

The Hu-Wen Leadership at Six Months

H. Lyman Miller

Party General Secretary Hu Jintao and People's Republic of China (PRC) Premier Wen Jiabao have governed China for nearly six months since their installation at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002 and the 10th National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2003. Since taking power, they have faced unexpected crises and new dilemmas. They have also had an opportunity to put in place policy departures that give concrete expression to the abstruse ideological prescriptions of the party congress. And, they have imparted their own style of governance. Judged from the record so far, Hu and Wen have built on themes of the Jiang Zemin era to pursue an activist agenda of liberalizing economic and political reform and have projected a liberal approach to leadership.

Early Leadership Tests and Reform Initiatives

Since the close of the 10th NPC on March 18, the new leadership has been greeted by a series of crises and tests.

- Immediately following the NPC, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic burst into public view. The rapid spread of the disease to several major urban centers—including Hong Kong and the capital itself—and to other countries portended dire consequences for public safety, economic growth, social stability, international economic and political ties, and China's international image. As the dimensions of the crisis emerged into view, Hu and Wen moved decisively, sacking central and provincial leaders, touring stricken provinces and visiting hospital wards, emphasizing cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO), and imposing emergency restrictions on public travel and activities to contain the spread of the disease. By June 24, the WHO lifted its ban on travel to Beijing.
- Also immediately after Hu and Wen took power, the United States went to war in Iraq. For a variety of geopolitical reasons, Beijing in the months preceding the war expressed opposition to Washington's approach to the Iraq question and worked cautiously but unsuccessfully to constrain Washington's course of action within a United Nations framework. Closer to home, PRC media openly worried about the potential economic impact of the war on world oil markets and so on China's economic growth, leading the new leadership to ponder creating a strategic oil reserve.
- Following the trilateral Sino-U.S.-Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) talks in Beijing at the end of April, Beijing departed from its previous, relatively passive approach to the North Korean nuclear crisis. It began an intensive round of diplomacy with Seoul,

Tokyo, Washington, Moscow, and, most significantly, Pyongyang to produce a consensus on opening six-way talks with Pyongyang in Beijing in late August.

- Meanwhile, rancorous debates in Hong Kong over new security legislation under Article 23 of the 1984 Basic Law erupted into mass street demonstrations on July 1, the anniversary of Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese sovereignty. While showing solidarity with the Tung Chee-hwa administration, Beijing tacitly accepted the resignation of two prominent pro-Beijing members of Tung's cabinet and agreed to new "consultations" on the legislation.

These early tests of the new leadership appear not to have deflected attention from an agenda of new reforms authorized at the 2002 party congress and at the 2003 NPC. In particular, several new reform initiatives have emerged:

- The State Council reform approved at the NPC in March recast several existing central executive bodies and created important new ones in an apparent effort to manage the impact on China's domestic economy of China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), especially for the state-owned enterprise sector. The State Council reforms called for the reorganization of the State Development Planning Commission into a new State Development and Reform Commission, the abolition of the previously powerful State Economic and Trade Commission, and the creation of two new commissions—a State Assets Regulatory Commission and a China Banking Regulatory Commission. In April and May, at the height of the SARS crisis, Xinhua reported each of these bodies commencing work.
- In June and July, PRC media accounts announced a forthcoming structural reform of state-controlled media, the details of which will be announced in September. Commentary thus far indicates that the reform is intended in part to accommodate WTO stipulations providing for foreign participation in retail distribution of publications and in other roles. The reforms also promise to reduce the number of party-affiliated publications and to revamp ownership relationships of some media, but not to alter the power of the party to regulate media content.
- Active preparations have been launched to revise the PRC constitution at the 10th NPC's Second Session in spring 2004. In early June, the communist Hong Kong newspaper *Wen wei po* reported the formation of a group to manage the process of constitutional revision, headed by NPC Chairman Wu Bangguo. On August 11, the official news agency Xinhua reported that a meeting of the party Politburo that day had authorized a process of broad review among party and extraparty constituencies of proposals for constitutional amendments, to be followed by submission of the proposals to the party Central Committee's Third Plenum, which the Politburo scheduled to convene in October.

The Politburo meeting of August 11 also decided that the upcoming Third Plenum would review and endorse a new document on economic reform. According to a commentary in *Wen wei po*, the anticipated reform document will be comprehensive, paralleling the scope and scale of the 50-point document on economic reform adopted by the 14th Central Committee's Third Plenum in November 1993, which outlined sweeping corporatizing reforms

in China's state-owned enterprises, an overhaul of a national tax system, changes in China's foreign trade structure, and a reorganization of the banking sector. The Politburo also prescribed a process of wider review of the new reform document, paralleling the process of review of proposed constitutional amendments, in the months preceding the plenum.

Political Reform and Leadership Approach

Since coming to power, the Hu-Wen leadership has undertaken several steps and emphasized new themes that together have been advertised in PRC media as its distinctive approach to leadership. These departures in the political process emphasize collective leadership, decision-making transparency, official accountability, and responsiveness to the interests of China's people. These steps include:

- *Routine public reporting of meetings of the Politburo, the party's top decision-making body.* The first such report came on November 16, 2002, the day after the 16th Central Committee's First Plenum elected the new Politburo. In the following nine-month period through early August 2003, Xinhua has reported a total of 11 Politburo meetings, averaging a meeting almost every three weeks. Current reporting of some Politburo meetings had been a new practice for several months in late 1987 and 1988, following the 13th Party Congress and the election of Zhao Ziyang as party general secretary, but reports were discontinued in fall 1988 amid evident leadership splits. Otherwise, PRC media have never reported meetings of the Politburo. The present reports are relatively short. They summarize major items on each meeting's agenda and report on its decisions, but they doubtless do not report all the business addressed.
- *Meetings of the Politburo Standing Committee.* Even more remarkably, Xinhua has twice reported meetings of the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee—one on December 12, 2002, on how to aid China's poor and the other on April 17, 2003, on the SARS crisis. PRC media previously had never reported meetings of this key decision-making core of the Politburo.
- *Politburo study sessions.* Since December, PRC media have reported the Politburo meeting seven times to hear expert lectures on major issues of international and domestic interest. The first of these study sessions met in December to study the PRC constitution and law, and subsequent sessions have been devoted to such issues as trends in the world economy, approaches to dealing with unemployment, requirements for military modernization, and trends in contemporary culture. Reporting on routine sessions of the full Politburo for the study of important topics is new, although occasional meetings at which the top leadership assembled to study major world and domestic issues were reported in the mid-1980s, during the leadership of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang.
- *State Council meetings.* A similar effort is apparent in the reporting of State Council plenums and executive sessions under Wen Jiabao. Reporting on meetings of the Executive Committee is not new, but the current reporting is more extensive. A comparable effort at glasnost with respect to party and government decision making at lower levels may be in the

offing. On June 26, Xinhua reported the formation of a new National Leading Group for Making Government Affairs Public under the leadership of He Yong, a member of the party Secretariat and deputy secretary of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission.

- “*Scientific and democratic*” decision making. Both Hu and Wen have been depicted as promoting a “scientific and democratic” style of decision making that emphasizes broadened consultation with interested constituencies, expert advice and feasibility studies, and collective leadership. This approach resurrects another feature of the Zhao Ziyang era, when similar themes and formulations were employed in the late 1980s after the liberal reformer Wan Li had spelled them out in a landmark article in the party journal *Red Flag* (*Hongqi*) in 1986 and they had been endorsed at the 13th Party Congress in 1987.
- *People’s Daily*. At the beginning of the year, the format and focus of reporting in the party newspaper *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) were adjusted, giving more prominence to accounts of local affairs and issues of broader concern to the public and less to the activities of the leadership.
- *Cancellation of the Beidaihe leadership retreat*. In mid-July, PRC media reported the cancellation of the leadership’s annual summer retreat at the seaside resort at Beidaihe. Such gatherings had convened annually since the 1950s down through the Jiang Zemin era and provided an occasion for the senior leadership to deliberate informally on priorities for the forthcoming year. The cancellation of the leadership retreat reflects in part an effort to undercut the elitist overtones of such gatherings and in part, as reported by the Hong Kong communist newspaper *Wen wei po*, an effort to foster “a new image of the party and government as enlightened, open, approachable, and pragmatic.”¹ It also undercuts the opportunity for retired elders to kibitz in the deliberations of the younger leadership that replaced them.
- *Official accountability*. The most prominent instances of enforcing leadership accountability were the dismissals of Minister of Health Zhang Wenkang and Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong in April for their mishandling of the SARS epidemic and then the removal of several People’s Liberation Army (PLA) navy leaders—including Navy Commander Shi Yunsheng—in June. In May, *People’s Daily* cited a party Organization Department official as attributing the dismissals of party and government officials in 15 provinces to “dereliction of duty” in handling the SARS epidemic.² In the same vein, in June *People’s Daily* took note of a petition signed by voters in the special economic zone of Shenzhen demanding the recall of an elected deputy to the local people’s congress. Although the report said the issue was not yet resolved, the process undertaken in response to the recall campaign underscored the importance being attached to official accountability.³
- In the spirit of all these changes, it is tempting to see the now standard reference to “the 16th Central Committee’s leadership collective with comrade Hu Jintao as general secretary”—in contrast to the reference to the Jiang leadership as “the 15th Central Committee third generation leadership with comrade Jiang Zemin as the core”—as denoting the progressive emphasis on collective leadership rather than as conveying a probationary condition to Hu’s leadership.

All of these measures have been praised as exemplifying a distinctive new approach to governance on the part of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. At the same time, however, they draw on departures mandated in the political report delivered at the 16th Party Congress by outgoing General Secretary Jiang Zemin. The political report called, for example, for a system for “keeping the public informed” about leadership decision making on issues of public interest, for efforts to enhance “scientific and democratic” decision-making processes, and for strict governance according to law. Similarly, several of the broad themes that have become strongly associated with Hu Jintao since the party congress have their roots in Jiang’s political report. Hu’s widely publicized visits with ordinary citizens in urban and rural poor areas last winter and comparable visits thereafter by most of the new Politburo during lunar new year festivities follow from the party congress report’s call for “decision makers to go deep among the people to get to know how they are faring.” Similarly, the theme of “building the party for the public and exercising power for the people,” which Hu has repeatedly emphasized in speeches since the congress, derives from the congress report’s section on party-building.

In addition, the new steps and themes have proceeded under the broad ideological umbrella of the “three represents,” which enjoin the party to “represent” the most advanced elements of China’s reforming economy, the interests of the broadest majority of China’s people, and the most advanced trends in culture. Since the party congress, Hu has served as the frontline spokesman in the effort to explicate the significance of the three represents and stimulate renewed study of them. Hu presided over the current Politburo’s first meeting in November 2002, which commissioned nationwide study of the congress’s political report—which itself formally enshrined the three represents as the party’s “guiding ideology”—and he presided over the Politburo meeting on April 28, 2003, that authorized a new nationwide “upsurge” in studying the three represents, as mandated by the party congress. Hu reconfigured observances of the party’s 82d anniversary on July 1, 2003, to galvanize the study campaign, which formally got off the ground with the release of a Central Committee circular in mid-June.⁴

The implication for leadership politics of the emergence of these steps and themes is not so much that they are distinctive new initiatives by Hu and Wen themselves as that they are reflections of the particular activism of Hu and Wen in pursuing departures that received authoritative endorsement by the entire leadership at the party congress. The crises and tests that the Hu and Wen leadership has faced since taking power—especially the SARS epidemic, whose spread underscored the need for regime transparency and the public’s “right to know,” official accountability, and responsiveness to the public interest—have lent impetus to their pursuit. In addition, the party’s Central Party School (CPS), over which Hu presided for a decade until the 2002 party congress and over which Politburo Standing Committee member Zeng Qinghong now presides, has proven a mainstay of support for Hu’s efforts at reform of the political process. In the late 1990s, the Central Party School emerged as a major bastion for liberalizing political reform under Hu Jintao’s direction. Since the 16th Party Congress, CPS professors and researchers and its weekly newspaper *Study Times* (*Xuexi shibao*) have served as prominent exponents for a range of political reforms, emphasizing government

transparency, democratic procedures within the party and without, due process in law, and the need for leadership study of looming international and domestic trends that affect China.

The changes in political process and the themes stressed by the Hu-Wen leadership appear to have sparked expectations for more fundamental political reform, especially as the process of consultation for constitutional revision has gotten under way. PRC media in recent months have carried a broad range of opinions by academic commentators agitating for a broad range of political reforms. Other opinions, such as those voiced at a symposium on constitutional reform convened in Qingdao in June by the 1980s liberal scientist and now lawyer Cao Siyuan, have not been publicized in PRC media but have nevertheless attracted the attention of foreign media. Evidently in an attempt to deflate expectations, the Hong Kong communist newspaper *Wen wei po* reported in late July that consensus had been reached to confine revision of the constitution to a few areas, including incorporation of the three represents into the constitution's preamble, enhanced protection of property rights, and narrow questions of political process.⁵ In addition, according to Western media, Beijing in late August moved to prohibit broad academic discussion of political reform.

Leadership Implications

Hu and Wen's activist promotion of liberalizing themes and measures in the months since the party congress has allowed them to seize the public stage as Jiang Zemin and the retiring elders have receded from public view. In particular:

- In keeping with his positions as party leader and head of state, Hu Jintao has dominated the public limelight while Jiang's public activities have diminished—mainly being constrained to his role as chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and his occasional courtesy meetings with particularly important foreign leaders. During the SARS crisis in particular, Jiang was nearly invisible at a time when Hu and Wen were depicted touring stricken provinces and hospitals—including PLA institutions—and working actively to contain the epidemic. From late April through late July, Hu Jintao's picture appeared on the front page of *People's Daily* 32 times, while Jiang's appeared only eight. Over that period, Jiang and Hu have appeared together only four times. Three of those were CMC occasions, at which Jiang's seniority on that body placed him ahead of Hu in protocol. The fourth was the memorial service for deceased Defense Minister Zhang Aiping on July 12, a party occasion at which Hu Jintao was listed ahead of Jiang.
- The emerging campaign to study the three represents makes due acknowledgment of Jiang's role in first enunciating them in early 2000, but the three represents theme is treated not as Jiang's exclusive intellectual property and personal legacy but rather as the party's "collective wisdom" and consensus. The Central Committee circular employs the standard formulation referring to the "important thinking of the three represents"—not "Jiang Zemin's important thinking of the three represents" (in contrast to the "Thought of Mao Zedong" and "Deng Xiaoping Theory"). This formulation was first used in a *People's Daily* editorial in

May 2000, signaling a Politburo consensus behind the theme, and has been used consistently and universally in authoritative party documents and leadership speeches since then.

- The circular launching the campaign also prescribed the study of several of Jiang's speeches on the three represents, especially his 2001 party anniversary speech explicating the implications of the three represents for party recruitment. As he did with his political report to the 16th Party Congress, however, Jiang delivered his 2001 party anniversary speech "on behalf of the Central Committee," not as a recitation of his personal views. By contrast, Hu presented his long speech at the party anniversary forum on July 1, 2003, as his "understanding" of three represents themes and their importance, a posture in keeping with the spirit of collective leadership, even while the speech has been incorporated into the emerging study campaign as a key document for attention.

The public prominence given Hu and Wen in recent months may reflect merely their frontline roles as Jiang and the retiring elders have receded from public view and may tell us little about the actual constellation of power behind the public image. As time goes by, however, one gets the inescapable feeling that the public image slowly but steadily reflects the emergent realities of power. As the two younger men consolidate in their hands the authority that accrues naturally and inevitably from running the party and government day to day, longer-term trends would seem to be running in Hu and Wen's favor, and Jiang's power would seem to be slipping away.

Notes

¹ *Wen wei po*, July 18, 2003, in World News Connection (WNC), July 21, 2003, FBIS CPP-2003-0718-000062.

² *Renmin wang*, May 13, 2003, in WNC, FBIS CPP-2003-0513-000035.

³ *Renmin wang*, June 17, 2003, in WNC, FBIS CPP-2003-0617-000054.

⁴ Forums marking the founding anniversary of the party are not new—forums sponsored by various party institutions were held to mark the anniversary in 1997 and 1999, at which Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, respectively, delivered "important speeches." But, such forums have not previously been held in recent years on the day of the anniversary itself. In addition, over the past decade the editorial in *People's Daily* marking the anniversary was always published on either June 30 (1995 and 1997) or July 1 (normally). This year the editorial did not appear until July 2, the day after Hu's speech.

⁵ *Wen wei po*, July 21, 2003, in WNC, FBIS CPP-2003-0721-000055.