"Social Management" as a Way of Coping With Heightened Social Tensions

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Over the last year there has been an increasing emphasis on "social management" as a way of managing increasing social tensions in Chinese society. Indeed, the effort the CCP is putting into publicizing this concept underscores high-level concerns. Although these concerns cannot be attributed to the Arab spring or other global events, such social movements certainly make the CCP leadership more wary about the ways in which external political changes might stimulate domestic incidents, especially given the growing role of social media. Although this emphasis on social management should not be seen as giving up on the modest efforts at political reform the government has been undertaking in recent years, it does suggest that the government sees other measures as more important in the short run.

The Politburo held its 23rd collective study session in September 2010, focusing on the "correct handling of contradictions among the people in the new era." General Secretary Hu Jintao called for establishing a mechanism, led by the party and government, that would protect the interests of the masses, as citizens of China are still called, and would strengthen and innovate (创新) "social management" (社会管理).[1]

Since then, there has been repeated and heightened emphasis on social management by Chinese leaders and in the Chinese media. On February 19, 2011, Hu Jintao delivered an "important speech" at the opening session of a Study and Discussion Session on the Special Theme of Social Management and Its Innovation for Principal Leading Cadres at the Provincial and Ministerial Level (in other words, the Central Committee). The general secretary told the gathering that strengthening and making innovations in social management were necessary to maintain social order and promote social harmony. He named eight tasks that were important in social management, including "supporting people's organizations"; forming "scientific and effective mechanisms" for coordinating interests, expressing demands, and mediating contradictions; and improving the "management of and services for" the transient population and special groups.[2]

The following day, Zhou Yongkang, the Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of politics and law, elaborated on Hu's points, saying that it was necessary to put "people-centered services" at the top of the party's agenda. Zhou especially highlighted the importance of "social coordination." If the party tries to undertake all social management work, it will be overwhelmed and the results will be less than ideal. It is necessary to enlist social organizations, including the various "mass organizations" under the party's control, as well as public and private institutions, to undertake much of this

work. Zhou was not suggesting that such organizations work autonomously, but rather that they work under the party's supervision. As he put it, "We should continuously attach importance to developing, managing, and supervising" social organizations and "include them in party committees and government-led social organizations systems."

Zhou did not forget to include potentially more coercive measures in his prescriptions. He called for establishing a national ID system that would, among other things, provide the government with accurate information on the size of the population and would help it realize effective management and good service.[3]

The issue of social management was also highlighted in the "Outline of the 12th Five-Year Program for Economic and Social Development," adopted by the Fourth Session of the 11th National People's Congress, which met in Beijing March 3–14. Unlike similar documents in the past, this outline had a special section on enhancing and innovating social management.[4] The document laid out a three-level understanding of social management, including building a more "service-oriented" government in order to "prevent and reduce" the number of social problems, strengthening of "dynamic management" to "resolve the masses' legitimate and rational appeals," and strengthening the party-state's ability to manage the sudden outbreak of public incidents. It also called for establishing a "social stability risk and evaluation mechanism" that would assess the social impact of construction projects, including land acquisition, before they were undertaken.[5]

Hu Jintao again emphasized social management in the Politburo meeting held on May 30. Hu emphasized taking a "people-centered" approach, putting service first, practicing "joint government" (共同治理, the idea that some governance functions be undertaken by social organizations, under party supervision), and "improving the mechanism for safeguarding the masses' rights and interests under the party's guidance." The general secretary made clear that the task of social management was urgent because China is now both "in a period of important strategic opportunities for its development and in a period of pronounced social contradictions."[6]

Hu Jintao came back to the theme in his July 1 speech on the 90th anniversary of the CCP, stating: "We should build a socialist social management system with Chinese characteristics under the leadership of the party, with responsibility assigned to the government, with assistance of society, and with the participation of the whole society."[7]

The party's new emphasis on social management reflects the growing concern that the increasing number of "mass incidents" (群体性事件) in China is undermining the legitimacy of the party. These mass incidents are in part a product of the enormous economic and social changes China is going through. As Hu Jintao put it in his July 1 speech, "China is going through social changes unparalleled in scope. While releasing tremendous dynamism for China's development and progress, these changes have inevitably given rise to conflicts and problems."[8] But they are also a product of a mode of economic growth that is, in Premier Wen Jiabao's words, "unbalanced, uncoordinated, and unsustainable." Moreover, the Internet and social media are playing a greater role in

such incidents, and political upheavals abroad, particularly "Arab spring" but also the riots in England and recent calls to "Occupy Washington," have generated great concern about how such movements might affect China's own stability.

Growing Concern with Social Disorder

As all who follow events in China are aware, there have been increasing numbers of "mass incidents" in recent years. In 1993, there were 8,700, and by 2005 there were 87,000. In the past few years the number of mass incidents has grown at an alarming rate, reaching 180,000 in 2010. Such numbers are not precise; the definition of "mass incident" may have changed over time, and different interests in China have incentives to either hold the numbers down or push them up. But these numbers appear broadly reflective of reality. Both Chinese observers and foreign scholars agree that the number of incidents is continuing to grow. More important, the number of large incidents, sometimes involving 10,000 people or more, seems to be increasing.

Recent media commentary has emphasized the risks currently facing social stability. As one article put it, "Conflicts are increasing between strata and groups, the social structure is changing, and there is a vacuum of social values."[9] In another, Guo Binsheng, deputy editor-in-chief of the Jiangsu branch of the Xinhua News Agency, wrote, "our basic consensus is that society is at a stage with big risks." He notes the sense of injustice that lurks behind most mass incidents as disparities grow between those "inside the system" and those "outside the system."[10]

Writing in *Public Security Research* (公安研究), one Zhang Weidong of the Jilin Provincial Public Security Bureau worries that an increasing number of large-scale mass incidents are caused by the "long-term piling-up of grievances." As he notes, many of those participating have no direct relation to whatever grievance set off a particular incident but rather use it as "a channel for venting their own dissatisfaction with society."[11] Similarly Guo noted that while the causes of most mass incidents are very simple, the "long-term accumulation" of a sense of injustice can turn small-scale incidents into large-scale mass incidents.[12]

Guo nevertheless believes that social strife can be contained if more public hearings are held, if there is greater openness over how demolition decisions are made and compensation determined, and if labor unions are give a greater role in negotiating compensation for labor-related injuries.[13] However, Zhong Yuming, assistant editor-in-chief of the Guangdong branch of the Xinhua News Agency, seems skeptical, particularly about the prospects of public hearings. As she says, collecting public opinion through symposiums and public hearings has little credibility with the public because they do not know what opinions have been collected, whether some suggestions have been adopted, or why other suggestions have not been adopted. She calls this "one-way democracy" and says that it is "useless in solving the current social contradictions."[14]

Similarly Huang Huo, deputy editor-in-chief of the Chongqing branch of the Xinhua News Agency, notes that in the wake of the Weng'an and Menglian incidents in 2008

governments began training cadres to prevent similar incidents—but that did not prevent the outbreak of the Shishou incident, which was "nearly a carbon copy of the Weng'an incident," in 2009. Huang notes the enormous temptations that lie behind the abuse of authority at the local level: "Land values have doubled and the large transfer fees and financial incomes arising from them and the GDP growth and political achievements (政纪) driven by the real estate industry in some places have given rise to self-interested political groups characterized by power and money."[15] Another source gives figures about just how large this temptation can be. It says that in 2005 only one-third of the 163,000 hectares of state-owned land sold that year were sold through "bidding, auction, and listing," in other words at market prices. According to this article, the average land price sold through the market was "four or five times the price transacted by other means, with the average price differential of more than five million yuan per hectare."[16] Apart from financial temptations, the power of local officials can be tremendous. As Huang puts it, "In some places that are like 'local kingdoms,' the various 'local tyrants' have nearly the same rights as the central government. . . . Having so many rights, they are certainly not willing to negotiate with others, not to mention giving up interests for the purpose of reconciliation."[17]

Apart from the number of incidents, there are several factors that make trends worrisome for the leadership. For instance, mass incidents used to be primarily local disputes with little impact on other places, but now rights protection groups tend to spread information across regions and across levels of government. Huang Huo argues that the government should not be hostile to such groups. As he says, "Almost no 'rights protection' group was formed because of ideological or political reasons," so "the government should value highly their demands and not feel too nervous or even regard them as potential political enemies, which may intensify the contradiction."[18] Despite Huang's advice, the government has taken very strong measures against rights protection lawyers and others over the past year.

Similarly, the growth of the Internet and social media in recent years has complicated government efforts to control public opinion. Some have argued that the government should take a more open approach, and the government seemed to take that approach in 2008 when it promulgated the "Regulations of the PRC on Making Government Information Public." Of course, that regulation was passed in the run-up to the Olympics, and implementation since then has been spotty at best. As one author wrote, "The failure of the authoritative organs of state power to come forward and tell the truth in a timely fashion easily causes information to be distorted as news spreads in all directions, which exacerbates social instability." A case in point was the poor handling of information in Qixian County, Henan Province, when rumors of a nuclear accident spread in 2009 and 100,000 fled their homes. This writer argues that a "new opinion stratum" has emerged, which has the ability to influence society, but it is "inappropriate to use public security or other security departments to deal with them." Social management, he says, should "stress reason, not control."[19]

Others take a less open approach. For instance, one article in *Gongan yanjiu* said that "Public security organs must carry out 24-hour monitoring of various types of popular

sentiment, establish sound online patrol, and . . . guarantee that they are able to discover, report, and deal with as soon as possible any major popular sentiments."[20] Another article in the same journal said, "Another aspect is that one should powerfully improve information monitoring systems. One should strengthen tracking, grasping, and control of the attitude of all masses in society toward some hot topic and sensitive issues, focus on seeking out social problems for which preliminary clues have been revealed and which might ferment into major problems today or in the future."[21] Yet another piece, alluding to Mao Zedong's 1957 article, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People," expressed the extremely complicated mixture of domestic and foreign currents of thought that will make it more difficult to maintain social stability: "Contradictions between us and the enemy and contradictions among the people will be intertwined against the background of economic globalization, social informatization [社会信息化], and opening up to the outside world."[22]

Moreover, protests are not necessarily limited to peasants, migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups. One of the interesting phenomena of recent years is the spread of protest to the urban middle class. As one writer put it, after real estate is developed in some areas, development companies will then start to build infrastructure, such as roads and garbage disposal facilities, which residents then object to because it is too close to their property. For example, when an area along Zhongshan Road in Guangzhou was developed, the government started to build a transformer substation next to a fairly expensive apartment building. Of course, the residents opposed this project on the grounds that it would hurt their property values and they repeatedly blocked the main roads in the area.[23]

One factor making mass incidents both more likely and more difficult to deal with is the erosion of the government's credibility. This public cynicism is born of experience. For instance, "experts" testified that ore could be safely mined at the Xingning mine in Guangdong, but they had not even reached the airport to go home when disaster struck.[24] Another article noted, "the nascent media will rapidly ferment the incidents, which will markedly demonstrate the government's inadequate public credibility."[25] Similarly, people often object to new projects that they believe will harm the environment. Even if the project has passed an environmental impact assessment, people will still worry that the project will affect the environment.[26]

With the launching of the 12th Five-Year Plan this year, social conflicts are not expected to go down. As the newsweekly *Liaowang* put it: "New projects will be started during the 12th Five-Year Plan, so new contradictions may be triggered by relevant issues such as land expropriation and housing demolition and relocation, environmental protection, safe production, and so forth. Given the fact that the transformation and upgrading of the economy will speed up, this will bring deep changes in relevant areas, such as employment structure, labor capital relations, and the like. As a result, new unstable factors may be generated."[27]

The Role of "Civil Society"

Some writers have tried to interpret the party's new stress on social management in ways that emphasize a greater role for society. For instance, a forum in *China Econonmic Times* (*Zhongguo jingji shibao*) emphasized that it was "necessary to prevent letting social management and service simply evolve into social control." The forum warned the government to guide rather than crack down on social media. Social media is a trend that cannot be resisted and if the government was too heavy handed, it would "run counter to popular opinion," making it "impossible to achieve the goal of effective social management."[28]

Zhao Benshu, secretary general of the Central Politics and Law Commission, however, took a much harder line. Zhao warned that China should not fall into the "'civil society' trap designed for us by some Western nations." It was important not to over-emphasize the development of social organizations or to exaggerate their "third department" (第三部门) characteristics. "To nourish and develop social organizations in China, it is imperative to formulate the proper code of conduct and put in place the 'safety valves' in advance to prevent the proliferation of ill-intentioned social organizations."[29]

Strengthening Public Security

Despite efforts to interpret social management in ways that stress citizen participation and democratic rights, strengthening police work will inevitably play a central role. In strengthening police work, China is building on the experience gained during the Olympic games in 2008. Following the close of the games, Meng Jianzhu, minister of Public Security, called for "turning the Olympic experience into a lasting mechanism," and the following year, Zhou Yongkang echoed Meng, saying "We should apply the successful experience of security at the Beijing Olympic Games in developing a public order prevention and control system.

Doing so costs money and manpower. In preparation for the Olympics, Hebei Province spent some 200 million yuan, more than half of which went for a command post for the "Great Moat" around Beijing and 17 inspection stations. Subsequently the State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform approved an additional 5,000 people's police to augment the "great moat project," and, starting 2008, Hebei was planning to spend an additional 4.95 billion yuan on improving the great moat and other public security facilities.

In order to discover potential problems early and intervene effectively, the "system of people's mediation," which had been ignored for a long time, was given a new lease on life beginning in 2006. Taiyuan city alone set up 2,622 people's mediation committees, with 18,442 mediators—1 percent of the population. These and other mediation committees are supported by special funds from the central treasury.[30]

Political Reform?

The absence of commentary on political reform in the discussion of social management has been conspicuous. The Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee, which was convened September 15–18, 2009, warned that the party's "status as a ruling party was not settled once and for all" and that corruption, especially among high-level cadres, was having a serious effect. The "Decision of the CCP Central Committee on a Number of Issues in Strengthening and Improving Party Building in the New Situation" called for a number of modest political reform measures, such as expanding the democratic selection of cadres and the expansion of the "permanent representative system" (常任制) for delegates to party congresses. These and other measures were intended to tackle the issue of corruption, including the buying and selling of offices, and thus enhance public confidence in the party.[31] At least at tht time, political reform was still seen as part of a broader effort to prevent corruption and make the party more responsive to public needs. However, the discussion on social management to this point has not stressed political reform, highlighting service to people, party leadership over social organizations, and better police work.

Notes

[1] "胡锦涛主持中共中央政治局第二十三次集体学习" (Hu Jintao chairs 23rd collective study of the CCP Politburo), retrieved from http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-09/29/c_13535934.htm.

[2] 扎扎实实提高社会管理科学化水平 建设中国特色社会主义社会管理体系，(Improve the scientific level socialist management in a down-to-earth manner and build socialist social management system with Chinese characteristics) retrieved from http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/13959222.html#.

[3] Zhou Yongkang (周永康), "加强和创新社会管理 建立健全中国特色社会主义社会管理体系" (Strengthening and innovating social management by establishing and improving the socialist management system with Chinese characteristics), *Seeking Truth* (求实), no. 9 （May 1–15, 2011).

[4] See Zhang Guo (长国) and Chen Fengli (陈风莉), "民生与社会管理独立成'篇'" (People's livelihood, social management become separate "chapters"), *Beijing youth daily* (北京青年报), March 6, 2011.

[5] 我国国民经济和社会发展十二五规划纲要 (Outline of the 12th Five-Year Plan for China's economic and social development), retrieved from http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-03-17/055622129864.shtml.

[6] 中共中央政治局召开会议 研究加强和创新社会管理问题 (CCP Politburo convenes meeting to study how to strengthen and innovate social management), retrieved from http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/14779718.html#.

[7] Hu Jintao (胡锦涛), "在庆祝中国共产党成立90 周年大会上的讲话"(Speech at the assembly celebrating the 90th anniversary of the birth of the Chinese Communist Party") retrieved from http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-07/01/c_121612030.htm.

[8] Ibid.

[9] *China Economic Times* (中国经济时报), May 6, 2011.

[10] Guo Bensheng (郭奔胜), "构建社会管理新格局" (Establish a new pattern of social management), *Outlook* (了望), No. 3 (January 18, 2010), pp. 17–18.

[11] Zhang Weidong (长炜东), "公安机关健全完善化解民众不满情绪及社会矛盾长效机制之谈说" (Exploration of the building of sound and perfected public security mechanisms for long-term resolution of people's dissatisfaction and social contradictions), *Public Security Research* (公安研究), no. 12 (2010), pp. 18–23.

[12] Guo Bensheng, "构建社会管理新格局" (Establish a new pattern of social management; see endnote 10).

[13] Ibid.

[14] Zhong Yuming （钟玉明）""'十年代' 社会矛盾变局" (Changes in social contradictions in the first decade of the 21st century) *Outlook* (了望,), No. 3 (January 18, 2010), pp. 21–22.

[15] Ibid.

[16] "寻求减少社会矛盾的治本之策 (时事观察)" ([Observation of current events] Search for fundamental ways to reduce social conflicts), *People's Daily* (人民日报), October 21, 2010.

[17] Huang Huo, "社会矛盾纠结于公司博弈."

[18] Ibid.

[19] Woods Lee, "Villagers Head Home after Nuclear Scare Sparks Mass Exodus," *South China Morning Press*, July 20, 2009; see also Chen Lidan (陈力丹), "虚拟社会管理的六个理念" (Six notions of virtual social management), 中国党政干部论坛 (Chinese party and government cadres forum), April 6, 2011, pp. 22–24.

[20] Ni Xingyu (倪兴余), "试论公安机关社会矛盾化解机制建设" (Some opinions on building social conflict resolution mechanisms for public security organs), *Public Security Research* (公安研究), no. 6, June 15, 2010, pp. 30–34.

[21] Zhang Weidong (长炜东), "公安机关健全完善化解民众不满情绪及社会矛盾长效机制之谈说" (Exploration of the building of sound and perfected public security mechanisms for long-term resolution of people's dissatisfaction and social contradictions), *Public Security Research* (公安研究), no. 12 (2010), pp. 18–23.

[22] Chen Zewei (陈泽伟), "巩固社会和谐稳定" (Consolidate social harmony and stability), *Outlook* (了望), no. 1 (January 3, 2011), pp. 32–33.

[23] Zhong Yuming, "Changes in social contradictions" (see endnote 14).

[24] Ibid.

[25] Dong Ruifen (董瑞丰), "群体性事件会少吗" (Will there be fewer mass incidents?), *Outlook* (了望), no. 11 (March 14, 2011), p. 44.

[26] Guo Bensheng, "Establish a new pattern of social management."

[27] Chen Zewei (陈泽伟), "巩固社会和谐稳定" (Consolidate social harmony and stability; see endnote 22).

[28] "社会管理不是社会控制" (Social management is not social control), *China Economic Times* (中国经济时报), (May 6, 2011).

[29] Zhou Benshun (周本顺), "走中国特色社会管理创新之路" (Take the road of innovating social management with Chinese characteristics), *Seeking Truth* 求实, May 16, 2011.

[30] Hu Ben (胡贲), ""'维稳' 体制隐然成型" ("Maintaining stability" system quietly takes shape), *Southern Weekend* (南方周末), March 3, 2010.

[31] "中共中央关于加强和改进新形势下谠的建设若干重大问题的决定" (Decision of the CCP Central Committee on a number of major issues in strengthening and improving party building in the new situation), *People's Daily* (人民日报), September 28, 2009.