

# ***Factors behind Xi Jinping's Scorched-Earth Policy toward Dissidents and Civil Society***

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## **I. Contradiction at the Heart of Chinese Politics: The Tighter the Control the More Insecure the Authorities Feel**

In its late 2017 report on the status and development of the public sphere in more than 100 countries, CIVICUS<sup>1</sup> downgraded China's rating from "repressed" to "closed." CIVICUS, or World Alliance for Citizen Participation, deplored the "continued escalation of the assault on basic civil freedoms under Xi Jinping." The Johannesburg-based watchdog noted that "China has since 2015 relentlessly pursued its critics through mass arrests of lawyers and activists, the shutdown of websites promoting peaceful dialogue and the deployment of security forces [against dissidents and NGO groups]." It suggested that the already besieged civil society in China would be further circumscribed by new laws on NGOs as well as state security.

While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) administration's repression of intellectuals, activists, and civil-society groupings has been widely reported, this paper attempts to elucidate the peculiar reasons behind the scorched-earth measures taken by the Xi Jinping administration to tighten ideological and other kinds of control over all Chinese. On the one hand, the leadership under President Xi has won plaudits for its economic success from opinion-makers even in advanced democracies such as the United States. Despite the growing rich-poor gap, income for both urban and rural Chinese has

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<sup>1</sup> CIVICUS is an international alliance of civil society organizations and activists that work to strengthen citizen action and civil society throughout the world.

risen for three decades. Moreover, the party-state apparatus has put together a high-tech police-state apparatus that has left little room for maneuver for liberal intellectuals, human rights lawyers, underground Christians and NGO activists. So why is the party-state so bent on further tightening the grip on even meek expressions of dissent?

At least three factors are at play. Despite the fact that China realized a GDP growth rate of 6.9 percent for 2017, chinks in the armor of the so-called “Chinese economic miracle” have become more apparent. Growth has been achieved mainly through government investment in sectors such as infrastructure, defense, housing, and social welfare; this gargantuan outlay is bankrolled by loans. Independent estimates have put China’s total debt level at three times GDP. Corporate and consumer debt, respectively equivalent to 175 percent and 44.4 percent of GDP, is increasing at an alarming rate. In view of this debt pile, it seems inevitable that the growth rate will decline to, say 4 percent or 5 percent a year. Wealth that will be “trickled down” to the underclasses will drop dramatically. And given that the country’s Gini Coefficient is estimated as close to 0.6, large-scale social upheaval in the medium term cannot be ruled out.

Secondly, Xi has, since he took power in 2012, been stoking the flames of nationalism, which is seen as the most reliable pillar of the CCP’s legitimacy. This has meant aggressive military posturing in areas close to Japan and Taiwan as well as in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Xi’s signature Belt and Road Initiative (B&RI) is an overarching grand plan to restore China’s position as Middle Kingdom. However, hefty outlay by the Chinese government on intercontinental infrastructure projects has fanned the “China threat” theory even as it has exacerbated China’s indebtedness. Moreover, nationalism is a double-edged sword. A foreign-policy fiasco by the Xi team could turn the people against the party-state apparatus.

Finally, Xi, who has bestowed on himself titles such as “core leader,” “supreme commander,” and most recently, “economic tsar,” is an innately paranoid person. His successful power grab the past five years means he has made many more enemies than his two predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, combined. Given that Xi

in 2016 masterminded a thorough purge of the top brass of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)—particularly factions under “big tigers” Generals Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou—hundreds of displaced or marginalized senior officers are gnashing their teeth. The 66-year-old paramount leader is particularly nervous about possible coups or assassination threats. His attempt at self-preservation, mainly through appointing protégés and cronies to top military posts, has in turn exacerbated already serious divisions among the military factions.

## **II. Militarization of Daily Life and the Establishment of a High-Tech Police-State Apparatus**

The more power a dictator has, the more insecure he feels. As the Chinese saying goes, a paranoid tyrant “sees [enemy] troops behind every tree and every stalk of grass.” After Xi's insertion of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” into the CCP Constitution at the 19th Party Congress—thus in theory putting himself on the same par as Mao—the words of wisdom of the 21st century Great Helmsman are being studied in government offices, schools, factories, and state-owned enterprises. More significantly, the commander-in-chief is relying on naked force to bolster his authority and impose ever-tighter control over the party, the military and ordinary citizens.

What is happening is a dangerous militarization of daily life. In two major military parades held since the autumn, Xi has asked the 2.3 million PLA officers and soldiers to remain “absolutely loyal, dedicated and trustworthy” to the supreme commander. Political commissars have issued numerous dictums that “the army should follow Xi's command and answer to his order.” Xi has also bolstered control over the People's Armed Police (PAP), which is a one-million strong para-military force responsible for internal order. Recently, PAP members lauded Xi with the song titled “We must be a good soldier of Chairman Xi.”

Partly with the help of the PLA, PAP, the ordinary police and spies from the Ministry of State Security, the Xi administration has put together a 24-hour, multi-dimensional, all-comprehensive, and omnipresent police-state apparatus the effectiveness of which

George Orwell could never have imagined. This so-called *wei-wen* (“maintain stability”) network has benefited from latest advancements in ICT, AI and related technologies. For example, police have used state-of-the-art face recognition software—together with hundreds of thousands of spy cameras and videos installed in public venues all over China—to keep track of the movement of dissidents and NGO activists. *Wei-wen* authorities have also established a national “social credit” data bank, which tracks the financial situation and other personal characteristics of a few hundred million citizens. With information provided by the social media, e-commerce platforms as well as banks and e-banking firms, police and state-security departments can easily keep tabs on even the apparently mundane activities of citizens.

### **III. Major Targets: Liberal Intellectuals, Human Rights Lawyers and Underground Christians**

The quasi-police state apparatus is targeting mainly three groups of people, who are deemed to be agents of instability that pose a frontal threat to the party’s legitimacy. The first consists of liberal intellectuals. Despite Beijing’s overwhelming control of the Internet and other media, writers and public opinion leaders have laid bare the lies on which the CCP’s authority is being anchored. For example, scholars have exposed the role of the party during the anti-Japanese war (1937-1945) as well as Chairman Mao’s atrocities in the 1950s and 1960s. They have lambasted how Beijing is using Maoist tactics to brainwash students from primary school to college. Liberal intellectuals have also cast doubt on the veracity of statistics such as national and regional GDP figures, which serve to paint a rosy picture of the party’s achievements.

One of the public-sphere groupings that the authorities have dealt with most mercilessly comprises human rights lawyers, or attorneys who specialize in protecting the rights of suppressed sectors such as migrant workers, victims of “land grab,” underground Christians, and people who have been abused by China’s party-dominated legal system. Rights lawyers only number up to 300, a miniscule proportion of the country’s estimated 200,000 legal professionals. On July 9, 2015, more than 200 rights

lawyers and legal activists were arrested by police. Most were subject to torture and given jail terms of up to seven years. The shabby treatment of lawyers has belied repeated claims by Xi and his colleagues that China would abide by “rule by law with Chinese characteristics.”

The third target of the police-state is the church, especially the Christian and Catholic churches. By definition, the CCP cannot tolerate any organization it cannot control, lest this network sprout into a rival political centre that could challenge party dominance. Deng Xiaoping said in the early 1980s—when the Polish Catholic Church and Solidarity Movement were undermining the hitherto supreme authority of the Polish Communist Party—that “we must prevent Polish germs from spreading to China.” Xi Jinping has upped the ante by wholly or partially destroying more than a thousand Christian churches in Zhejiang, where he served as party secretary from 2002 to 2007. While the spate of the forceful removal of crosses seemed to be petering out by 2016, the *wei-wen* apparatus has devoted even more resources to controlling the activists of both legal and underground churches. For example, listening devices and CCTV equipment are installed in every church, which is otherwise closely monitored by police and “neighborhood committees.” Xi unveiled in 2015 the party’s agenda regarding the *zhongguohua* or “Sinicization” of Christianity. Cadres responsible for religion said Beijing was adamant about rendering Christianity “compatible with the core values of socialism.”

#### **IV. Possible Scenarios for the Future**

Despite the CCP’s failure to remedy severe structural problems in the economy, the Xi leadership is throwing its weight around the world. Chinese achievements in cutting-edge sectors such as AI, robotics, DNA engineering, unmanned aircraft – not to mention state-of-the-art weapons such as missiles and submarines—have apparently prompted President Donald Trump to boost America’s military budget and to take more stringent measures to guard against Chinese “theft” of U.S. intellectual property rights. Overall, the viability of the “China model” is being

praised by not only politicians in developing countries but also a number of professors in elite American universities.

Close observers of China do not foresee a hard landing in either the economic or political arena in the near term, say the rest of Xi's second term as General Secretary (2012-2017). However, no major historical events, particularly cataclysmic changes with quasi-revolutionary force, can be predicted. The stringent and highly discriminatory policies that the CCP leadership has adopted toward the so-called "low-end" population has demonstrated latent but ever-growing contradictions between the "red aristocracy" that is running the country and China's underclasses. Particularly significant is the fact that even well-off businesspeople are "voting with their feet" by parking their wealth overseas and securing residence rights in mostly English-speaking countries. This accounted for the alarming level of capital flight in 2016 and 2017, which forced Beijing to delay the liberalization of capital-account transactions.

As late as the Hu Jintao era (2002-2012), many Sinologists credited the CCP with a considerable degree of "authoritarian resilience." While being a conservative cadre dedicated to the preservation of the party's monopoly on power, ex-president Hu experimented with different forms of "intra-party democracy"; he was also relatively tolerant toward the first groups of NGOs that began to sprout in different parts of China. However, President Xi's predilection for Leninist-style concentration of all powers at the apex of the party—meaning in his own hands—has vastly constricted the CCP's "resilience" and its ability to handle crises. While it is impossible to predict when the party might implode, what seems certain is that Xi's restitution of Maoist norms will result in an ever-more unjust and volatile socio-political order where the "red ruling class" continues to enjoy a monopoly of political and economic resources—and where ordinary citizen's freedoms and rights to political participation will be further squeezed. And this is a formula for long-term instability and internecine bickering that could have ominous consequences for the Asia-Pacific Region and beyond.