

Covid-19 and the Communist Party of China's Governance Crisis

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Abstract

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease (Covid-19) in Wuhan and subsequent spread to other countries, has challenged China's model of governance. The Communist Party of China (CPC or CCP), which proclaims itself as a 'ruling' or 'governing' party, a transition from its revolutionary ethos has been castigated for mishandling the pandemic outbreak which has claimed many lives within China and across the globe. The pandemic, although was brought under substantial control, exposed the single-party controlled state's woeful governance inadequacy which were not bereft of criticisms from citizens, activists, intellectuals and foreign leaders. Although the party leadership through its efficient propaganda have tried to change the narrative of the superiority of Chinese governance model and its successes against fighting the pandemic, the crisis has created new challenges. This paper seeks to analyse China's governance crisis during the present pandemic by looking into the political aspects: government institutions and party leadership. The paper tries to argue that China's governance model is secondary to regime survival and political stability. The changes that have been undertaken on governance innovations have only led to establishment of penal institutions, increasing mass surveillance of its citizens and ideological education campaigns to secure the control and legitimacy of the party, which is shy of governance transparency.

Keywords

Covid-19 pandemic, CPC, governance crisis, party-state, security, innovation, regime security, Xi Jinping, intellectuals, criticisms

The past six months in 2020 has been a critical phase for People's Republic of China (PRC). The outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease (Covid-19) at Wuhan, a capital city of Hubei province in Central China, and its global spread have left no county unaffected. A pandemic with more than 17 million affected and approximately 675 thousand deaths as of July end according to the data released by World Health Organisation (WHO),ⁱ the number is still rising! Many world leaders like Trump, joined by some of West European nations lost no opportunity castigating China for failure to respond and warn other nations about the spread of the virus — animals to humans and human to humans — later escalating to even cultural and racial attacks among its citizens and on expats alike.

With the ensuing China-US trade-war since 2018, the Covid-19 pandemic accentuated economic hardships within China. The worst affected were the migrant labour population and small and medium scale businesses. At once millions of enterprising Chinese became unemployed and financially destitute. The pandemic, although was brought under substantial control, it also exposed the single-party controlled state's woeful governance inadequacy which were not bereft of criticisms from citizens, activists and intellectuals. This paper seeks to analyse China's governance crisis during the present pandemic by evaluation of the political dimension: party and government leadership and institutions, I argue

that China's trust with fighting pandemics is not unknown but with every such crisis, the Communist Party of China (CPC or CCP) — a sole ruling party's governance mandate faces crisis as evident during the current pandemic.

Scholars such as Zheng Yongnian quotes the party as an 'organisational emperor' with Leninist party structure.

The Party: A governing party?

From a revolutionary party that defeated the Nationalists (Kuomintang) that took reins of the government in 1949, the CPC has remained in power ever since. In post-Mao period, it has been a vanguard of not only the downtrodden peasantry and working classes, but a more encompassing and inclusive organisation consisting of even erstwhile class enemies. Especially after Jiang Zemin's Theory of Three Represents (*sange daibiao*) exposition, in 80th anniversary in 2001, and later enshrined in the party constitution in 2002,ⁱⁱ the party welcomed inclusion of moneyed class and entrepreneurs as new productive forces of China's changing realities. Scholars such as Zheng Yongnian (2012) quips the CPC has been evolving as an 'organisational emperor' with Leninist party structure.ⁱⁱⁱ It makes the party akin to a hub that commands, controls and integrates other political institutions including the eight democratic parties (*bada minzhu dangpai*) which functions as interest groups.

Additionally, with changing times, the CPC's party school syllabi stressed on professional scientific and management disciplines in addition to courses on Marxism for cadre's mid-career training (*pei xun*) and learning tours. Similarly, Daniel Bell (2015) indicates, 'meritocratic political leadership' has complemented China's model of governance.^{iv} Unlike the old guard, the party cadres in the reform period onwards required higher education as one of the criteria for upward political mobility.

Apart from the epicentre in Wuhan, other provinces also witnessed cadres being penalised for shirking responsibilities.

Today, at both the membership and cadre level, the increased percentage of managerial and professionals have resulted in a technocratic leadership at the top—SOE heads, members of provincial and military elite, and central committee.^v Besides, the party membership of these professional technocrats have increased compared to the previous years. The rechristening of Central Party School as Chinese Academy of Governance (*guojia xingzheng xueyuan*) and likewise at provincial levels after re-organisation of party and state institutions in 2018 indicates the party's focus on governance and administration that seeks to maintain its dominance and rule. In fact, with more than 91 million members,^{vi} the CPC

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years to become the governing party of the Chinese people.

Local or Central: Blame-game and dismissals

Although reports that emerged from China and Hong Kong indicate that the first case of Covid-19 may have been traced to 17 November 2019, in Wuhan^{vii} it was only in the second week of December that some doctors identified that the virus was spreading from one human to another, and shared it on their social media groups. However, the local administration authorities' fear of falling foul of higher party bosses, forced these whistle blowers including Dr. Li Wenliang, who later died of the virus, to officially apologise for alleged misinformation and 'unlawful acts.' Later with the casualties rising, 'blame game' (*shuia guo*- tossing the wok) among the officials began leading to evading of responsibilities. However, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection team visiting Wuhan, blamed the local authorities for 'bureaucratic formalism' and were dismissed for dereliction of duties. By 2 February alone, more than 337 officials from Huanggang city in Hubei were punished,^{viii} and likewise senior party and government officials were dismissed. Apart from the epicentre in Wuhan, other provinces also witnessed cadres being penalised for shirking responsibilities.

The Central Committee's Organisation Department dismissed the provincial party

secretary–Jiang Chaoliang (61), and Wuhan city party secretary–Ma Guoqiang (53). The former is replaced by Shanghai City Mayor Ying Yong (62) and Wang Zhonglin (57) former Jinan city party secretary respectively.^{ix} Similarly, the two senior local health officials–Zhang Jin (party secretary, Hubei Provincial Health Commission) and Liu Yingzi (director, Hubei Provincial Health Commission) were replaced by single incumbent Wang Hesheng (deputy director, National Health Commission). At the government level, Mr. Wang is being assisted by deputy head of Central Government Leading Group Chen Yixin, a former Wuhan party chief, and current secretary general of the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of CPC Central Committee. ^x With such appointments and replacements, the party has found an easy way out of crisis management leaving no stone unturned to shield Xi Jinping’s image despite the ‘chairman’s knowledge about the raging public health crisis. Nevertheless, it became an opportunity for current central leadership arose to appoint loyal officials of his choice and consolidate his control even at the grassroots level of government organisations.

With the re-organisation of the National Health Commission in 2018, medical experts seem to be a mere cog for the Chinese politicians

Small Leading Groups: Rule by decree sans innovation

In order to deal with public health emergencies, there were adequate institutions and protocols in China. Although the previous outbreak of SARs in 2002-03 which was first reported from Foshan in Guangdong province created a serious crisis for the Chinese leadership, the current SARs version of Covid-19 has dwarfed its dubious records within China and globally. The earlier SARs resulted in 5300 infections with 349 deaths in China.^{xi} Since then, the state had a well-established system of reporting to the concerned higher authorities which mandated all medical institutions to report any infectious diseases to Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC).^{xii} More recently, the re-organisation of the National Health Commission in 2018, upgraded from a ministry with more independent powers and functions, experts, however seems to be a mere cog for the Chinese politicians as same party apparatchiks were appointed heads of different policy and research units. The bureaucratic formalism of red tape and control continued to compound coordination among the local and central institutions. These problems not only accentuated policy paralysis but also led to inadequate responses in the early period of the current public health crisis. Suppression of information of the outbreak by local administration in the initial days lost considerable time for fear of official admonishment from the superiors which showed a governance disjuncture and the lack of trust among officials at various levels of governance.

On the other hand, the party Central Committee (CC) constituted the ‘Central Leading Small Group for Work to Counter the New Coronavirus Infection Pneumonia Epidemic’ (*Zhongyang Yingdui Xin Guanzhuang Bingdu Ganran Feiyan Yiqing Gongzuo Lingdao Xiaozu*) under Li Keqiang, the premier with other prominent members of the Politburo, State Council and the Central Committee. *Lingdao Xiaozu* has become a bulwark of Xi Jinping’s governance strategy since he came to power in 2012, and is the head of more than dozen such groups.^{xiii} The members of this group included the heads of the propaganda department, public security, united front work, ideology and foreign minister who all maintain inter-agency positions in the party and state institutions for policy formulation and implementations (*see appendix*). This ‘empowered committee’ similar to the National Task Force for Covid-19 in the Indian case, represented the strategy of crisis management, and its eventual ‘face saving tactics’ of the government both within the country and abroad.

These aggressive tactics by the state officials were more profoundly used against foreign critics. These officials as ‘wolf warriors’ disputed the origin of the virus not only from the podium but also through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook which are banned in China. While combatting foreign critics, the blame was shifted from domestic to ‘foreign hands’ and thereby changing the

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discourse and pledging aid to foreign governments (Covid diplomacy) in a coordinated approach to maintain its profile as a responsible actor in global public health crisis.

China today has a new ‘mountain top’ in Xi Jinping, the position only held by Mao.

Xi’s Core Leadership: Anathema to governance reforms

Xi Jinping, as a core of the leadership after the sixth plenum of the 18th CPC Central Committee in 2016 has resulted in absence of power balancing and collective leadership. In fact, China today has a new ‘mountain top’ in Xi Jinping, the position only held by Mao. The current politburo and its standing committee has become a mere echo-chamber of Xi Jinping.^{xiv} Many of the political opposition and potential challengers have been subdued with the fear of attracting the wrath of the party watchdogs for any anti-party activities and many losing their heads in the power struggle and jockeying for higher positions. In the guise of rebuilding the party, and trends of indispensability to this task by the Xi leadership has been leading to a system of authoritarian governance.

Apart from re-organisation of some institutions and policies in the domain of governance innovations such as National Supervision

Commission, most of the other tasks involved steps to consolidate the core leadership. Further, the officials were tasked to attend ‘study sessions’ on —Xi Thought and his ‘important speeches’—an ideological education programme for building his personality cult. Even the senior legislators were suggested to study these speech texts at the plenary sessions.^{xv} Every pronouncement by other leaders and officials acknowledged Xi’s core leadership leading the fight against Covid-19 emergency even when he was absent from public appearance from 21 January until 10 March. This seems to be a calculated strategy by the CPC to protect him from criticisms and sending Li Keqiang to the hotspot to ‘feel the nerves’ of the people. This core mountaintop leadership was only enjoyed by Mao’s stature earlier in 1950s-60s.

Scores of citizen journalists, civil society activists and video bloggers have been silenced and arrested for admonishing the administration.

If Xi had succeeded in silencing his political opposition, the period also gave rise to intellectual activists penning critical reports and raising issues of mis-governance. In this era of political void, the intellectuals and activists with no political factions and cliques or cultivated by any power brokers in Beijing or Shanghai began to seize the space.

Many intellectuals and academics within China like Xu Zhangrun^{xvi} and Xu Zhiyong^{xvii} have been vocal in their resentment about the ‘party’s failure in taking care of the people’. Xu Zhiyong’s essay urged Xi to step down for his ‘inability to handle major crises’— trade war, Hong Kong protests and fighting the corona virus outbreak.^{xviii} Besides, business tycoon like Ren Zhiqiang,^{xix} a party member (*dang yuan*) and member of Beijing Municipal People’s Consultative Conference, who criticised the government for failing to control the pandemic has been arrested and is under investigation. *Wuhan Diary* by Fang Fang,^{xx} a personal account which had every day notes about the life during 76-day lockdown in Wuhan has been banned in China recently. Likewise, scores of citizen journalists, civil society activists and video bloggers have been silenced and arrested for admonishing the administration while reporting from ground zero as traitors of the Chinese state.

Regime security trumps governance

One-party state’s foremost concern is the success and continuity of the regime. The Communist Party of China after coming to power in 1949 is already 70 years old, and the challenges are aplenty. With changing domestic and global political landscape, ruling ideology and its goals have evolved. However, apart from economic, social and cultural policies, the arena of political reforms is nowhere to be seen. As a party ruled state, institutions and policies were established to

secure and buttress its survival and thereby ensure social stability. Therefore, efficient control of its citizens becomes a misnomer to governance. For ensuring control the party has not shied away from harnessing digital and AI technologies to monitor the masses by creating artificial social credit scores and political quiz games—a form of ‘digital Leninism’.^{xxi} This has tremendously increased under Xi’s rule.

At the institutional level, the establishment of statutory National Supervision Commission which has superseding powers over public security and justice departments have been subsumed under the party’s watch dog, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). The reforms of the People’s Armed Police, and its jurisdiction directly under the military control ensures the securitisation of the state and regime stability rather than governance. The persecution of minorities in Xinjiang, Tibet and other religious groups through policing control, party vigilantism and sham ‘vocational schools’ ensures that governance is conditional to presumed threats against regime stability.

The premium of social security has negated every other aspect of Chinese institutional innovation. The real number of Covid deaths, though revised later to 4632 in mid-April^{xxii} shows its reluctance for fear of people’s resentment. Similarly, the post-Galwan clash of 15 June, where 20 Indian soldiers died, China has not released the number of casualties yet, though some unconfirmed reports give 35-45

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deaths.^{xxiii} The secrecy, or the information monopoly maintained by the Chinese government is the pretext to prevent social upheaval. One can feel the thresh hold of ‘powerful country’ (*qiang guo*) is quite low as compared to electoral democracies, or it may be a ‘scandalous drubbing’ inflicted by its southern neighbour!

Xi Jinping’s inability to nominate a successor, and possibility of him continuing even after 2022 has created confusion in the party.

Xi Jinping’s problems galore

Xi Jinping’s iron grip of the party has made him a ‘face of everything’. Heading more than 12 party, state and military leading groups on reforms and policy implementations, the Xi leadership seems to have ‘plateaued’ with no further governance innovation leading to policy paralysis and fatigue. The writings on Xi’s pet ideological innovation of ‘socialism for a new era’ a catchphrase since 19th CPC National Congress in 2017 has taken a back seat. Thus, for Xi to resurrect his credentials as a people’s leader (*lingxiu*), it becomes important for the party to take proactive public relations exercise through vigorous propaganda and personality cult. However, any military adventure would be disastrous for the party-state to cope with, especially with adverse economic numbers and ill-managed Covid-19 pandemic that has targeted China.

Likewise, Xi Jinping's inability to nominate a successor, and possibility of him continuing even after 2022 has created confusion in the party. Being 68 years by then, the party convention of '7-up, 8-down' would be challenged. And doing away with two-term limits in the PRC constitution, Xi Jinping has already embarked in a presumed long journey to remain at helm without an anointed successor. This can be detrimental to the party in the long run when many young leaders' prospect of leading the party-state can be scuttled without institutionalised succession pattern.

The Covid-19 Whitepaper released by the Chinese government tries to absolve itself

In the military domain, with the outbreak of the Covid-19, there has been cancellation of recruitment process in the PLA. Unlike earlier, with military re-organisation taking place, the twice a year recruitment process has been stalled. Similarly, one can also observe the absence of PLA or military membership in the small leading group constituted under Li Keqiang. Although PLA units were instrumental in building hospitals and mobilising resources both human personnel and infrastructure, its absence in the group is conspicuous, as many of these reconstruction teams had representatives from the military. Even in 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, and similar crises earlier, the role of the military in

decision-making process was deemed inevitable.

Assessing these developments in the Covid-19 era, the party has been relatively successful in controlling the narrative within China. The Covid-19 Whitepaper released by the Chinese government tries to absolve itself, and sing paens to the general secretary's leadership but taking no responsibility for the crisis.^{xxiv} The party's monopoly of the truth and assistance by best state of art technologies and medium of control with loyal cadres, Xi Jinping has been able to resurrect his image once dented by his long absence until his March 10 visit to Wuhan. The expulsion of journalists in China, banishment of its domestic critics, lawyers, activists, aid-diplomacy, rising anti-racial nationalism shows how sophisticated the Chinese agencies are disposed with shaping the post-covid geo-political landscape. Even moving its aircraft carrier to the offshore in Taiwan straits shows uneasiness of the regime that is intolerant about its governance failure thereby undermining the regime's legitimacy. The protests in Jiujiang (a city in Jiangxi province) among Hubei residents and confrontation with the Jiangxi police show the mis-governance malaise.^{xxv} Similarly, the rising number of imported cases in the north-eastern region of China and Hong Kong can be seen as a challenge to a transparency-shy one-man army regime obsessed with crisis management under Xi Jinping.

Endnotes

ⁱ WHO Corona Virus Disease (Covid-19) Dashboard, World Health Organisation, <https://covid19.who.int/?gclid>, (Accessed on 1 August 2020).

ⁱⁱ This call initiated the transformation of the power-base of the party to the new social classes that represented new production forces and new culture. This gave a new class of economic and social elites in addition of increasing young technocratic cadres recruited post-1978 reforms.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zheng Yongnian. *The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor: Culture, Reproduction, and Transformation*. London: Routledge, 2010.

^{iv} Bell, Daniel A. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and The Limits of Democracy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015.

^v Nine Cadres of post-70s were promoted as provincial ministers in one month, (yige yue nei jiu ming ganbu lu xin 70 hou sheng bu ji ganbu duiwai zhuangda). *Renshi*, CPC Personnel Database, <http://renshi.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0422/c139617-31683248.html> (Accessed on 24 April 2020).

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17', *South China Morning Post*. 13 March 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3074991> (Accessed on 13 July 2020).

^{viii} 337 party members and cadres, including 3 county-level official were punished in Huanggang City, Hubei, CPC News Online, <http://fanfu.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0130/c64371-31565382.html> (Accessed on 15 July 2020). Even my interaction with some party members on WeChat blame the local officials for mismanagement.

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^{xiv} ‘Viral Alarm: When Fury Overcomes Fear,’ (An Essay by Xu Zhangrun, Translated and Annotated by Geremie R. Barmé), ChinaFile. 10 February 2020. <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/viral-alarm-when-fury-overcomes-fear> (Accessed on 29 June 2020)

^{xv} Xinhua. ‘Senior legislators study Xi’s speech at and spirit of key CPC session,’ 3 November 2019. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/01/c_138521537.htm (Accessed on 22 July 2020).

^{xvi} Feng, Chongyi. ‘The rot goes right up to Beijing’: Why detained professor Xu Zhangrun is such a threat to China’s leadership’, *The Conversation*. 7 July 2020. <https://theconversation.com/the-rot-goes-right-up-to-beijing> (Accessed on 16 July 2020).

^{xvii} Xu Zhiyong is a legal scholar and was a university lecturer. He co-founded the New Citizens Movement, a group that advocated civil rights and China’s peaceful transition to constitutional rule. Detained in July 2013, he was sentenced to four years’ jail in 2014 for “gathering crowds to disrupt public order.” He went into hiding in late 2019, until he was detained in Guangzhou on February 15, 2020.

^{xviii} ‘Dear Chairman Xi, It’s Time for You to Go,’ (An Essay by Xu Zhiyong, Translated and

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^{xxiii} ‘45 Chinese Soldiers Killed In Galwan Valley – What Does Chinese Media & Netizens Say About The Casualties?’ *The EuroAsian Times*, 18 June 2020.

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Appendix

Central Leading Small Leading Group, Members (25 January 2020)

Members	Party Hierarchy	Institutional Position (Party/State)
Li Keqiang (Chair)	PBSC	PRC Premier
Wang Huning (Vice Chair)	PBSC	Ideology & Propaganda policy czar, Senior member of Party Secretariat
Ding Xueliang	Politburo	Director, CPC Central Office
Sun Chunlan (f)	Politburo	Vice-Premier, Public health, education and culture (former director, CPC UWFD)
Huang Kunming	Politburo	Director, CPC Propaganda Dept.
Cai Qi	Politburo	Beijing, Party Secretary
Wang Yi	Central Committee	PRC Foreign Minister
Xiao Jie	Central Committee	PRC State Council Secretary General
Zhao Kezhi	Central Committee	PRC, Minister of Public Security

Source: 中央应对新型冠状病毒感染肺炎疫情工作领导小组, Zhongyang Yingdui Xin Guanzhuang Bingdu Ganran Feiyan Yiqing Gongzuo Lingdao Xiaozu, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/> (Accessed on 8 April 2020).

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