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Chinese Politics in the 1990s

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SOCIETAL STABILITY AND POLITICAL REFORM: CHINESE POLITICS IN THE 1990s

Dr Wong Yiu-chung

Abstract

On 28 September 1995, Jiang Zemin delivered one of the most important speeches in his tenure as the General Secretary of the CCP in the Fifth Plenum of 14th CCP Congress, which is entitled “To Handle Correctly Certain Relationships in the Process of Socialist Modernization Construction”. On the top of the agenda was the relationships between reform, development and stability. To him, reform, in particular economic reform, must be pursued; development is the enhancing of national strength and stability is the pre-condition of development. Indeed, it is the equilibrium of these three sets of relationships that the CCP leadership strove for that shaped the major forces of dynamics of Chinese politics in the 1990s. The leadership’s overriding concern was stability of the regime. Economic reform, with a temporary haul in the early 1990s, was accelerated and culminated in the accession to the WTO, resulting increasing absorption into world economy. Political reform was considered secondary to economic reform and it was perceived to be an inherently destabilizing process and any measures that would cause controversies within the Party were to be shelved. Learning the lessons from the 4 June crackdown, ideological control was exercised unrelentingly and dissidents intellectuals were punished severely. Administrative streamlining was carried out two times in the 1990s. Grass-root democracy was instituted and anti-corruption drives waged but organized opposition was crushed mercilessly. So were the ideological debates within the Party. The result was that China’s economic growth attained admirable figures and it was rapidly becoming a powerful economic house. However, behind the growth phenomena, lies the abject poverty of the peasantry, massive unemployment, labor unrest, frustrated intellectuals and rampant corruption. Among the liberal intellectuals, the consensus was that only a genuine political reform program could alleviate the problems that the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao new leadership is encountering. Despite the political reform in several important area, however, China political reform programs have not surpassed the speech on cadre and leadership by Deng Xiaoping in 1980, supposedly the most comprehensive political reform blueprint in the reform era.