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China's COVID-19 Protest: How Far Will It Go?

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SYNOPSIS

*China has seen a recent flare-up of public protests as a result of harsh COVID-related lockdown measures. In this piece, **TIONG WEI JIE** and **LI MINGJIANG** place the recent spate of unrest in context. Public protests, not a rarity in the country, have largely arisen from local grievances and generally do not constitute calls for regime change. However, the authors acknowledge that the recent protests could have affected public support for the leadership and point to the bigger challenges that China faces in time to come.*

COMMENTARY

Amid the flare-up of protests against COVID rules in China, many observers read the unrest as a sign of the Chinese public demanding wider regime change. Notable examples commonly cited to support this view include (1) the mass protest in Shanghai's Wulumuqi Road, where many shouted for Xi Jinping to step down, and (2) the student protests at Tsinghua University, where hundreds gathered and many chanted slogans calling for "democracy, rule of law and freedom of expression". According to some observers, the latter shared some similarities with the Tiananmen incident of 1989.

There may be some validity to these opinions; the aforementioned protests should raise some concerns for Xi's administration. The protests do seem to be on a rising trend recently, ostensibly sparked by the deadly apartment fire in Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang Autonomous Region, which killed 10 residents and injured 9 on the night of 24 November.



Temperature registration station in Wuhan, China. While the rest of the world had already moved on from stringent COVID control measures, China has only recently started to relax its own strict control measures. [Photo](#) by Cheng Feng on Unsplash.

That said, it must be noted that the majority of the recent protests were against specific measures — in this case, the central authority’s insistence on the zero-COVID policy, which had threatened the livelihoods of many, and the draconian implementation of the policy at local levels. On the Urumqi fire incident, some alleged that the tragedy arose because access for fire-fighting vehicles had been obstructed by the barriers that local authorities had built around the road leading to the residential tower as part of their lockdown efforts. These claims were flatly denied by the local government of Urumqi.

The Big Picture of Public Protests in China

For context, protests have been regularly taking place in China, even before the outbreak of the pandemic. Estimates reported by a [London-based research project](#) funded by the European Union placed the number of “mass incidents” in 1993 alone at 8,700. By 2005, this number had grown tenfold to 87,000. According to Tsinghua University sociology professor [Sun Liping](#), 180,000 protests took place in 2010 alone. On the surface, these statistics seem to paint a bleak picture of the party-state’s regime stability. However, the *target* at which these protests are directed matters.

A [study](#) published by the international journal *Mobilization* shows that only 13% of the protests between 2000 and 2019 were directed at the central and provincial governments. The remaining were either targeted at the lower rungs of the Chinese government (such as the local prefecture, county, township or village level) or against firms (both state-owned and non-state).

The protesters' demands were also mostly focused on specific localised issues such as rural land seizures by the local government, local corruption and wage disputes. The vast majority of the protests stopped short of demanding regime change or wider political reform. One recent example could be seen in the series of demonstrations in mid-2022 in the city of Zhengzhou against corrupt and illegal local practices in Henan province's rural banks.

Similarly, most of the anger during the COVID-related protests was in fact directed at the draconian or even brutal restrictions and their resulting impact on the livelihoods of the average Chinese. The rallying calls that repeatedly dominated these protests included "end the lockdown!" (解封) or "we do not want nucleic acid testing; we want our livelihoods!" (不要核酸要吃饭), not outward calls for an end to the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. On the other hand, there were noticeable demands for freedom of expression, where protesters held up blank pieces of paper as a form of symbolic demonstration against censorship. Even so, these anti-censorship gestures do not amount to calls for the ruling party to step down.

There is no doubt that there is an increasing trend of public dissent, particularly among the intellectual elite, against the tightening of ideological and political control in recent years. On top of the protest in Shanghai calling for an end to Xi's rule, avid China watchers would remember the Beijing Sitong Bridge protest that occurred a few days before the 20th National Party Congress, when Xi completed his power sweep. More than merely protesting against COVID-19 restrictions, the words on the banner atop the bridge called for free elections. Given the timing of the incident, many saw it as a rare affront to the party's leadership under Xi Jinping. Although this incident only represents the work of one man, its virality on social media must have caused some concern for the ruling party.

No Crisis but Growing Challenges for Chinese Leadership

Notwithstanding such occasional protests, many quantitative studies in the past two decades based on public opinion surveys have found that overall support for the regime is actually quite high. For example, according to a [2020 study](#) by the Ash Center of the Harvard Kennedy School, overall satisfaction with the central government was consistently above 80% from 2003 onwards and was at a high of 93.1% in 2016.

Xi Jinping's relentless anti-corruption campaign, despite criticism by detractors that it is a pretext for centralising his political power, seemed to enjoy robust popular support. In 2021 alone, 627,000 Chinese officials were punished for violating party discipline and the law. Many of these officials were from the lower rungs of government, where corruption is rife.

The purported objectives of Xi's common prosperity and rural revitalisation campaign to reduce income inequality were also in line with the aspirations of the average Chinese citizen. In May 2020, [Premier Li Keqiang](#) highlighted that 600 million Chinese still earn less than 1,000 RMB a month each. This illustrates the enormous inequality facing China, which these campaigns seek to reduce.

Fast forward to the present, it would not be unreasonable to argue that domestic approval of Xi's administration has weakened due to the zero-COVID policy, which has pushed many citizens to breaking point. Xi's repeated staking of his reputation on this policy by claiming direct oversight of it does not help his popular standing either. How far his popular support has weakened is anybody's guess.

In any case, observers should take into account the nature of the recent protests and their targets to make more nuanced judgements of public sentiments towards the regime at large. In just about a week following the protests, the central government dramatically changed its pandemic policy and now appears to embrace co-existence with the virus. It remains to be seen how the party-state may be able to cope with the almost inevitable massive infections and deaths in the country in the coming months. In the years to come though, challenges bigger than the COVID-related policy would include pushing for structural economic reforms, solving the mounting unemployment problem, particularly for the youth, and sustaining at least medium-speed economic growth.

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