
The Political Consequences of Economic Liberalization

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Since the Deng era befell China, the market system has become increasingly established, especially following Deng's "Southern Trip" in 1992. Economic liberalization is proceeding rapidly, and mainland China's high rate of economic development is catching the world's attention. What are the political consequences of economic liberalization? Specifically, what does it bode for the Chinese democracy movement? I will analyze this issue from the perspectives of the Chinese dissident movement, middle class, societal structure, and role in global society.

The Chinese dissident movement exists in a non-ideological social environment. The Tiananmen Square massacre sounded the alarm of the panic-stricken, forcing the Beijing authorities to realize the strength of their opposition. Killing citizens in public, the government crossed a psychological line—no other taboos were feared. The Party authorities paid no heed to ideological losses. They reasoned that they had to maintain power at any cost; therefore, provided that they did maintain power, whether they were called "socialists" or "capitalists" was of little importance. Thus, the door opened to economic liberalization.

The Tiananmen Square massacre was a watershed in contemporary Chinese politics. In essence, it pronounced a death sentence for the ideological legality of the Chinese Communist Party. For this reason, the Party had to explore other legal bases more urgently than it had needed

to in the past. Economic growth provided the legal base of choice. Thus, the massacre became the starting point for dispelling the ideological dispute over economics.

The Tiananmen Square massacre resulted in a deemphasis of ideology. The former ideology will be meeting its death. Except for small, privileged groups within the Party, most of China has grown deeply disgusted with ideological dogma. Over the past ten years, the majority of the Chinese people have benefited from the weakening of ideology. Now, in China, there is a phenomenon of non-ideologicalization. Official dogma has been put aside; it is mocked unscrupulously by the people. Many have become involved in business, and one can discern the appearance of a consumer culture. These are all signs of non-ideology.

The whole focus of society has turned towards economics, and the people's enthusiasm for political participation has waned. These factors have made the Chinese political stage rapidly diminish in scope. It has become increasingly clear that society is splitting into different levels. To dissidents, this indicates that the opportunities for street politics have become reduced, but that the possibility for politics of the elite still remains. Political competition may unfold among the professional politicians.

Chinese economic momentum is giving rise to a middle class which will grow much faster than in any other country in history. It is shaped by private enterprise, businesses in villages and towns, cooperative ventures, foreign investment, and middle and high level bank managers working in private organizations. The middle class will certainly benefit during the process of economic expansion from conflict with the government and non-free market rule system. Political spokesmen will appear, and the dissidents are prepared to assume this role.

Economic development has altered the structure of society. Society is becoming more clearly divided. Economic development has provided new soil and space for the preservation and growth of dissident forces. The government's abilities have shrunk; political control over trades, industries, and societal organizations has been reduced. Following the increase of society's initiative and autonomy, a kind of confrontation and balance has begun to appear between the government and society—the strengthening of restrictions connecting each other among the central authority and the localities, the decentralization of benefits and power, the enlargement of the district's gap, the increase of benefits tilting toward particular areas, and the decrease in governmental interference—these are all basic facts.

Changes in both economic structure and method of organization are of great importance. In the past, the government managed and kept

watch over active and retired workers, peasants, and their family members. It oversaw economics, politics, thought, conduct, morality, cultural education, marriage, birth, death, aging, and illness. Government reached everywhere, functioning as a national machine for direct control over individuals.

Economic liberalization has changed the situation. As many scholars have pointed out, jurisdictions once controlled by the government are now spilling over, as a part of a free-flowing of resources. Peasants can now act autonomously in agriculture, and the government's monopoly of the funding and means of production has become weakened in the cities. Foreign funds are pouring in, finance is split up, enterprises keep funds for themselves, the market provides for job opportunities, self-employed laborers, and privately owned businesses. These are all part of the free-flowing of resources.

Individual freedom of action is increasing throughout society. From farming in the countryside, to the ability of peasants to go seek jobs in the city, to retail trade, publishing communities, research institutes, imperial art academies, correspondence colleges, salons, and magazines, the middle class is squeezing through cracks in the system.

The middle class is becoming increasingly self-organized, comparatively independent, and standardized; connections among people are getting tighter, making possible the establishment of a pluralistic legal society.

Since 1989, it has become clear that the majority of China's dissidents—save for exiles abroad—are silently entering those "free spaces" of relative individual freedom. The above organizations have become "protective territories" harboring dissidents from the regime. On one hand, they have safe protection; on the other, they are establishing their own economic strength. This situation is creating conditions for competitive political power in the future.

Global society has already become a protective power and driving force behind the dissident movement. The international communist movement is defeated. The remaining communist countries will withdraw from history. Already, this is a vista visible even to the blind. The international community encourages China's non-ideology in different ways. China has no foreign enemies, and no danger is presented by a

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country attempting to intervene as an ideological overlord. Most countries encourage China to abandon its dogmas; this is a propitious international environment.

Most importantly, China's economic and political situation has been essentially integrated into the international economic and political order. Mainstream international society already influences China's political and social conduct, making it conform to current international norms. Foreign countries come into contact with China, exerting pressure for China to improve its human rights situation and to tolerate dissidence. In the meantime, the Chinese economy and the internal logic of societal development forces it to reform and to establish a modern legal system. This is more advantageous than closing the door on dissidents. In fact, in private speeches about the United States, Deng has indicated that China might be willing to make concessions. For this reason, Beijing has yielded to the US in order to draw the Americans over to their side. The Beijing authorities canvass with all their effort, and send groups to America to purchase lavishly so as to display kindness. They do all they can to release political offenders. Only two things are feared: baiting the global economy by using its tremendous market, and showing a progressively gentler human face.

At root, the Beijing authorities have not changed their behavior regarding human rights issues, but, all in all, the international environment discussed above has led the authorities to act more scrupulously when suppressing people; they can no longer act in an unbridled manner, as they did during the Maoist era. In the meantime, the government must discuss issues of Chinese human rights with the international community. This undoubtedly functions to protect China's dissident movement.

China's present wave of economic liberalization has had a profound influence on the Chinese dissident movement. Large-scale street resistance is ultimately transforming into legal competition among the political elite, albeit on a small scale. This may give birth to the rule of modern political competition. Gradually, change of this kind will assist China's progress. (W A)