Why is the Chinese Government Hyper-Responsive to Public Opinion?

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Few people in the democratic world expect the authoritarian government in China to respond to public opinion. Chinese leaders do not have to go through competitive elections; they frequently rely on repression to keep political dissidents at bay; and they manufacture public opinion through media control and censorship.

Yet the Chinese government is one of the most paranoid in the world when it comes to public opinion. The government-controlled Xinhua News Agency plays a major role in collecting public opinion through their national network of correspondents that in turn serves policy making. Chinese media organizations employ full time staff to monitor public opinion on the internet. They write reports for higher level government organizations in order to help them understand the public mood in anticipation of new policies and their implementation. Local governments are required by Beijing to set up websites where they can collect and respond to public requests.

Consequently, Chinese opinion surveys consistently show that more than 70 percent of survey respondents agree that their government is responsive to public opinion. In contrast, in the same surveys, only a little over 30 percent in democratic Taiwan feel the same way.

For some people, the easiest explanation is that Chinese people, living in a highly controlled society, do not really have their own opinion and they think that whatever the government says is representative of their opinion. For others, Chinese people are simply too scared to be critical of their government. But this view does not take into account the tens of thousands of mass protests and petitions taking place every year in China, many of which are covered at length in the Western media. For examples, recent high-profile incidents — such as the mining plant dispute in Shifang in 2012, the waste water processing plant dispute in Qidong in 2012, the land dispute in Wukan in 2011, and protests against a chef's death in Shishou in 2009 and a young girl's drowning in Wengan in 2008 — have been reported by the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. These political actions suggest that in fact the Chinese people do know what they want and are not afraid of asking for it.

In their study of protests with 500 or more participants from 2003 to 2010, the US-based scholars Yanqi Tong and Shaohua Lei show that the Chinese government tolerated or made concessions in more than 90 percent of these protest cases (Tong and Lei, 2013). In the cases of the chef who fell to his death from a hotel building in Shishou and the 17-year-old girl who drowned in Wengan, both the families and local residents refused to accept the medical examiners' reports because they did not find evidence of murder. As a result, the families and local citizens organized large protests. The higher-level governments responded by appeasing the very public they feared, and so intervened by compensating the families, regardless of the medical examiners' findings. In the protest against the waste water processing plant in Qidong, the protesters stripped the mayor and the party secretary, and forced them to put on environmental protection T-shirts. Both officials were later fired by the higher-level government. In Jinan in 2014, a female police officer triggered another mass protest when she got into a row with some street vendors. Demonstrators dragged her out of a police car, poured water on her and made her kneel and apologize. As a result, she lost her job. In all of these cases, the state responded quickly to meet the demands of the protesters.

So, what makes the authoritarian government respond to public opinion? The answer lies partially in the very fact that China does not have competitive elections. In a democracy, legitimacy is derived from following the institutional procedure of elections. The winner sowe their victories to the people who voted for them. Their jobs are relatively secure until the next election. As a result, democratic leaders are more likely to respond to their own voters but less to those who didn't vote for them, and they don't have to respond as quickly and frequently between elections as during elections.

In China, the authoritarian government also claims that it represents the interests of the majority. Yet without competitive elections which serve as a simple but effective yardstick, the authoritarian government has no way of showing its legitimacy. It gets nervous about its image even if there are only a few protestors on the streets. While they do not hesitate to arrest the most threatening ones, Chinese officials spend a lot of time and energy in collecting and responding to public demands. Perhaps this is why people in authoritarian China feel that their government is more responsive than people in democratic Taiwan.

The deeper root of the Chinese government's hyper-responsiveness can be found in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s political culture, which I call populist authoritarianism (Tang, 2016). Based on the ideological tradition of the Mass Line, the CCP often relies on large scale public campaigns (e.g., about anti-corruption) to mobilize mass political participation. The unintended consequence of such political mobilization is that it encourages public political activism and mass protests. In response, the central government often tries to redirect public anger towards local governments and their officials. For example, the central government in Beijing and its agencies will directly intervene in local affairsby bypassing institutional channels, dismissing problematic local officials, and compensating the protestors. Consequently, the public believes that the central government is highly responsive.

In this populist authoritarian political culture, the Chinese government enjoys strong public political support, as repeatedly shown in many surveys conducted by independent scholars and academic organizations, such as the World Values Surveys and the Pew Research Center Surveys. In fact, such political support exists even if media censorship, economic growth, “Asian values,” and political sensitivity are taken into consideration. In the Internet age, media censorship can find it difficult to prevent people from voicing their criticism. Economic growth may not be the only reason for government support, as witnessed by weak political trust in other fast-growing economies such as India, Brazil, and Mongolia. The“Asian values” theory, which attributes strong political support to political obedience, is obviously in contrast to the political activism and the large number of protests in China that is not only where Confucian social hierarchy originated, but also a revolutionary society of mass political mobilization. Finally, political sensitivity may prevent a small percentage of survey respondents from voicing dissatisfaction with the government, but political support in China is still among the strongest in the world even when the 8-10 percent of the survey respondents who would hide their distrust of the Chinesegovernment are excluded.

So far, this system of populist authoritarianism is working. Yet such a system with a high level of mass participation, high government responsiveness, and strong public political support is inherently vulnerable. Without institutional outlets such as elections or the rule of law, public opinion can only interact directly with the stateand sometimes it can fluctuate violently and cause system-wide political earthquakes, particularly during periods of elite conflict or drastic changes in the economic environment.

References

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