

What Impact Does the Recent Political Turmoil in China Have on Us?

An analysis of how the Communist Party's "Maintaining Stability" system undermines stability in China and what we can learn from it

By Yiyang Xia, Senior Director of Policy and Research at the Human Rights Law Foundation

China's thirty years of economic development are now at a crossroads. The country's communist rulers are finding that they have lost their direction. Thirty years ago, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) introduced economic reforms, but they stopped short of truly creating a free market in China and refused to institute serious political change. Now, this path of reform has hit a wall. Specifically, there are two major problems: an ideological vacuum and growing social turmoil. In the interests of time, I will focus my remarks on the second of these problems.

In recent years, social turmoil has worsened amidst growing economic inequality, political repression, and rampant corruption. The CCP's response has been an approach termed "Maintaining Stability". I will present how this concept was developed, how it has been implemented, and why it has paradoxically become the most serious threat to stability in China.

The Leadership Team for "Maintaining Stability"

The concept of Maintaining Stability was first introduced in the 1990s. However, since it was not a priority for CCP leaders at the time, there was no formal structure to implement it and it received little attention from observers either at home or abroad. This changed in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics in August 2008. Early that year, amidst rising social unrest and fears that signs of turbulence would surface while the country was in the international spotlight, the CCP's rulers felt it necessary to setup a leadership team to prevent such an occurrence. Since the 1950s, the CCP has used such leadership teams to coordinate action on various issues. They are typically secretive, arbitrarily created and dissolved, and headed by members of the Politburo Standing Committee.

The newly established team was called the CCP Central Committee's "Leadership Team for Maintaining Stability." Zhou Yongkang, the party's security Tzar, was appointed to head it. As is typical for such teams, an office under the leadership group was setup to handle daily tasks. It was called the "Office for Maintaining Stability". Liu Jing, then Vice Minister of Public Security, was appointed to direct it. The new leadership team and office's immediate task was to "Maintain Stability" before and during the Olympics. But in practice, its life has extended far beyond the 2008 Olympic games, a mission referred to as "Normalization of Olympic Security." It means that even after the Olympics, the security measures used during Olympics would become the routine practice.

Since the mandate of the Maintaining Stability apparatus mostly involved security issues, it was placed under the broader existing system of the Political and Legal Affairs Committee (PLAC) of the CCP's Central Committee, the party branch charged with

overseeing internal security, the judiciary, and law enforcement agencies that is also headed by Zhou Yongkang. In fact, since 2008, Maintaining Stability has become a major focus of the PLAC's work.

The Maintaining Stability system operates with its own logic and incentives that differ from other parts of the Chinese governance apparatus. In most areas of CCP and government work, if the stated goals are not achieved, the relevant leaders are held accountable. For example, if GDP growth is lower than expected, or if local petitioners go to Beijing to appeal, the corresponding officials will usually lose their chance at promotion, or may even be demoted.

But these incentives are distorted in the Maintaining Stability system. In a strange twist, the offices and personnel tasked with Maintaining Stability benefit bureaucratically from unstable social conditions. Whenever or wherever social unrest or a so-called "mass incident" happens, the related Maintaining Stability departments and officials are able to ask for more funding, more personnel, and more power. Given the importance of stability to the party, they usually get what they want.

This is where the problem lies. The influence of the apparatus tasked with maintaining stability within the CCP's power structure actually increases when there is more instability, not less. The more unstable society becomes, the more power it and the individuals involved gain. There is no incentive to fundamentally resolve problems—like by addressing petitioners' concerns rather than repressing their attempt to seek justice. This helps explain why, over the past several years, the authorities have tended to respond with excessive force to social conflicts or citizens' attempts to pursue accountability. This has, in turn, often worsened the underlying tensions rather than resolved them.

One example of this paradox is how the number of "mass incidents" (a vaguely defined term that refers to any anti-government protests of more than a handful of people) has actually increased since the creation of the Maintaining Stability Leadership Team. According to official figures, about 80,000 mass incidents occurred in 2007, 120,000 in 2008, at least 180,000 in 2010. Also during this period, Zhou Yongkang became the most powerful member of CCP's Politburo Standing Committee in terms of the size of the apparatus he oversees, even though in 2007, when he joined the committee, he was ranked last out of the nine. By 2012, the Maintaining Stability budget exceeded military spending for the second year in a row.

A Case Study: Chen Guangcheng

The case of blind, self-taught lawyer Chen Guangcheng is a typical example of these dynamics. When Chen had a conflict with the local authorities for helping women who had been victims of forced abortion and sterilization, they put him in jail. This is a routine way for local party and government officials to handle so-called "troublemakers." What was unique in Chen's case is that while he was in jail, the local officials converted his home into a prison and fortified security around the whole village to prevent visits to his

wife by fellow activists, foreign journalists, or diplomats. Chen was released from prison in 2010 and immediately transferred to another prison—his own home.

All of these actions by the local officials are illegal under Chinese law. Then, why have they been able to get away with it, even amidst so much condemnation and attention from within China and abroad? It is because they have been acting under the banner of Maintaining Stability. As long as this is the stated goal, officials can practically do whatever they want without any due process. Moreover, they will obtain additional human and financial resources to do it. There are between 50 and 100 personnel that have been monitoring Chen and his family. In 2008, the cost of his house arrest was 30 million yuan (about 4.8 million Canadian Dollars), and by 2012, this had more than doubled. It's a big business, with lots of profit to be made. Everyone involved wants to maintain or even expand this business, from a local hoodlum to high-ranking security officials in Beijing. They will do anything to keep the business going. We have now heard from Chen's elder brother and Western journalists that although Chen has left for the United States, the security in his hometown is even tighter than before.

It's a vicious feedback loop that nourishes itself. Left on its own, it will pull the party and the whole nation down. For those of us outside China, it's important that we understand who we are dealing with and the Maintaining Stability system is critical to understanding how the Communist Party rules China. In the *Art of War*, Sun Tzu wrote, "Know yourself and know your opponents. You will win one hundred battles without losing a single one."

When representatives of the U.S. government were initially discussing Chen's situation with their Chinese counterparts, they were aware of the political weakness of China's formal representative, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, according to Jerome Cohen of New York University, who assisted the negotiations as a consultant to Chen. But, when they were looking for someone in the system who is strong and has the authority to make a tough decision, they made a mistake. They turned to the secret police, which is directly under the command of the PLAC and its head Zhou Yongkang. Since Zhou and his security forces are the reason for Chen's tragic situation in the first place, they clearly have conflicting interests when it comes to this case and should thus be avoided in the related negotiations.

Soon after Chen left the U.S. Embassy, he changed his mind and asked to leave China, whereas before he said he wanted to stay. This was not so much because he received phone calls from friends encouraging him to leave, but rather because he and his family were threatened by the security forces, both at home and in Beijing. The only explanation for these threats is that the security apparatus didn't want Chen to stay in China and to continue exposing their crimes. Since they had also been involved in the negotiations, they knew the details and weaknesses of the deal, and were able to strike as soon as they had the chance. That put the U.S. State Department and the Obama Administration under enormous pressure. If the latter had been clearer from the beginning that this power center was the fundamental cause of the problem, they could have avoided the awkward turn of events.

These and other developments in China related to the PLAC in the past three months are no accident. When the PLAC was established in the early 1980s, initially, it wasn't any more powerful than other departments of the CCP's Central Committee. It gained its power through the persecution of the Falun Gong spiritual group that began in July 1999 and continues to this day. By persecuting Falun Gong—a group comprising tens of millions of people from every province, age, and profession—the PLAC accumulated the power and experience for carrying out large-scale surveillance and suppression. Now they are using the same mechanism against a wider target—the broad array of Chinese people with complaints against the party or government. This fact is evident by simply looking at the people involved in both campaigns. The Leadership Team for Handling the Falun Gong Issue is headed by the same person who leads the Leadership Team for Maintaining Stability—Zhou Yongkang. The corresponding office, the Maintaining Stability office, when just formed, was headed by Liu Jing, the same person who headed the 610 Office (tasked with daily coordination of the anti-Falun Gong campaign) until 2009. For this reason, some observers have confused the two offices, thinking they had merged and the 610 Office had changed its name. In fact, they remain distinct, but much of their work and personnel overlap. The difference is that the 610 Office still focuses largely on Falun Gong, while the Maintaining Stability apparatus targets the wider population.

The political turmoil is only the tip of the iceberg. The Maintaining Stability policy is based on the fact that China economic development is at the cost of human rights, the environment and natural resources. Any model, Chongqing model or China model, won't last long if it's based on that. Trying not to bend our value and principles is our best interest.