

Understanding the Chinese Communist Party at 100

At 100, the CPC is on track to continue its domination of Chinese politics

By Avinash Godbole June 24, 2021



File photo of Chinese President Xi Jinping at the opening of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in 2017 | Reuters

The Communist Party of China (CPC) which turns 100 on July 1 is set to celebrate its centenary with a series of showcase events. The CPC has made a significant contribution in shaping China and on that basis, China hopes to guide the future of the world in the next decade and after.

Analyses of the CPC's future trajectory usually consider three aspects: Its transition to democracy, its fragility possibly leading to a chaotic implosion and its authoritarian resilience. This third way is also the story of how the CPC amended its ideology and changed its functioning over many years, leading to China becoming as powerful as it has become today.

Changing Composition:

CPC is the longest surviving communist party and a massive apparatus that has not only survived all the projections of its collapse but also thrived and remoulded itself to suit the changing times and circumstances. As a consequence, it is vastly different today compared to the less than 20 members who came together to form the party in Shanghai in July 1921. The CPC is 91.8 million strong and registers an annual growth rate of 20 per cent—a consistent figure since 2008, when China began to see and project itself as a global power as a consequence of two events; the Beijing Olympics and the global economic

slowdown. This growth in numbers is in the younger cohort (below 35 years of age) and attests to the fact that the party is not getting older, more jaded or outmoded in its relationship with Chinese society.

That may be considered a true success to begin this analysis with. How it does that and what mistakes it avoided that similar organisations have made is worth studying among the reasons for its success.

Structurally, the CPC is also different. More than 51 per cent of party members are graduates, surpassing the peasants and workers who make up nearly 35 per cent of the membership number. Thus, the CPC today is more urban and middle class than it ever was in its history. However, this also mirror images China's society, which in itself is a middle-class consumer society, mostly located in and around China's more than 200 large cities and beyond.

Ideology and organisation

The two key variables that have kept the mammoth party together for the longest time period have been ideology and organisation. On the ideological front, the party works on the basis of principal contradiction or the central problem facing Chinese society. In 1981, the party identified that the means of production were not adequate to fulfil people's demands. Thus, it led the way for something called the "socialist market economy" in China, and it got the strongest momentum after Deng Xiaoping's famous southern tour of 1992. However, in the latter part, it also led to income and regional inequality, environmental damage, corruption, popular protests across provinces and other challenges. Thus, in 2017 at the 19th Congress of the CPC, there was a revision after 36 years and the new contradiction is said to be "between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life". This is expected to focus on quality-of-life issues, increase domestic consumption, raise wages among other things.

As an organisation, the CCP has subbranches in various forms and those number more than five thousand. Besides the politburo and the Central Military Commission, the Central Commission on Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and the United Front Work Department (UFWD) have emerged as the most important party organisation in the last decade. The CCDI handles the corruption cases and was headed by Xi's trusted ally Wang Qishan for several years. The UFWD has a significant underground role in monitoring ideology and social thoughts on issues like politics, society, religion and stability at home and abroad on several levels. Besides that, the central party school holds the ideology together by studying the situation at home and abroad and creating documents for the leadership to look into. For example, the thinking on the new principal contradiction would have most likely originated in the party school.

An important feature of the CPC is its omnipresence. It is practically present everywhere, in factories, the army, social organisations, private enterprises, academic institutions and in all other organisations that matter. The party began the process of having committees in private organisations in 2007-08 and by now, it is present in more than 70 per cent of China's private organisations.

Sources of power and legitimacy

The party's relations with the people, its legitimacy and the social contract under which it achieves that legitimacy has always been under the scanner. The CPC is not a monolith like it is made out to be by the media commentary. The party has extensive internal debates about how to plan the economic future, well-being, regional inequalities, environment, quality of life and other issues. What the CPC does not like, however, is for the criticism of the leadership to be made public.

The big lesson the party drew from Tiananmen 1989 was that party unity is vital to its centrality. That is why it insists on handling debates internally and presenting a singular external viewpoint. That is also why

it preferred to weed out someone like Bo Xilai, who was the party secretary in Chongqing and who was dismissed and arrested in 2012 on charges of corruption and abuse of power. His corrupt and cruel ways of ruling perhaps could have been overlooked, but not his campaigns to reach the pinnacle of power.

Anti-corruption and the rise of Xi Jinping

CPC considers all forms of corruption as an existential threat. Premier Wen Jiabao made a speech to that effect and that became the mandate of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign since 2013. What it also did alongside was to reduce the relative power of other factions and that led the way for Xi Jinping's eventual rise as a paramount leader. Xi got rid of the collective leadership system and centralized more and more power in himself, even reducing the authority of the premier Li Keqiang like in economic matters. Xi earned the moniker of "chairman of everything" after he became the chairman of at least 16 crucial commissions and committees.

Xi sees himself not just as a fifth generational leader but someone who will leave a lasting impact on the future of the party. If the first 30 years of the PRC were under the shadow of Mao, the next under the shadow of Deng Xiaoping, Xi has set himself to impact China's politics and policies in all the fields possible leading to the centenary of the PRC in 2049. In that sense, the million-dollar question is whether Xi will continue to be in power beyond 2024, which looks increasingly possible today. If that happens the next generation of leadership like Hu Chunhua and Chen Min'er may eventually lose out.

Dark Sides of power

There are of course several dark sides to the power of the CPC. It has given up on any semblance of liberal order and it rules in an absolute brutal manner in its minority provinces. What happens in Xinjiang is fairly well known by now as it has extended its surveillance even in the digital domain. Minorities must install state-approved apps and their physical movement is actually tracked. The Ramzan fasting ban is real and so is the policy that leads to the suppression of the Uyghur language. That the "reeducation camps" or mass jails exist across Xinjiang has been proven beyond doubt and exiled Uighurs have argued that those who speak on these issues abroad have seen their families disappear without trace.

More importantly, there are signs that these policies may come to Tibet if some of the recent news in Chinese media were to be treated as clues. For China, the dispute in Xinjiang was easier to frame in the aftermath of 9/11. In contrast, in Tibet his holiness Dalai Lama and the party's obsession with deciding on the succession issue is a source of tussle that may only intensify further.

For other Han Chinese as well, life has not been easy under the surveillance state. The great firewall keeps an eye on one's search patterns and there have been instances of party officials knocking on doors to check the well-being of an individual if their search history included banned terms like the Tiananmen massacre or related to corruption by the central committee and the like. Several student leaders, outspoken artists, economists, lawyers, women's right activists and businessmen have seen their wings cut in the last few years. China has also broken the promises made to Hong Kong in 1997.

As the Party begins its celebrations, it is also showing a hard hand in controlling all the voices that do not speak the version of the truth authorized by the party. Xi Jinping called such behaviour "historical nihilism". Recently, two million online posts were removed for "harmful" discussions on history. The Cybersecurity Administration of China (CAC) is tasked with monitoring the internet for such posts. The criteria for judging historical nihilism includes, attacks on party leadership, slandering heroes and vilification of Chinese culture.

As the party turns 100 and celebrates its achievement of turning China into a moderately prosperous society, the world faces a contradiction about China. Today's China is more powerful and yet more insecure. This insecurity is driving its actions on the borders, in the South China Sea and in the trade war and in the wolf warrior diplomacy. China also wants the world to recognize its power and status but that is not going to happen if it continues to behave the way it did in Bangladesh recently, telling what choices were good or bad for Bangladesh. This form of hyper-nationalism may suit the party at home but it is bound to cause more trouble abroad.

The author is Associate Professor of International Relations and Chinese Studies at the Jindal School of Liberal Arts & Humanities, Jindal Global University.

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