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Abstract: Contentious politics have led to regime downfall or democratization of many countries. Today, China is faced with increasing numbers of contentions politics. However, Contentious politics in China does not result in regime change because the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) manages protests by keeping it fragmented and small in scale. It achieves this primarily through structural and institutional means, but is willing, to resort to violent repression if a protest movement becomes too widespread. This paper is divided into four parts. First part is a backgrounder, giving stats to show that protests are frequent but small in scale. Second, I will argue that China's weak institutions – labour union, media, and internet – preclude small-scale protests from becoming large, cohesive movements. Third, I will argue that the government in China is structured in such a way that grievances are pursued at the local level; therefore, regional protests are unlikely to become national movements. Finally, even if protest become large and target the central government, the CCP is capable of suppressing protests using military, and police, as a last resort.

Introduction

Throughout history, contentious politics have led to regime downfall or democratization of many countries. In the early 1900s, devastations of WWI caused many protests that targeted the government. Eventually, popular demonstrations led to the regime collapse, and it created Fascists States – Germany and Italy – and the Communist Soviet. In a more recent event, protests led many authoritarian regimes to democratize during the Arab Spring of 2011.

Contentious politics bring political change because concerted resistance can force a government to change (Friedman and Taylor 2012). However, Chinese government shows this is not always the case. Although the number of contentious politics has been steadily increasing in China, the government preserves its status quo by keeping protests small. Researchers suggest that even though the absolute number of protests has been increasing, the proportion of cases with 100 or more participants has been declining (Cai 2010). In 1993, 16.1% out of 8,700 protests had 100 or more participants; however, in 2003, 12% out of 58,500 protests had more than 100 participants (Cai 2010). In addition, only 5% of petitions from industrial sectors in 1999 had more than 100 participants and none of it had more than 500 people (Cai 2010).

Unlike the democratic movements that transformed many states of Europe and the Middle East, contentious politics in China does not force its government to change. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controls institutions to keep protests independent from each other, the central government dodges protestor's rage by

blaming the provincial government, and the CCP uses physical force to suppress movements if necessary. These points will be elaborated on using three subsequent parts. In the first part, I will argue that China's weak institutions – labour union, media, and internet – preclude small-scale protests from becoming large, cohesive movements. Second, I will argue that the government in China is structured in such a way that grievances are pursued at the local level; therefore, regional protests are unlikely to become national movements. Finally, even if protests become large and target the central government, the CCP is capable of suppressing protests using military and police as a last resort.

Weak Institutions that Represent Protestors

China's small-scaled protests can be explained by weak institutions – labour union, media, and internet – that otherwise might turn small, regional movements into national ones. The Chinese labour union has not been successfully leading large-scale workers' protests because they are largely controlled by the government. China's sole labour union, All-China Federations of Trade Unions (ACFTU) represents 280 million workers, but its leadership appointment is based on his/her connection with the party rather than his/her relationship with labourers. Consequently, unlike other countries – the U.S, Canada, and the Western Europe –, who elect its union leaders from pool of working class, the ACFTU leaders have been appointed from bureaucrats. For example, Wang Zhaoguo who served as the ACFTU Chair in 2002, had a career in Taiwan Affairs Department for seven years (Friedman 2014). Li Jianguo, who was

the Chair between 2013 to 2018, served ten years as a provincial party secretary of Shaanxi before coming to the office ("Li Jianguo" n.d.). The current leader of the ACFTU, Wang Dongming, was the party secretary of Sichuan province between 2012 and 2018. ("Wang Dongming" n.d). More importantly, these leaders jointly held the ACFTU Chair position while serving as the Vice-Chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC). Due to union leaders' bureaucratic background, lack of experiences with labourers, and political interest, the labour union ensures that protests are isolated from the society and do not pose a threat to the regime.

Moreover, the media is unwilling to spread information, which restrains protests to become larger in scale. According to Esarey (2005:54), the Chinese media is described as the "party's mouthpiece as well as an industry." The party retained firm control over media industries through appointments of top-level managers. The Propaganda Department and the CCP Organization Department have been appointing top-level managers whose career prospects were based on the loyalty to the party. Although managers needed to produce media contents that are attractive to consumers, they had to censor politically sensitive topics (Esarey 2005). For example, Xinhua and many other state media did not cover large protests in Wukan village until a couple of months later, when they started to praise how the provisional government handled the incident effectively ("China's State-Run Newspapers Praise Government Handling of Wukan Protest" 2011). Knowing the media-state connections, citizens are reluctant to approach media for criticizing

the state. According to a survey conducted by Cai (2008:97), "only less than 5% of citizens chose to approach media when they had conflicts with state authorities." Therefore, media is used as a tool by the government to control the flow of information and is viewed as untrustworthy by the public. This censored media makes protests regional, isolated, and small in scale.

Furthermore, the CCP is capable of controlling the internet that could disseminate information widely and precipitate regional protests. Therefore, the CCP has been maintaining stringent control over the internet, which is sometimes called as the Great Firewall of China (Barne and Ye 1997). Li Yonggang, a Chinese scholar, compares hydroelectric water-management system to China's internet control that includes censorship, surveillance, and manipulation of information (Mackinnon 2011). For example, the central government ordered China's largest websites, Sina.com and Baidu, to censor information by deleting, blocking, or banning certain topics or keywords (Mackinnon 2011). During the Chinese pro-democracy protests in 2011, also known as the Jasmin Revolution, the central government ordered to block the word "jasmin" and prevented further spread of information that could facilitate larger movements (Jacobs and Ansfield 2011). Moreover, during the Xinjiang ethnic riots in July 2009, the CCP cut off the internet in the entire province for six months to prevent protests from becoming widespread (Mackinnon 2011).

State-Local Separation of Responsibility

The CCP legitimizes its leadership through state-local separation of responsibility. Most protestors target local governments instead of the central government because of this split in their duties. Due to decentralization of power and cadre evaluation system, local governments are primarily responsible for handling disputes. Meanwhile, the central government moderates conflicts between local officials and protestors with the petition and the court system. This directs dissident's anger toward local governments while the central government arbitrates disputes to gain favour over distressed citizens.

Since the early 1990s, China's institutional decentralization started to put much more responsibility on local governments in handling daily issues, which directly put them in conflict with local citizens. Especially after the fiscal decentralization, local governments started to take a primary role in expanding their budget, but many ended up having major disputes with citizens. For local governments, land expropriation has been the fastest way to generate revenue because governments can stimulate the local economy with real estate developments. Chinese constitutions make land expropriation much easier for local officials because village cadres have the deciding vote regarding land use within a village (Cai 2010). However, these processes often result in creating direct conflict between local governments and its citizens. For example, in Shantou city in Guangdong province, large numbers of peasants attacked homes of village cadres in more than ten villages because

demonstrators were suspicious of cadre's corruption in land sales (Cai 2010).

In addition, demonstrators target local officials because local governments are primarily responsible for resolving disputes under the cadre evaluation system. The CCP established three performance targets for the political promotion: the veto targets, which prioritize social stability; hard targets, which focus on economic growth; and soft targets, which include long term issues such as health care and education (Ong and Gobel 2014). Even an outstanding performance that meets hard targets and soft targets can be discredited if local officials fail to meet the veto target that is largely concerned with protests. Therefore, local cadres prioritize dealing with protestors, which include concessions and repression. Their strategies vary depending on forcefulness of action (scale of resistance) and cost of concession (financially). Yongshun Cai (2010) argues that when there is a forceful resistance group that demands a low financial cost, most local governments make financial concessions; however, when there is a weak resistance group that demands a high financial cost, most local governments use the physical force to repress. In cases where a weak resistance group that demands for a low concession, usually local governments does not respond (Cai 2010). In all of these cases, local governments are the primary contacts in resolving disputes. As a result, protestors target local governments for the grievances that governments created while demanding for the compensation.

In the midst of disputes between local cadres and citizens, central government legitimizes its leadership by opening up

alternative channels – the petition and the court system – for citizens to appeal their demands. Petitioning the central government has been recognized as a constitutional right since the late 1970s in China (Li, Liu, and O'Brien 2012). After Hu Jintao announced improvement of the petition system to accommodate more citizens, the number of petitioners increased dramatically between 2003 to 2007 (Li et al. 2012). During this period, the petition office handled 10 million cases annually ("Complaint Bureau busiest office in Beijing" 2007). The effectiveness of the petition system in resolving disputes still remain minimal because the central petition office sends most cases back to the local level. However, the petition system has been successful in legitimizing the central government by appearing to take the initiative to resolve citizens' concerns. Furthermore, the CCP recently made improvements in the court system in order to legitimize its leadership. The legal system has been more effective in resolving disputes than petitioning. According to the China General Social Survey, 27% of total disputes were channeled through legal actions in 2005 (Cai 2010). Many cases, such as mediation and arbitration of labour, have been resolved through the court system (Cai 2010). There are still limitations to the court system because the court is not independent from the CCP and therefore hard to criminally punish party officials. However, the court system is increasingly becoming more effective in resolving civil litigations (Cai 2010).

Consequently, data shows that most Chinese citizens favour the central government much more than local governments. According to the World Values Survey China in 2012, the satisfaction

scored for the central government was 76 out of 100, while village level governments were at 54 (Tang 2016). Furthermore, in terms of level of trust, central government officials scored 83 points while village level officials and county officials scored 54 and 60 respectively (Tang 2016). Both results show that citizens favour the central government and its officials far better than local government and its associates. Other research that measures the government dissatisfaction after imposing unpopular policy provides a similar result. When the policy dissatisfaction increases from minimum (0) to maximum (1), the dissatisfaction with village level governments increases by 51.7%, county/city level governments by 48.5% but it is much smaller in the central government by 29.1% (Tang 2016). It shows that dissatisfaction with policies affect the credibility of local governments much more than the central government. Due to the split in the state and local responsibilities, protestors target local governments instead of the central government, thereby protecting the legitimacy of the state.

State's Capacity

Overall, China's weak institutions and its localized governing structures prevent small, regional protests from becoming large national ones. When these mechanisms fail, however, and national protest movements arise, the government uses force as a last resort. The state is capable of suppressing large scaled demonstrations using military and police. In the early years of the CCP, the party used the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to suppress movements that could pose a threat to the regime's stability. After winning the civil

war against the Kuomintang, who fled to Taiwan after the defeat, the PLA's primary goal shifted to restoring order in the newly created People's Republic of China. In 1959, massive demonstrations occurred in Lhasa, Tibet that demanded Tibetan autonomy, and this has posed a significant threat to the CCP. Tibetan Uprising was ethnic in nature with the goals of protecting Tibet's culture and religion (Norbu 2001). The movement had a strong leader, Dalai Lama, and the protest was large-scaled with more than 300,000 participants (Norbu 2001). The CCP ordered over 30,000 PLA troops to enter Tibet and suppressed demonstrators by killing 87,000 Tibetans (Norbu 2001). Similarly, in 1989, Tiananmen protest in Beijing posed a significant threat to the regime's stability. The protest was large with nearly a million Beijing residents (Zhao 2001). It criticized the dictatorial regime while demanding for a democracy, and demonstrators were from various sectors of the society ranging from police officers, lower party officials, youth league, working-class, and professionals (Zhao 2001). The protest again was suppressed by the PLA after the CCP declared Martial Law. Nearly 300,000 troops began severe suppression of demonstrators, which resulted in thousands of casualties (Thomas 2006). For the CCP, the PLA saved the regime from collapsing during these massive protests. It was possible because the first-generation leader, Mao Zedong, and the second-generation leader, Deng Xiaoping, had stringent control over the military while on their duty as the General Secretary (Kiselycznyk and Saunders 2010).

Since the early 1990s, the People's Armed Police (PAP) replaced the role of the PLA in controlling mass demonstrations. The Tiananmen incident marked the turning point for the PAP when the CCP started to acknowledge the necessity for the strong public security force that could focus on social instability. Consequently, between 1989 to 1992, the PAP budget expanded by 45% from 1.1 billion USD to 1.6 billion USD (Sun and Wu 2008). Within ten years after the Tiananmen incident, the PAP developed into a nation-wide armed force with more than 1.1 million members (Sun and Wu 2008). Meanwhile, the CCP maintained strict control over the PAP through an institutional structure of the CCP that authorizes the State Council and the Central Military Commission to directly oversee PAP's operations (Sun and Wu 2008). When there were large scaled demonstrations that local governments could not handle, the central government ordered the PAP to effectively suppress such movements. For example, when 100,000 protestors were mobilized against the Sichuan Dam project in 2004, 10,000 PAP troops were deployed and put an end to the movement (Haggart 2004). Similarly, during the 2011 pro-democracy protests, upsurge of cross-regional demonstrations between twelve to thirteen cities were stopped by 180,000 PAP troops and 560,000 security volunteers ("China arrests more activists for urging protests" 2011).

Conclusion

Contentious politics, in and of themselves, do not necessarily threaten the stability of an authoritarian regime, so long as they are kept fragmented and small. Furthermore, even large scaled

demonstrations do not naturally mean the collapse of regime, as long as the state is capable of controlling the military and public security forces to suppress such movements. The CCP has been effectively controlling the labour union, media, and internet to prevent the spread of protests, and kept them isolated from the general public. Although there were few incidents that mass demonstrations became widespread, the CCP was capable of using the PLA and the PAP to suppress such movements. Despite the significant control over the society, most Chinese view the CCP as positive. It is largely because of the split in responsibility between the state and local government where local officials take primary role in creating and resolving disputes. Consequently, most protests target local governments while the central government dodge criticisms by presenting itself as a neutral arbitrator. Therefore, despite the rising numbers of contentious politics, China still remains as one of the most durable authoritarian regimes today.

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