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Tiananmen at 30: Examining the Evolution of Repression in China

Members of Congress and staff, thank you very much for organizing this important hearing. It is an honor to be here.

The late 1970s and 1980s saw Chinese leaders such as Deng Xiaoping steer China out of the economic stagnation, ideological isolation, and political chaos of the Maoist era and into the reform era.

Ideologically and economically, China opened up. In Deng's famous words, "It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat." Within the Chinese state and schools, that pragmatic attitude gave many citizens and officials latitude to import concepts and practices from abroad. The ideological fervor of the Mao era faded. Authorities backed out of people's daily lives. Religion came back. Churches, mosques, and temples reopened. And market reforms gave citizens control over both their croplands and careers, helping fuel a decades-long boom.

Politically, China began to stabilize. The 1980s saw Chinese leaders support the emergence of a range of partially institutionalized political norms in large part to address the chaos and instability they had personally experienced under Mao. These included:

- Collective leadership, rather than single-man rule, as with the case under Mao.
- Development of internal norms regarding the regular promotion, retirement, and succession of top Communist Party leaders.
- Partial depoliticization of the bureaucracy, with Party authorities retreating from an effort to manage the day-to-day affairs of state and turning that responsibility over to technocrats within the bureaucracy.
- Emergence of bottom-up input institutions – such as village elections - giving citizens a limited degree of voice into the political process and contributing to state legitimacy.

Then came 1989. China's leaders were put to the test. Do you allow the forces that you yourselves unleashed begin to fundamentally reshape your political system? Or do you revert to Leninist one-Party controls. They chose the latter. On the streets, repression. So too within the Party. Reformers were cashiered; ideological controls reasserted. And the principle that one-Party rule should never - ever - be called into question was reasserted loud and clear in internal political study sessions.

China's reform era did not end in 1989. In the 1990s and early 2000s, economic reform and social change continued to produce a host of private actors – such as commercial media (and later internet) outlets airing citizen grievances - that Beijing struggled to control. And many within the Party's own bureaucracy continued to experiment with governance reforms, such as administrative law reforms aimed at addressing corruption and abuse of power by local officials. Back in the early 2000s, one could imagine a world in which—even if real democratic reform

was totally off the table—such innovations might allow the hard edges of China’s political system to eventually be slowly sanded smooth.

That did not happen. As each of those reforms was instituted, citizens rushed to use them. First to criticize local officials, and then to make deeper political claims. And at each point - whether village elections in the late 1990s, legal reforms around 2003, or a flourishing online discussion around 2010, Party leaders saw shades of 1989 and moved to pull the rug out from under their own reforms, or reassert their grip over fields (such as the internet and social media) where they felt their controls had slipped.

In Beijing, Party officials like to think of their response in 1989 and subsequent years as a successful antidote – saving China from the fate of the Soviet Union. But in reality, it has actually been a destructive virus. Beijing’s reflexive desire to reassert Party control has mutated and is now spreading through the veins of China’s political system – steadily undermining and destroying the potential that had been introduced in the early reform era.

Economically, Beijing’s push for control has led to a turn away from the market-oriented policies of the early reform era. Since the early 2000s, there has been a recommitment to industrial policy, a resurgence of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and designated national champions. And the resulting policies – such as a massive increase in the share of bank lending going to SOEs – are slowly asphyxiating China’s private sector.

Ideologically, what limited space had opened up in China’s reform era is steadily contracting. In field after field – whether media, law, or in civil society - controls have been ramped up to the tightest in decades. An ideological straightjacket is descending on university campuses, targeting both liberal professors espousing concepts of democracy and wildcat Marxist student groups promoting solidarity with the working class. Repression has also heightened with respect to religion. Draconian new controls have descended upon beliefs viewed as “foreign” – particularly in China’s western region of Xinjiang, where some 10% of the Muslim Uighur population has been thrown (since 2017) into an extensive network of political re-education camps aimed at suppressing and remolding their ethnic and religious identity.

And politically, the reform-era norms that the Party itself adopted have steadily broken one by one. Since Xi Jinping’s accession to power in 2012, power has re-concentrated in the hands of a single leader. Elite retirement and succession norms were toppled in the wake of the 2017 19th Party Congress, and China is swinging back towards an increasingly personalized single-man authoritarian rule, potentially for decades to come. Technocrats are being sidelined as Beijing reasserts the need for absolute Party leadership through state and society alike. And what limited space had once opened up in China’s halls of power for honest discussion among officials themselves over the very real challenges facing China – such as how to address mounting debt, trade conflicts, or rising social tensions – is being choked off as a stifling blanket of silence and inertia generated by the fear falling on the wrong side of a rapidly changing political line descends over China’s bureaucracy.

Naturally, all of this poses deep risks for China. Chinese leaders themselves launched China into the reform era as a response to the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and the excesses

of the Maoist era. But today, you can see many of those practices beginning to push themselves – zombie-like – back to the surface again as the reform era steadily unwinds.

And that is yet another tragedy of Tiananmen. Not only did hundreds or thousands die in the evening of June 3-4. Not only did 1989 close the door on a route for China's political system to gradually evolve into something better. But the decision that Party leaders took that year continues to reverberate and amplify until today, dragging the country backwards out of the reform era, and steadily increasing the risk that China will relive some of the worst periods of its own history.

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