



Freedom in the World - China (2003)

Polity: One party

Population:
1,280,700,000

GNI /Capita: \$3,976

Life Expectancy: 71

Religious Groups:
Daoist (Taoist),
Buddhist, other

Ethnic Groups: Han
Chinese (92
percent), other,
including Tibetan,
Mongol, Korean,
Manchu, and Uighur
(8 percent)

Capital: Beijing

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

The ruling party's carefully scripted leadership changes, aimed at giving the impression of a smooth transition to a younger generation of leaders, ended up creating some uncertainty over who actually wields decisive power in the world's most populous country. Hu Jintao, the sixty-year-old state vice president and an engineer by training, formally took the reigns of the all-powerful Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from veteran party boss Jiang Zemin, 76, at a November party congress. Jiang, however, held on to a key military post, leading to speculation that he intends to

be a power broker behind the scenes. Regardless of who really is on top, the party is expected to continue its overarching policy of gradually freeing up the economy while crushing political dissent as it faces rising unemployment, widespread labor protests, and growing income inequalities.

The CCP took power in 1949 under Mao Zedong after defeating the Koumintang, or Nationalists, in a civil war that began in the 1920s. Aiming to tighten the party's grip on power, Mao led several brutal, mass mobilization campaigns that resulted in millions of deaths and politicized nearly every aspect of public life. Following Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping emerged as China's paramount leader. While maintaining the CCP's absolute rule, Deng scaled back the party's role in everyday life and launched China's gradual transition from central planning to a market economy. The party showed its intent to hold on to power at all costs with the June 1989 massacre of hundreds, if not thousands, of student protesters in and around Beijing's Tiananmen Square. The Beijing demonstrations, along with similar student rallies in cities across China, protested official corruption and demanded democratic reforms. Following the crackdown, the CCP tapped Jiang, then the Shanghai mayor and party boss, to replace the relatively moderate Zhao Ziyang as party secretary-general. Jiang became state president in 1993 and was widely recognized as China's new paramount leader following Deng's death in 1997.

Against opposition from die-hard Marxists within the party, Jiang continued Deng's policies of selling off state firms, encouraging private enterprise, and rolling back China's "iron rice bowl" welfare system. He also oversaw China's emergence from

its pariah status following the Tiananmen Square massacre to become a more engaged player in world affairs, even as the government continuously faced foreign criticism over its appalling human rights record.

CCP leaders appear now to have reached a consensus that continued economic reforms are needed in order to boost living standards and stave off broad calls for political reform. They fear, however, that freeing up the economy too fast--thereby giving people ever more freedom in their day-to-day lives--will create social unrest.

While the student activism of the late 1980s has largely died down, factory workers and farmers have in recent years held thousands of street protests over hardships associated with economic restructuring. Tens of thousands of workers demonstrated over mass layoffs, poor severance pay, low or unpaid wages or pensions, and other labor grievances in spring 2002 in the northeastern cities of Liaoyang and Daqing and in the eastern mining town of Fushun. These hardships are expected to increase as the government slashes tariffs and takes other measures to open up China's economy to trade and foreign investment in line with its commitments as a World Trade Organization (WTO) member.

Already, the privatization of thousands of small- and medium-sized state-owned enterprises has thrown tens of millions out of work in a country that lacks a viable system of unemployment benefits, health insurance, and pensions. The government also faces the difficult choice of either cleaning up China's ailing state banks, which would involve yet more painful job cuts at state firms, or allowing the billions of dollars in bad loans held by these banks to continue choking off lending to private firms and risking a financial crisis. Analysts suggest that, at least in the near term, China's leadership will continue stoking the economy with massive public spending rather than take tough measures to clean up state banks or reform money-losing large state firms.

Meanwhile, in the countryside, home to 70 percent of the population--or roughly 900 million Chinese--thousands of riots and demonstrations by farmers in recent years have protested against high and often arbitrary local government fees and taxes. Rural China also has too many workers chasing too few farm and factory jobs. This has contributed to a "floating population" of some 80 million to 130 million people, by official count, who have left their rural homes in search of work in cities, where the migrants increasingly compete with locals for jobs. China's WTO membership could make matters worse for many peasants if cheaper agricultural imports chip away at their incomes. Already, China has wide income gaps between the dynamic, export-oriented coastal and southern areas and the ailing rural and rust-belt interior.

Corruption, meanwhile, has flourished in a country that has a rapidly expanding economy but lacks independent courts, regulators, investigative agencies, and a

free press. Corruption consumes 13 to 17 percent of economic output annually, according to official figures. Chinese authorities have responded recently by executing hundreds, possibly thousands, of people for corruption.

Against this backdrop, the CCP's sixteenth party congress in November--an event held only once every five years--was carefully stage-managed to project an image of an orderly transfer of power. Hu was named secretary-general of the CCP, reportedly having been tapped by Deng a decade ago as Jiang's successor. Jiang is expected to also give up the state presidency to Hu when his term expires in March. Jiang continues, however, to head the Central Military Commission, a post that effectively keeps him in charge of China's 2.5 million-strong armed forces. By virtue of this position, Jiang, not Hu, is officially listed as the head of the new party leadership.

Analysts say, moreover, that five or six of the cadres on the powerful, nine-member Politburo Standing Committee, which Hu heads, are Jiang proteges. The Jiang allies include Zeng Qinghong, 63, described by some observers as a potential political rival to Hu. In addition to formally endorsing the new leadership lineup, the congress also approved Jiang's controversial decision to allow private entrepreneurs to join the CCP.

Chinese authorities, meanwhile, continue to stifle any organized calls for political reform. Since 1998, courts have sentenced more than 30 leaders of a would-be opposition party, the China Democracy Party, to prison terms of up to 13 years on subversion or other charges. The government has also jailed thousands of followers of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, which in 1999 organized the biggest protest in the capital since 1989, to demand official recognition.

Wary of separatism, the government has also tried to crush pro-independence movements among the seven million ethnic Uighurs and other, smaller Turkic-speaking Muslim groups in China's northwestern Xinjiang province. Since the early 1990s, officials have detained "tens of thousands" of Uighurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang, executing several for alleged separatist activities, the human rights group Amnesty International said in a March report. Most Uighur independence activities appear to be peaceful. Beijing, however, has used allegations that Uighur militants carried out several bombings and assassinations in the 1990s--and, more recently, the post-September 11 campaign against pan-Islamic terrorism--to brand all Uighur dissidents as terrorists.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

China is one of the most authoritarian states in the world. Opposition parties are illegal, the CCP controls the judiciary, and ordinary Chinese enjoy few basic rights.

The CCP Politburo's Standing Committee makes nearly all key political decisions and sets governmental policy. Party cadres hold nearly all top national and local governmental, police, and military posts. China's legislature, the National People's Congress, is constitutionally the most powerful state body. Its handpicked delegates now routinely register protest votes over the government's handling of crime and other issues. For the most part, though, the congress merely rubberstamps the Politburo's decisions.

China's only real experiment with democracy has been at the local level, mainly with elections for so-called village committees. These bodies, however, cannot levy taxes, and hold few executive powers. Moreover, "In general the CCP dominates the local electoral process, and roughly 60 percent of the members elected to the village committees are CCP members," according to the U.S. State Department's global human rights report for 2001, released in March 2002. More recently, however, tens of thousands of villages have held elections for the more powerful position of local party secretary, a party researcher told the Hong Kong-based *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

The government controls the judiciary, with the CCP directing verdicts and sentences in sensitive cases, according to the U.S. State Department report. Recent reforms aimed at making ordinary trials fairer "have not brought the country's criminal procedures into compliance with international standards," and officials often subject prisoners to "severe psychological pressure" to confess using legal loopholes to prevent suspects from obtaining counsel, according to the report. Trials are generally little more than sentencing hearings. Moreover, corruption and inefficiency in the judicial system are "endemic," the report added.

Officials bypass the courts entirely in jailing, without trial, hundreds of thousands of Chinese each year under two types of administrative detention. "Reeducation through labor" camps held some 310,000 Chinese as of early 2001, and the number has very likely grown since then, Amnesty International said in an October report. Meanwhile, a system called "custody and repatriation" is used to detain one million Chinese each year, many of them homeless people and other "undesirable" city dwellers, the report said.

By most accounts, Chinese prisons, reeducation camps, and detention centers hold thousands of political prisoners, although the exact number is not known. Even after they are released, many former political prisoners face unrelenting police harassment that prevents them from holding jobs or otherwise leading normal lives.

China executes thousands of people each year, more than all other countries combined, according to Amnesty International. Many are executed immediately

after summary trials, and often for nonviolent crimes. As part of Beijing's national "Strike Hard" campaign against crime that began in 2001, many Chinese have been executed for nonviolent offenses such as corruption, pimping, hooliganism, or the theft of farm animals or rice.

Law enforcement officials routinely torture suspects to extract confessions, Amnesty International said in a September report. Courts have recently sentenced some officials convicted of torture to heavy prison sentences, although most perpetrators go unpunished. Deaths of criminal suspects in custody continue to be a concern, according to the U.S. State Department report, which did not provide figures on the number of such cases each year.

Conditions in Chinese prisons and labor camps for both political prisoners and ordinary criminals are "harsh and frequently degrading," the U.S. State Department report said. Prisoners are kept in overcrowded jails with poor sanitation and often receive inadequate food and medical care. Forced labor in prisons is "common," the report added.

The regime sharply restricts press freedom. It bars the media from promoting political reform, covering internal party politics or the inner workings of government, criticizing Beijing's domestic and international policies, or reporting financial data that the government has not released. At the same time, officials often allow the media to report on certain problems that the CCP itself seeks to alleviate. These include corruption, arbitrary decision making, and other abuses by local officials. Newspapers, however, cannot report on corruption without government and party approval.

Chinese jails held 36 journalists as of December 2002, 14 of whom were serving time for publishing or distributing information online, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists. Other journalists have been harassed, detained, threatened, or dismissed from their jobs over their reporting. Officials also recently have suspended or shut down some liberal magazines, newspapers, and publishing houses. While China's press is both public and private, the government owns and operates all radio and television stations.

The government promotes use of the Internet, which it believes to be critical to economic development, but regulates access, monitors use, and restricts and regulates content. Amnesty International, in a December report on state control of the Internet in China, said that it knows of 33 Chinese who have been detained or jailed for offenses related to their use of the Internet. Some 45 million Chinese regularly log on to the Internet, a government-funded industry group reported in mid-2002, and the number is growing rapidly.

China has hundreds of thousands of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). They

all work in areas that, at least on the surface, do not challenge the government's authority, such as the environment and the provision of social services. Officials use a complex vetting process to deny licenses to human rights or other politically oriented groups. Once registered, NGOs must report regularly to specific government departments.

Workers, farmers, and others have held thousands of public protests in recent years over labor and economic issues and corruption by local officials. Security forces, however, have forcibly broken up many demonstrations, particularly those with overt political and social messages or where protesters became unruly. Police, for example, broke up a May protest in the town of Yaowan over a lack of adequate compensation for the more than one million villagers who will be displaced by the controversial Three Gorges Dam, the London-based *The Economist* magazine reported.

Beijing sharply restricts religious freedom by placing religious groups under the tight control of state-sponsored bodies and cracking down on religious leaders and ordinary worshippers who reject this authority. For each of the five religions recognized by the government, the respective "patriotic association" appoints clergy; monitors religious membership, funding, and activities; and controls publication and distribution of religious books and other materials. Beijing does not allow the Roman Catholic patriotic association and its member churches to be openly loyal to the Vatican. The five recognized religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Buddhism claims the most adherents.

The extent to which congregations must actually submit to these regulations varies by region. In many areas, unregistered Protestant and Catholic congregations worship freely. Elsewhere, however, zealous local officials sometimes break up underground services. They also harass and at times fine, detain, beat, and torture church leaders or ordinary worshippers, and raid, close, or demolish underground churches, mosques, temples, and seminaries, according to the U.S. State Department report and other sources.

In Xinjiang, officials sharply restrict the building of new mosques, limit Islamic publications and education, ban religious practice by those under 18, and control the leadership of mosques and religious schools. Officials recently have also shut down many mosques in Xinjiang, Amnesty International says.

Tens of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners continue to be detained in China, with the vast majority apparently held without trial in "reeducation through labor" camps, Amnesty International said in a September report. At least 200 Falun Gong adherents reportedly have died in detention since 1999, according to the U.S. State Department Human Rights report. Chinese authorities generally show leniency toward ordinary practitioners who recant, while severely punishing those

who refuse, as well as core leaders. "Anti-cult" laws developed to crush the Falun Gong, which combines *qiqong* (a traditional martial art) with meditation, have also been used to sentence members of at least 16 other religious groups to long prison terms, the New York-based Human Rights Watch reported in February.

China's one-child family planning policy is applied fairly strictly in the cities and less so in the countryside. While urban couples seldom receive permission to have a second child, rural couples generally may have a second child if their first is a girl. Couples failing to comply face demotion or loss of jobs, fines of up to three times their annual salary, or loss of benefits or access to social services. Local officials have at times demolished or confiscated homes and personal property to punish couples for unpaid fines. Some officials have also forced women to undergo abortions or to be sterilized in order to meet government birth targets, the U.S. State Department report said. The government, however, appears to be relaxing the family planning policy somewhat in the cities, the report added.

Chinese women face considerable unofficial discrimination in employment and other areas and are far likelier than men to be laid off when state firms are slimmed down or privatized, according to the U.S. State Department report. Violence occurs in about 30 percent of Chinese families, with 80 percent of cases involving husbands abusing their wives, according to a 2000 survey by the official All-China Women's Federation. Trafficking in women and children, and the kidnapping and sale of women and girls for prostitution or marriage are serious problems, although the number of victims each year is not known, the State Department report said.

Muslims and other minorities face unofficial discrimination in access to jobs and other areas, and minorities credibly claim that the majority Han Chinese have reaped an outsized share of benefits from government programs and economic growth, according to the U.S. State Department report. China's 55 ethnic minorities make up just under 9 percent of the population, according to 1995 government figures.

In the absence of vigorous unions or strong enforcement of labor laws, private factories often pay workers below-minimum wages, force them to work overtime, sometimes without extra pay, and arbitrarily dismiss employees. Although the law does not guarantee the right to strike, officials frequently allow workers to strike or demonstrate against layoffs, dangerous conditions, or unpaid wages, benefits, or unemployment stipends. The government prohibits independent trade unions, requires all unions to belong to the state-run All China Federation of Trade Unions, and has detained or jailed several independent labor activists.

The economic reforms launched in the late 1970s have freed millions of Chinese from party control of their day-to-day lives. Many now work for private firms, which

account for around 30 percent of China's economic output. In urban areas, however, many state workers still must belong to company-based, government-linked work units, which control many aspects of everyday life including housing, health care, permission to have children, and approval to apply for passports. All government offices, public schools, and state firms still have party committees that handle budgets, political education, and personnel decisions. The economic reforms have also lifted hundreds of millions of Chinese out of absolute poverty, although some 200 million still live on less than \$1 per day, according to the World Bank.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*