100 years with China’s Communist Party - where did it take China's political order? (Policy Brief)

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This policy brief seeks to explain the kind of political system that the CPC has built in China. What is the meaning of the Chinese Constitution’s definition of the Chinese political order as a “people’s democratic dictatorship? How does the Party secure its legitimacy to remain in power?
100 years with China’s Communist Party – where did it take China’s political order?

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In this ThinkChina Policy Brief, professor emeritus Jørgen Delman looks at the Communist Party of China (CPC) that celebrated its 100th anniversary on July 1st, 2021, and has been ruling the People’s Republic of China for more than 70 years. The CPC has modernized China and brought economic and social progress at a speed hardly ever seen in the world before. Under CPC rule China has become a major power and now speaks up against and demands respect from the US.

The policy brief seeks to explain the kind of political system that the CPC has built in China to foster this major change. How does the Party secure its legitimacy to survive as the keeper of the world’s best functioning one-party rule? Will the CPC be able to rule for another hundred years?

Key takeaways:

- The CPC has established itself at the apex of a hegemonic one-party system and created an intricate power pyramid to sustain its power. The Party now sees itself as the only and true representative of the people, and not only of the working class.

- The CPC does not have an electoral constituency to relate and be responsible to. Being the undisputed party in power, the CPC recruits members, political employees, and public leaders itself. Therefore, historically, policy processes have been driven by bureaucratic politics, primarily by individual bureaucracies that have pursued their own interests, often in competition with each other.

- Xi Jinping has largely managed to rectify the CPC and re-create it into what he thinks it should be like. The Party organization is more streamlined than ever before, there has been a perfection of CPC power and the public administration, which means that the Party-state is more prepared to exercise its power in unison than ever before.

Keywords: China, Communist Party of China, China’s Political System, Nomenclature, Xi Jinping.
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Introduction

The Communist Party of China (CPC) had a lot to be proud of on its 100th anniversary on 1 July 2021. The CPC kicked out the foreign powers from Chinese territory and ended 100 years of national humiliation in the late 1940es. The Communists won the civil war against the Nationalists (Guomindang) in 1949. The CPC has now been holding the power over China as a sovereign country for more than 70 years and kept the Party and the country together despite enormous political challenges and mistakes, severe internal rifts, and threatening social protest movements along the road. The CPC has delivered peace and stability on the Chinese territory and expanded it by acquiring Hong Kong and Macao back, and the Party has modernized China and brought economic and social progress at a speed hardly ever seen in the world before. China has become a major power and now speaks up against and demands respect from the US. What kind of political system has the CPC built in China to bring about all of this? How does the Party secure its legitimacy to survive as the keeper of the world’s best functioning one-party rule? Is there a hundred years more in the bag?

China’s political order

The Chinese Constitution defines the Chinese political order as a “people’s democratic dictatorship”. This concept may seem self-contradictory, and it is not explained well in the Constitution. Also, there have been few attempts to explain it in the theoretical literature within and outside China. The original definition is found in a 1949-article by Mao Zedong, the founding leader of the People’s Republic of China and one of the founders of the CPC. The article’s bottom line was that the people’s democratic dictatorship combines a democratic order for the people with dictatorship over the enemies within. The working class would lead the political order, because it is the most enlightened and strategically thinking class in society. The CPC represents the working class, according to Mao, as the leader of the revolution, and it possesses a right to political power because the Party liberated China and laid the foundation for a socialist revolution.

With reference to China’s dynastic history it would seem pertinent to argue that, in 1949, the CPC Party-state – like earlier dynasties – acquired the right to manage the heavenly mandate because the Party spearheaded a successful national and social revolution.

The power of the CPC

The Chinese Constitution defines China as a unitary and not a federalist state. All provinces are under the authority of the ‘Center’ (中央), i.e. the combined authority of Party and state and organized in the same way as the central party-state bureaucracy (Fig. 1). The Central authorities delegate a high degree of authority to local governments at lower levels, with the provinces as the pivot. The local authorities then implement central and their own
Figure 1: China’s Political System

On the one hand, China’s political system is constructed by vertical organizations (tiao 条 = [vertical] line, or: column, e.g. Ministry of Finance or Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs) which stretch through the administrative levels (kuai 块 = [vertical] piece), and on the other hand governments at the different administrative kuai-levels cut across the columns. The system is called the tiaotiaokuaikuai (条条块块) system in Chinese. It is hierarchically constructed under the top leadership and the central authorities (‘center’) at the apex. The system is evidently vertically and horizontally fragmented and this fragmentation creates competition and power struggles between bureaucratic interests in the system, even between Party and state. With time, the system has developed mechanisms that helps it stick together, e.g. the use of contracts (see text) which helps ensure that local leaders stick to the current political line of the CPC and implements national policies and meets specific goals and targets, while also being attentive to local needs.

The CPC has established itself at the apex of a hegemonic one-party system and created an intricate power pyramid to sustain its power. The Party now sees itself as the only and true representative of the people, and not only of the working class. When Xi Jinping became the ultimate leader of the Party in 2012, he repeated Deng Xiaoping’s dictum in his inaugural statement: “The Party must handle the Party” (党要管党), he said. His idea was that the power of the CPC is beyond dispute. In his version of the CPC, the Party can handle its own problems and it does not have to tolerate external criticism. Critics quickly face the wrath of the Party’s dictatorship. While dissidents and political opponents are not put to death any more (possibly with some exceptions), they are quickly suppressed or put to jail as enemies of the people.

To maintain its indisputable power, the Party is beyond the law. In Party speech, the Party
protects the law, but the law does not protect anybody against the Party. There is no law governing the existence, organization, and administration of the CPC. The ‘laws’ of the CPC, like its Party Statute, are formulated by the Party itself and it has its own internal police and its own prosecuting body, which handles Party-internal disciplinary as well potential criminal cases involving Party members, for example corruption cases. Such cases are only passed on to the legal system, if the CPC decides to do so. No Chinese citizen can hold CPC legally accountable for malfeasance, since the CPC manages itself.

The belief in self-correction through rectification is deeply rooted in the organizational tradition of the CPC. Political mistakes, ideological deviations, internal criticism, infighting between cliques or factions can all be handled by the Party itself through infighting or internal criticism, self-criticism, self-reflection, self-correction or, ultimately, by the use of the sharp weapons of the dictatorship as necessary. In recent years, some spectacular corruption cases have been used to take out Xi Jinping’s potential contenders. The CPC has an institutional setup that handles the rectification campaigns or cases and which acts in secrecy without publishing the full details about processes or consequences.

Despite the many historical problems of the CPC, periodic political fallouts, at times serious challenges to its power monopoly, and – on top of that – its extra-legal status, the CPC is still popular. The Party now has 95 mil. members and enrolls 1.5-2 mill. new members annually, while many more apply for membership. The Party membership is attractive, because it strengthens the social and economic capital of the member and provides access to political, economic or business power and fame for the select few. Party membership is inevitable if one wants to become a leader within the Party-state organization or state-owned agencies and enterprises.

The Party-state apparatus
China’s parliament called the National People’s Congress (see Fig. 2), the public administration, the judiciary and the army are all led by the CPC at all levels of administration. The Party upholds a parallel organization in relation to the public administration with Party committees in all public institutions, including state owned enterprises, the judiciary and the army. The Party secretary is called ‘hand number 1’ (一把手), and he (it is typically a man) is number one decision-maker at his level in the Party-state hierarchy. The public employees in the Party-state is under a nomenclature, a hierarchical civil service system that also comprises Party employees. There is also a nomenclature for all Party and state organizations. When the public or the Party employee adds personal position with the status of the organization in the nomenclature, the incumbent will know her or his organizational position within the power hierarchy precisely, also on the career ladder. The Organizational Department of the CPC is responsible for managing the nomenclature and plays a decisive role in relation to the course of individual careers. It has – humorously – been called the biggest human resource development department in the world.
Figure 2: China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) – the political affiliation of the members (March, 2018). About two thirds of the almost 3,000 members of the NPC are also members of the CPC (red color). The other colors represent members from other parties. Grey color indicates members without any party affiliation. The most important task of the NPC is to make and pass new legislation. Otherwise, it is often called a rubber stamp Parliament that follows the wishes of the CPC. Despite the designed broader representativeness of the NPC, the member composition shows why this is possible. Image source: Wikipedia.org

Although the CPC has conducted numerous political rectification and cleansing campaigns that might potentially slow the bureaucratic machinery, the Party-state apparatus has proven to be quite effective and able to deliver necessary public goods and services over time. The public employee is generally a well-educated person and not any more a revolutionary soldier or a commissar trained in guiding revolutionary struggles. Recruitment of new employees to work within the Party-state organization is handled through open and competitive entrance examinations. Hardship is a must if one wants to move up the career ladder. The public employee must be ready to move around, initially in his or her own region and later around the whole country, if a leadership career is on the books. The perfect career unfolds itself across all administrative levels, starting from the grassroots, both within the CPC, within public administration, within the people’s congress system, and possibly within state owned enterprises (see Fig. 2). Xi Jinping’s career is exemplary in this way, and he even had stints of services in military positions alongside with his Party-state career.

The CPC does not have an electoral constituency to relate and be responsible to. Being the undisputed party in power, the CPC recruits members, political employees, and public leaders itself. Therefore, historically, policy processes have been driven by bureaucratic politics, primarily by individual bureaucracies that have pursued their own interests, often in competition with each other. As Chinese leaders frequently change between positions in CPC and public administration respectively, there is no functional distinction between politics and public administration, and the individual leader functions as both politician and
administrator at the same time. With their long, upwards progressing, and spiral-like careers behind them before they become senior leaders, China’s top leaders possess rich practical experience, often based on in-depth understanding of local development issues. They are used to fighting for local bureaucratic interests, i.e. the interests of their current employer where they are posted, often in competition with leaders placed elsewhere in the bureaucratic system. This hierarchical, yet fragmented institutional framework creates the framework for a competition oriented, and often entrepreneurial and innovative political-administrative system.

**Democracy and representation of interests**

On the opposite side of dictatorship and hierarchy, we find democracy as a cornerstone in China’s declared political order. Through the years, the CPC has tested many forms of democratic inclusion, deliberation, and participation. However, the CPC has realized that it is best for the Party to control democratic processes. On the other hand, the rapid economic and social development in China has led to the emergence of variegated social interests within the business sector and in civil society, necessitating new thinking with regard to the organization of democratic participation and consultation.

The most far-reaching democratic experiment in modern Chinese history started in the rural areas in the 1980es when the Party-state introduced open and free democratic elections for village committees, which - according to the Constitution - are self-governing and not a part of the Party-state apparatus (see Fig. 1). However, China’s peasants had no experience with or education in democracy, especially with regard to formulating and controlling the political agenda and taking hand of its implementation. Therefore, the entire village election and management approach had to be built from scratch. It did not develop equally well everywhere, but the principles were shaped by liberal democratic thinking, and one third of China’s about 1 mio. villages had good success with the electoral reforms. However, the CPC quickly realized that the reform went too far as many villages dis-elected the Party’s representatives because they preferred their own, independent candidates. Nowadays, the CPC orchestrates these elections itself so that the Party is certain that its own candidates are elected to lead and manage the villages. The reforms thus proved that liberal democratic freedoms have their limits under the people’s democratic dictatorship.

The CPC has furthermore experimented with different forms of democratic consultation and deliberation to identify and resolve issues in people’s daily lives. China’s civil society that comprises millions of publicly registered organizations also experienced a short period with relative freedom and independence, but the organizations are now subject to the Party’s organizational control and policy guidance. Ideally, they operate on the basis of a common understanding with the local Party leaderships and they may even be entrusted or contracted by the Party-state to deliver certain services locally. In addition, China has many unregistered, i.e. secret organizations that neither the CPC nor researches know about. Some of these may also deliver local social services while others may be more criminally inclined.
The CPC entertains an internal basic organizational principle called democratic centralism. This approach implies that the Party organizes and welcomes internal debate, but when a decision has been made, the members are expected to conform. Internal criticism of policies or even decisions is possible, but under Xi Jinping Party members will be punished if they utter criticism of the Party in public.

Finally, China has a number of other political parties that have survived since the days of the civil war in the 1940es, and some even from before. They still exist because they sided with the CPC against the Nationalists. They are generally small and without much influence. They recruit non-Communists as members, many of whom are prominent public personalities from within business and academia. These parties have their own national organization (the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference – CPPCC) which – like the civil society organizations – is under CPC leadership. The CPPCC and its regional affiliates act as consultation partners in relation to China’s people’s congresses and local Party organizations (see Fig. 2).

Under Xi Jinping, the role of the CPC in all economic and social activities has been strengthened considerably to defend the Party against any contention. The CPC was originally established as a so-called secret society, like so many other similar organizations during the course of Chinese history. The Party had to work underground to avoid being detected and eradicated by the powers-to-be, and it had to depend on Party cells that could operate relatively autonomously with only thin lines of communication to the Center. The experience taught the CPC that this type of organization can overturn the sitting regime and therefore the CPC exerts itself to prevent the emergence of such organizations or that any of the other political parties become politically strong.

Despite the hegemonic status of the Party, Xi Jinping appears to be uncertain about developments in society and the potentials of political reforms. He insists that Party Committees must exist, not only in all public organizations, but also in private companies and social organizations. The extension of the parallel Party system into these sectors makes it possible for the CPC to follow what is going on, to offer political guidance, and possibly exert control and prevent alternative political organization.

**The social contract**

The legitimacy of the CPC rests on its ability to formulate and abide by a social contract with the Chinese people, the third dimension in the “people’s democratic dictatorship”. The assumption is that when the CPC delivers security, social stability, livelihoods, progress, welfare and some measure of political participation, then the majority of the Chinese people will be satisfied with the regime and not organize against it. This assumption has proven to hold true until now, although critically challenged by popular movements and internal disagreements along the road. These days, the CPC displays a high degree of willingness to listen to the challenges and issues that the citizens of China encounter in their daily life. The Party-state administration is constantly reminded by the top leadership that they must listen and respond swiftly to
challenges, issues in daily life, and crisis situations - like for example local environmental issues or local protests. The public employees and their leaders are guided and/or controlled through a new public management approach to public administration. They must sign result contracts, which describe in detail what is expected from them and which goals and quantitative targets they have to fulfill. The contract targets can be quite comprehensive, but some are more important than others. For many years, economic growth, the one-child policy, and social stability were top priorities. At a later stage, green targets were added and some of them have already overtaken the original priority targets in terms of importance, if not across China entirely, then in most localities. Contract fulfillment can be rewarded monetarily or through promotion of local leaders. On the other hand, sanctions may be meted out if the local leaders and their departments do not fulfill their contractual targets. In some places in China, surveys and focus groups are used to ensure that the local population is satisfied with the performance of the local Party-state.

Ideological fuel
In China, ideology is not rubbish. On the contrary, the CPC’s use it as a preferred tool to guide the Party politically, as well as social perceptions, understanding, and acceptance of the Party’s power monopoly in general. The Party uses its own version of Marxism as a theoretical foundation for its ideology and it has accorded itself a monopoly to interpret China’s and the Party’ history and to guide and control public opinion. The Party has the exclusive right to decide who is ‘in’, i.e. who can participate in China’s own version of democracy, and who is ‘out’ and therefore has to submit to dictatorship as an enemy of the people. The Party’s external campaigns and Party-internal corrective actions are guided by broad ideological guidelines, which - in principle - are elaborated by the Chinese leader. Like Mao Zedong, Xi Jinping is an industrious thinker, although less theoretical. Xi Jinping’s ”thinking” (习近平思想) regarding China’s new era, its long term development goals towards becoming a middle income and democratic socialist country, and China’s international relations as a major power has been canonized on a par with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping thinking in the Chinese Constitution, although his thinking is still under development. Therefore: woe to anyone who speaks out against Xi Jinping’s ideas in public!

CPC ideology is used as a weapon in the Party-state’s censorship over traditional media, social media, the entertainment industry, educational institutions etc. The Party’s ideological struggle and its censorship uses negative lists based on topics that are prohibited to discuss. They are revised on a daily basis by the relevant Party organizations, and under Xi the lists have become steadily longer, while the open political debate has been put on ice.

At the same time, the CPC has taken out a patent for historical self-forgetfulness in relation to individuals and events that are not in line with the Party’s self-interpretation and its understanding of its own and China’s history. Now, the Party’s historical narrative focuses on the Party’s victories, primarily under the
sitting leadership, and not on the problems of the past, criticisms or defeats. Therefore, contestation of the Party’s historical truths is not allowed.

**Power transition and power centralization**

The CPC has not always been able to ensure peaceful power transitions. Historically, factions and cliques have been in conflict with each other, and at times it has not been pretty. Many top leaders have ended up in jail following intense power struggles and this still happens, now frequently as part of a corruption enquiry.

However, Deng Xiaoping created an acceptable and reasonably transparent formula for power transition in the 1980es, which meant that a top leader could not sit for more than 10 years. Xi Jinping is suspected of nourishing the wish to abstain from this rule, and it is now perfectly possible constitutionally after an amendment of the Constitution in 2018. The Party’s Statutes also allow it. Of course, it remains to be seen if Xi does want to break with the tradition. In case, it will happen at the 20th Party congress in 2022, where he can be reelected as general secretary of the CPC, and at the session of the National People’s Congress in 2023, where he can be reelected as President.

Xi’s focus is on maintaining the power of the Communist Party. He evidently believes that power centralization is essential to maintain the CPC’s hegemonic power, and he has gathered more formal power in his own hands than any of his predecessors. The media praises him endlessly as the great and only leader, the people’s leader. He is in charge of policy development in all major policy sectors and reserves the right to announce all new key policies, whether issued by the Party or the state. As Commander in Chief of the armed forces, he is also in charge of military policy and as President he has been extremely active in formulating China’s radically new foreign policy that sees China as a new major power with strong global economic and political ambitions.

**100 years more in the bag?**

Many will recognize traits from Lenin’s ideas about the socialist Party-state in China’s political order and the organization of the CPC as the centre of the one-party system. China’s communist regime is authoritarian, at times totalitarian, and the CPC does not hide the nature and purpose of the people’s democratic dictatorship.

The political order seems to fit the Chinese reality as it is now. Xi Jinping has largely managed to rectify the CPC and re-create it into what he thinks it should be like. The Party organization is more streamlined than ever before, there has been a perfection of CPC power and the public administration, which means that the Party-state is more prepared to exercise its power in unison than ever before. Xi has also strengthened internal supervision and external social control to a degree never seen. Economic growth under Xi is not as impressive as under his predecessors, but he leverages this potential weakness by calling it “the new normal” and by having a strong focus on making the China model more sustainable and to make the country one of the world leaders when it comes to high-tech innovation. In recent months, he has turned his attention
to address China’s inequality, which is on a par with that of the U.S. As long as the CPC acts on popular perceptions and concerns, the social contract appears to hold, and there does not seem to be a strong demand for more democracy. Furthermore, the general population seems to be happy with what the dictatorship offers in terms of social stability, and the harshness with which its critics are met is apparently accepted.

On the other hand, it goes without saying that foreign researchers have little insight into what happens under the surface of China’s contemporary political order. Our knowledge of what happens inside the CPC in terms of factional infighting is negligible and only based on limited publicly available information. We can scratch somewhat deeper, though, when some of the more illustrious corruption cases reveal information about political infighting.

Of course, we cannot know how many years Xi Jinping may have in the bag as China’s leader before he will or must step down. At this stage, he likes to be portrayed as the (most) successful Communist leader of China (ever) at the end of CPC’s first century and the leader who has laid the groundwork for ensuring that the Party will be able to stay in power for the next 100 years. If the CPC does that without being substantially challenged, the CPC will write itself into the history of successful Chinese dynasties, and the people’s democratic dictatorship will have demonstrated that it could survive under conditions for which it was not designed originally and despite its inherent self-contradictory nature.

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