counties and cities (See ECRAN Short Term Policy Brief 13). The geographical spread of the unrest was unusual as the majority of protests remained local. While this was the first major unrest since the 1980s, there have been sustained protests, demonstrations and riots in Tibet and Xinjiang over the last four years. The issues sparking unrest in these two border provinces are complex, involving a combination of demands for greater autonomy and independence, grievances around religious freedom, discrimination against minorities, and the excessive use of force by Chinese security institutions. In March 2008, around the time of commemorations of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising, a series of protests, riots and demonstrations took place in the Lhasa region, spreading for the first time to monasteries outside of the Tibet Autonomous Region. Following the deaths of two Uyghur migrants in Guangdong province in March 2009, serious protests erupted in Xinjiang, leading to around 200 deaths and over 1,700 injured. Urban centres in both regions have a visible, military presence. Controls on the internet and access to websites remain tight, while travel to the region by foreign journalists is severely restricted, limiting informational flows about unrest.

Labour disputes have risen steadily over the last three decades. Following the promulgation of the 2008 Labour Contract Law, the number of lodged disputes has risen significantly. This is because labour activists and aggrieved workers saw the new law as giving them further legitimacy and armoury in pursuing their claims. For example, in 2007, 350,182 cases were accepted by the labour dispute arbitration authorities, compared to around 50,000 in 1996 when figures were first reported. This almost doubled by 2008 to reach 693,645. Though this dropped to 602,600 in 2010, the total number of cases accepted by both mediation and arbitration committee rose to 1,287,400, suggesting that more cases were being settled through mediation. Statistics on labour-related protests such as strikes, demonstrations and sit-ins are not made public and many of these remain unrecorded. The suicides of 13 workers at a Foxconn plant in Guangdong province in 2010 attracted considerable domestic and international media coverage. Subsequent increases in wages at Foxconn prompted workers at other factories to press for wage rises. Strikes for higher wages at a Honda factory in May 2010 triggered disputes along the supply chain. The central government put pressure on local governments to raise local minimum wages, but the main driver for this was the shift in development strategy away from export-dependency towards boosting domestic consumption, rather than addressing labour grievances per se.

Apart from unrest related to ethnic grievances and work-place disputes, social protests have also occurred around issues of discrimination against rural migrants, land seizures and industrial pollution. Land seizures and subsequent demolitions of property by local government entities were the main source of social unrest in 2010. This has included individual protests at forced evictions from housing to much larger and often violent protests by villagers against government seizure of land.

Trends in social unrest in the last four years

- Social unrest has been increasing on all fronts. Most social unrest remains isolated and protests are largely uncoordinated. There is little horizontal organisation between protestors in different regions and there are no alliances between protestors addressing different types of grievances. The CCP fears any coordinated, large-scale action similar to the 1989 Democracy Movement.
- There is growing suspicion of the motives of international foundations, NGOs and think-tanks and concern that foreign governments are seeking to destabilise the government. The CCP thus watched the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 with trepidation and responded aggressively to thwart a 'jasmine revolution' in China.
- There is a new generation of migrant workers born in the 1980s and after, who are more vocal, more organised, and better educated than the preceding generation of workers. Though most protests centre on economic demands, some recent protests have included demands for independent trade unions (see ECRAN Short Term Policy Brief No. 17), elections of worker representatives and worker participation in collective-bargaining.
- Workers who have played a leading role in strikes tend to move on to other factories and keep a low profile in order to reduce the risk of being singled out as 'trouble-makers' by public security. Their participation in protest is thus temporary and fluid, making it difficult to build an enduring labour movement that draws on accumulated experience. Similarly, state repression constrains the development of enduring movement leadership around the environment, social justice or land issues, or the sustained emergence of political opposition groups.
- There is some anecdotal evidence of a rise in impromptu, often violent, mass incidents sparked by relatively minor incidents. In June 2011, for example, the alleged man-handling of a young pregnant Sichuanese street vendor in a county in Guangdong province sparked three days of mass rioting, leading to significant damage to government property.
- Online media such as the micro-blogging site Weibo, chat forums, and message boards such as QQ have become an important channel for venting anger, disseminating information, organising, and for exposing government corruption and abuse of power. China now has more than 300 million netizens, who are becoming increasingly sophisticated at evading controls over the internet and at using online media to draw attention to corruption, inequalities and social injustices. The CCP is highly concerned about the potential influence of the internet, which allows citizens to communicate autonomously and rapidly, providing an alternative source of knowledge and information. In the last four years it has continually adopted measures to close websites, control access to certain information by blocking words such as 'jasmine', 'democracy', 'Tiananmen', and to put pressure on Chinese and foreign internet providers to practise self-censorship.
- An emerging phenomenon is that protests are aimed not just at seeking redress or the proper implementation of laws, but also at influencing policy, as seen in the environmental protests in Xiamen in December 2007 and Dalian in August 2011, which respectively prevented the construction and operation of paraxylene plants.
- The CCP is becoming more sophisticated in its handling of social unrest as it moves away from a singular repressive approach towards a broader repertoire of responses involving greater use of mediation, arbitration, conciliation and accommodation of grievances.

However, social unrest that is deemed to threaten the stability of the regime such as ethno-religious, separatist protests in Xinjiang and Tibet, democracy activism, co-ordinated action across provinces, or protests timed around significant events continue to meet with fierce repression such as clampdowns on the internet and media, detention of dissidents and activists and state-supported violence. Indeed the Party/state will take preventive measures to stymie protests, such as detaining social activists and blocking the internet, in the run-up to international events such as the Olympics and in anticipation of any uprisings, as occurred with online calls for a 'jasmine revolution' at the time of the Arab Spring of 2011.

- In the last four years there has been increasing harassment of social activists, human rights lawyers and outspoken critics - the case of the internationally renowned artist, Ai Weiwei, being a key case in point.
- The government's growing concern about social unrest and its impact on social stability is reflected in the increasing amount of resources devoted to maintaining domestic stability. In 2010 the Ministry of Finance reported that expenditure on internal security rose 15.6% compared with 2009 to RMB 548.6 billion (more than the RMB 533.5 billion spent on national defence), with plans to increase this even further in 2011.

Reasons for social unrest

The reasons for growing social unrest are multiple. Some of the main economic, social, institutional and political factors are noted below.

- The rapid pace of economic development has led to a diversification of social interests, more complex class structures, increasing income and regional inequalities, and unmet rising expectations, fuelling frustration and resentment. China's growing middle-class is becoming increasingly vocal and dissatisfied with controls over information, the lack of government accountability and the effects of environmental pollution on their quality of life.
- There is a lack of institutional channels for resolving conflicts in a context of transition from a planned economy and society to a market economy. Existing channels for resolving disputes are inadequate and new systems and mechanisms that are being put in place are incomplete. For example, though the long established citizen petitioning system is well used, government agencies only address around 0.2 per cent of lodged complaints. Similarly, although there is an Administrative Litigation Law, citizens face difficulties in redressing their grievances through this law because of a lack of legal representation, corruption, Party and government interference in the courts, fears of retribution, and official resistance.
- Perverse incentives introduced by the cadre responsibility system lead cadres seeking to achieve their social stability targets to use force in response to social unrest rather than creating more long-term institutional mechanisms for resolving conflict. The situation is compounded by the lack of independent judicial and political institutions, independent intermediary organisations, or independent civil society watchdog organisations.
- Increasing access to the internet has enabled protestors and critics to mobilise opinion rapidly around individual grievances and injustices. The internet has thus created an alternative site of knowledge, organising and resistance.

Evaluation of threat to central leadership

The most dangerous threat to regime maintenance in China is co-ordinated protest across regions and across different types of grievances that challenge the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. However, China's high economic growth rates coupled with its tight control over nation-wide protest make it unlikely that the CCP will collapse imminently. Nevertheless, it is important not to underestimate the force of the unpredictable. Middle East analysts were not able to predict the Arab Spring of 2011 and its global consequences, nor were China-watchers able to predict the rise of the democracy movement in 1989.

The CCP's fear of destabilisation from abroad coupled with pressure on local government cadres to ensure social stability and economic growth will cause the state to continue to respond in contradictory ways, at times unpredictably and erratically. In the near future, we can expect the central Party to continue to adopt measures to appease public opinion and address grievances such as anti-corruption campaigns, promoting collective bargaining, using public tribunals to consult with urban citizens, reducing the scope for administrative discretion, emphasising 'social harmony', and easing restrictions on welfare-focussed civil society groups. However, such measures will be off-set by continuing bans on political publications, restrictions on reporting, controls over the media and websites, arbitrary extra-judicial detention of social activists and human rights lawyers, and tight control over rights-promoting civil society organisations.

Conclusion

The key findings of this paper are as follows:

- Social unrest in China has continued to increase over the past four years.
- The main issues driving social unrest are land seizures, working conditions, environmental pollution, regional autonomy, and corruption.
- The prime causes of social unrest relate to rapid economic development, increasing income, social and regional inequalities, unmet rising expectations; a lack of legitimate, effective and independent social and political institutions for channelling, mediating and resolving grievances; lack of government accountability and transparency along with endemic systemic government corruption; and the absence of independent, civil society watch-dog groups.
- The CCP is likely to expand its repertoire of accommodating responses to social unrest but this will be gradual, piecemeal and specific to particular threats that are interpreted as not regime-destabilising. The use of repression to address social unrest will continue, as local governments fail to establish longer-term mechanisms of conflict-resolution and as central Party leaders remain suspicious of 'hostile external forces' set to destabilise China.

Key policy recommendations

- China's stability and economic growth is important for Europe's economic recovery and prosperity. The EU thus has an interest in China developing more sustainable and effective

means of managing social grievances and in moving towards a more democratic style of politics.

- It is recommended that the EU provide support to China to establish robust and legitimate mechanisms for the redress of grievances, for consulting with citizens on policy decisions that affect their lives, for providing timely and accurate information about local government policies, and for establishing independent institutions for holding powerful elites (government and business) to account. European countries with their diverse forms of democracy, their active citizenries and their long histories of establishing democratic governance systems can make an important contribution to supporting China in these endeavours.
- With the downsizing of European aid to China, support can best be provided through professional training, exchange, secondments and dialogue involving government officials in security, judicial, media and welfare agencies; through the cultivation of China-European professional association networks; through support to Chinese and European civil society organisations (not just NGOs); and through joint research between European and Chinese research institutions; and through diplomatic channels.