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The Policy Programme and Human Rights Position of the Xi Jinping Administration

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Abstract

In the Nineteenth Party Congress in October 2017, Xi Jinping managed to consolidate power, generating speculation that he may even seek a third term in 2022 against the established political convention. To a considerable extent, the Party regime has been able to maintain legitimacy through economic growth, a basic social security net covering the entire population and effective governance. Above all else, Xi Jinping's impressive combat of corruption has been a significant hallmark of his administration. This article attempts to examine the policy programme of the Xi Jinping administration and understand its basic position on human rights in China's present environment where civil society is still developing under increasingly difficult conditions and as yet to be in no position to confront the Party regime.

Keywords: *Xi Jinping administration, policy programme, human rights, civil society*

1. Introduction

This article attempts to examine the policy programme of the Xi Jinping administration and understand its basic position on human rights (see Cheng, 2012). Obviously, Xi and his predecessors have made a substantial contribution to China's economic development; but the Party regime has no intention to give up its monopoly of political power. The formula for the maintenance of the regime's legitimacy during the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao administration (2002-2012) was economic growth, a basic social security net covering the entire population, and good governance without democracy. Hu Jintao and his colleagues realized that rapid economic growth could present serious shocks to social stability. Economic take-off generated a revolution of expectations; when people's demands were not met, grievances and dissatisfaction would emerge, adversely affecting social stability.

Vested interests certainly posed resistance to political reforms, but in general the Party leadership had been reluctant to allow the people's congress system and the mass media to rise as effective checks and balances mechanisms. In contrast to the promotion of political reforms and democracy, these measures would not immediately threaten the Party's monopoly of political power. In the initial years of the Hu-Wen administration, the media and the people's congress system enjoyed some limited liberalization. But since the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the entire political ecology had been tightened. In this increasing political intolerance, dissidents and the human rights movement (see Pils, 2015), autonomous labour groups, and the underground churches especially felt the pressure.

The Chinese leadership intended to create a deference effect and was willing to pay the price in terms of damage to its international image. At the same time, it engaged in spending large amounts of resources to enhance China's soft power. This was of course in line with

the Party regime's priorities, to remove the threat to the dictatorship of the Party always came first.

The strengthening of political suppression was to some extent related to the difficulties in the domestic and international environment. In 2008, there were riots and disturbances in Tibet, followed by those in Xinjiang in the next year. Since then, mass incidents had been on the increase, people's rights consciousness strengthened and their political struggle skills also improved in sophistication. In 2010, migrant workers in a number of coastal cities went on strikes and protests to fight for better wages and working environment. Chinese leaders adopted soft tactics in handling the incidents, but there had been no serious political reforms since the Tiananmen Incident in 1989.

The 2008-2009 global financial crisis heralded slower economic growth worldwide. Though the Chinese economy well demonstrated its resilience and its relative position actually improved, it had to accept the new normal of slower economic growth in the following decade. The accompanying downturn in world trade and the excessive capacity accumulated as a result of the stimuli packages introduced in the wake of the crisis strengthened the sustainable development strategy of relying more on domestic consumption rather than exports and infrastructure investment. This meant that the regime was willing to spend more on social services and the improvement of people's livelihood.

The Arab Spring in 2010 further alerted the Chinese leadership to the maintenance of social and political stability. Political control further tightened, especially regarding the Internet and social media. The authorities paid more attention to the employment issue, especially that of the fresh graduates, in view of the large-scale expansion of tertiary education since 1999. During the Hu-Wen administration, China became the second largest economy in the world and the largest trading state; after the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Shanghai held the World Expo in 2010.

Chinese people believed that China had "stood up", and were proud of China's rising international status.

While the Hu-Wen administration realized that raising China's international status had become an important source of legitimacy for the Party regime, they tended to continue to adopt a low profile. It avoided any reference to the Beijing Consensus (see Ramo, 2004: 11-13; Williamson, 1990: 8-19) nor G-2, for example. In fact, the mainstream Chinese mass media avoided talking about "*shengshi*" (a glorious era) (Wu, 2010: 29-30) soon after the global financial crisis in 2008-2009, probably in recognition of the deteriorating domestic and international environments.

2. The Policy Orientation of the Xi Jinping Administration

During the Xi Jinping administration, Chinese leaders realized that double-digit economic growth rates could no longer be maintained. In the new normal, China would still achieve high medium-range growth rates, i.e., about 6-7 per cent per annum. In the 2013-2016 period, China secured an average annual economic growth rate of 7.2 per cent, higher than the world average of 2.6 per cent and the developing counties' average of 4 per cent in the same period. In these years, per capita annual disposable income increased 33.3 per cent to 23,821 yuan at an average annual rate of 7.4 per cent. Xi Jinping administration was proud to indicate that people's income rose at a higher rate than GDP growth; and it also pointed out that the Gini coefficient dropped from 0.474 in 2012 to 0.465 in 2016 (Zhang and Fan, 2018: 3-5). This is nonetheless still an unacceptably high level for a socialist country, and exceeds the commonly recognized safety level.

In 2017, the National Reform and Development Commission released a policy document on deepening the reform of the income

distribution system. The gist was to improve the remuneration for technical personnel, those engaged in scientific and technological work, enterprise managers and executives, new-type professional farmers, etc. to enhance their incentives; and to improve the taxation system, the social security system and poverty alleviation work[1] (see also Zhang and Fan, 2018: 6).

It is obvious that the Xi administration has maintained the basic objective since the beginning of the era of economic reforms and opening to the external world to exploit economic growth as the major source of legitimacy for the regime. However, when the economy slows down, his administration is more concerned about raising people's living standards to stimulate domestic consumption, and to limit the widening gap between the rich and poor as well as strengthen income re-distribution to contain the grievances. The predominant considerations are regime maintenance and regime legitimacy, as well as social and political stability, through people benefitting from such a policy programme.

Employment has been a key element in avoiding social instability, an inconstant lesson learnt from the Arab Spring. In 2012-2016, employment improved despite the economic slowdown. It was claimed that employment had been secured for the rise in urban population with new job positions amounting to over 65 million; re-employment for 27.9 million workers who had lost their jobs were achieved; and 8.8 million urban workers with inadequate qualifications also managed to find jobs. In 2017, newly employed workers reached 10.97 million in the first three quarters, in comparison with the annual target of 11 million. In the same year, the urban registered unemployment rate stayed below 4 per cent; and the unemployment rate based on surveys in 31 major cities remained below 5 per cent (Zhang and Fan, 2018: 8). The respectable combat of unemployment was due to economic growth, the expansion of

the tertiary sector, the support given to small and micro enterprises, and the reforms adopted by the relevant government agencies.

China produced 7.56 million graduates from tertiary institutions in 2016 and 7.95 million graduates in 2017. According to statistics, actual employment of graduates was maintained at a high level of over 90 per cent from 2011 to 2015, increasing from 90.2 per cent to 91.7 per cent. Encouragement of graduates to start their own businesses and seeking further education both help to reduce the employment pressure. According to opinion surveys, the employment quality index of fresh graduates stayed at a level between 63.08 per cent and 67.56 per cent in 2010-2015; and their employment satisfaction index rose considerably from 47 per cent in 2010 and 2011 to 62 per cent in 2015 (Zhang and Fan, 2018: 8-9; Mo, Chen and Wang, 2018: 48-56). In view of the increasing number of graduates and the fact that a substantial segment of them did not have the qualifications and training to meet the job market demands, their employment quality and employment satisfaction were not too bad, probably reflecting the graduates' adjustment to the real world situation.

The Xi Jinping administration continues the Hu-Wen administration's work in providing a basic social security net covering the entire population. At the end of 2016, the basic pension system, unemployment benefits system, work injuries compensation system and the childbirth insurance system covered 888 million people, 181 million people, 219 million people and 185 million people respectively. The basic medical insurance system was participated by more than 1.3 billion people, actually succeeding in universal suffrage. In the same year, the basic pension scheme provided an average monthly payment of 120 yuan per head; and those enjoying an enterprise retirement scheme received an average monthly payment of 2,362 yuan per head. In 2017, government budgetary subsidy for the basic medical insurance system

reached 450 yuan per head[2] (see also Zhang and Fan, 2018: 11-12).

In the first five years of the Xi administration, poverty alleviation work also made substantial progress. It was claimed that over 60 million people were lifted above the poverty line. In 2017, 28 poor counties passed the review of the national authorities and were removed the designation. Since thirty-one years ago when the state first designated poor counties for assistance, this was the first time that a net decline in their number occurred.

In 2016, the poor population in rural areas fell to 43.35 million people assuming the poverty line to be a per capita net income of 2,300 yuan per annum (at 2010 unchanged prices) – a fall of 92.4 million people compared with 2015. In 2017, the Xi administration would concentrate on consecutive patches of especially difficult areas, old revolutionary areas, ethnic minority areas and the border regions, and it was hoped that the rural poor population would be reduced to 30 million (Zhang and Fan, 2018: 13).

According to the document "'Healthy China 2030' Planning Guidelines", in 2015 life expectancy in China had reached 76.34 years with infant mortality rate, death rate for children below five, and death rate for pregnant women at childbirth declining to 8.1 per cent, 10.7 per cent and 20.1 per 100,000 respectively. It was said that, by 2020, Chinese people's health level would reach the front ranks of high middle-level income countries. By 2030, the key health indicators of the Chinese nation would reach the level of high-income countries; at that time, Chinese people's life expectancy would reach 79 per cent or even exceed 80 years, infant mortality rate would fall to 6 per cent, and the death rate for pregnant women at childbirth to 12 per 100,000 (Zhang and Fan, 2018: 12-13).

In terms of good governance, Xi Jinping pledged in his political report to the Nineteenth Party Congress on 18th October 2017 that his

administration should be good at learning, at exercising political leadership, at exercising law-based governance, at engaging with the people, at implementing policy and at managing risks, as well as should be good reformers and pioneers, and good at promoting sound development. He also promised to improve the Party's ability to purify itself, deepen reform of the national supervision system, as well as reform the auditing management system and improve the statistics system (Xi, 2017: 61-67).

Above all else, Xi Jinping's impressive combat of corruption has been a significant hallmark of his administration. At the Nineteenth Party Congress, Xi promised to continue the campaign and considered "the fight against corruption remains grave and complex", and that his administration would "institute a system of disciplinary inspection for city and county level Party committees" (Xi, 2017: 60-61). While this campaign against corruption was used as a tool to strike at the political enemies of Xi in the intra-Party political struggles at high levels, the campaign has been popular among the people. The problem of corruption certainly has not been resolved, the people's congress system and the mass media have not been given any role in the combat of corruption, and this combat has been relying on campaign activities which can hardly be sustainable. Conspicuous consumption declined, though this was not good for the economy. The authorities reported on the drop in expenditure on conferences, official travels and official cars; for example, such expenditure at the central government level was reduced by 31 million yuan in the 2017 budget (Zhang and Fan, 2018: 4).

It is worth mentioning also that the Xi Jinping administration continues to accord considerable priority to environmental protection. China's forest coverage increased from 21.38 per cent in 2012 to 22.3 per cent in 2016; and the PM 2.5 average density in the Beijing-Tianjin-

Hebei area, the Yangtze Delta and the Pearl River Delta fell more than 30 per cent from 2013 to 2016. Water quality was said to be stable during the first five years of the Xi administration. In 2017, it was highlighted in the mass media that the water of the Yellow River became clearer (Zhang and Fan, 2018: 16).

In striving to enhance the legitimacy of the regime and ensure social and political stability, the Xi Jinping administration's policy programme has made contributions to people's livelihood issues.

3. The Self-confidence of the Xi Jinping Administration and Its International Propaganda Offensive

In contrast to his predecessors, Xi has adopted a much higher profile domestically and internationally. He advocated the idea of the China Dream and talked about "self-confidence in following the right path, self-confidence in theory, self-confidence in institutions and self-confidence in culture". This self-confidence means much less tolerance for Western ideas.

In spring 2013, the Communist Policy of China (CPC) Central Committee Office released a document criticizing that the spread of universal values was to deny Party leadership, hence political core objective of the censorship was imposed against the discussions of universal values, freedom of the media, civil society, civil rights, the historical mistakes of the CPC, the concept of the power elite capitalist class and the independence of the judiciary. The policy document also condemned "historical nihilism", i.e., denying the verdicts of the Party on historical issues, with the ultimate objective of weakening and even overthrowing the legitimacy of Party leadership (He, 2013). These were very serious accusations under the Party regime.

Xi Jinping obviously considers that the spread of liberal Western ideas and criticisms against the Party positions on important historical issues dangerous to the maintenance of the Party regime and political stability. This harsh position quickly led to strict control of the Internet and the social media, as well as deliberations in university campuses. The violations of human rights will be discussed below. But the author's academic friends in China told him that soon after this, university staff members of associate professorship and above would be required to deposit their passports with the university management; they should ask for them before their overseas travels. Nationally the academic papers they were to deliver at academic conferences abroad had to be submitted beforehand for approval. Their travel schedules were limited; academic trips should not exceed one weak, and the academics often complained that they could not extend their academic visits to do a bit of tourist sightseeing.

The self-confidence and high profile on the part of Xi Jinping led to a large-scale offensive to articulate China's position in the international community. Xi introduced his concept of "building a community of shared future of all humankind" (*goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti*), and this was articulated in Xi's speeches in international fora in the first term of his administration. The important message had been that China shared common interests with the entire human race, and that China's rise would be beneficial, and not a threat, to the global society. It also involved implicitly a claim that China would assume an increasing role in global governance. Xi Jinping fully realized that his contributions to enhancing China's international status and influence would, in turn, strengthen his administration's legitimacy and his own domestic political appeal.

In January 2017, Xi delivered a speech at the United Nations' Palais des Nations in Geneva. He stated:

> Sovereign equality is the most important norm governing state-to-state relations over the past centuries and the cardinal principle observed by the United Nations and all other international organizations. The essence of sovereign equality is that the sovereignty and dignity of all countries, whether big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, must be respected, their internal affairs allow no interference and they have the right to independently choose their social system and development path.
>
> (Worden, 2017)

There was nothing new in the above statement; the basic rationale is why other countries should not criticize China's human rights record. Chinese leaders firmly believe that this line of defence is widely shared by developing countries, and would serve as the foundation for a united front in which China would play a key role. Chinese leaders and their diplomats often preach dialogue, consultation and "openness and inclusiveness", i.e., China and the developing countries must not be excluded.

The Chinese position on human rights accords a priority to the right to development and economic rights over individual civil and political rights, and insists on a relativistic approach to human rights based on each country's unique history, culture, values, and political system (Worden, 2017). The position again is welcomed by developing countries, and China's united front strategy has been quite successful in winning a majority support in international organizations against the Western world's criticisms of China's violations of human rights. In turn, China has been actively in support of other Third World countries in their defence against Western countries' similar criticisms. Together they have been fairly successful in weakening the United Nations human

rights framework based on the principle of the universality, indivisibility and inter-dependence of all human rights.

China's diplomatic offensive involves introducing China's position into various resolutions of international organizations and fora. For example, China's concept of "building a community of shared future" was included in two resolutions adopted during the 34th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in March 2017: a resolution on the "Question of the realization in all countries of economic, social and cultural rights" (A/HRC/34/L.4/Rev.1) and a resolution on "The Right To Food" (a/HRC/34/l.21).

The Chinese authorities in recent years have the sources and skills to organize international events to spread China's position on human rights too; and these activities are relatively new, demonstrating the high-profile and self-confidence of the Xi Jinping administration. On March 8, 2017, for example, the Chinese Mission to the United Nations Office in Geneva and the China Society for Human Rights Studies (an NGO sponsored by the Chinese government) held a side event entitled "Building a Community of shared Future for Mankind: A New Approach to Global Human Rights Governance". In the following June session of the Human Rights Council, another similar side event was organized on "building a community of shared future". It released a joint statement on behalf of more than 140 countries entitled "Joining Hands to Reduce Poverty, Promote and Protect Human Rights" (Worden, 2017).

In early December 2017, China organized a more ambitious "South-South Human Rights Forum" in Beijing for the first time. President Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory message, and it emphasized that: "The development of human rights worldwide cannot be achieved without the joint efforts of developing countries, which account for more than 80 per cent of the world's population … Developing countries should uphold both the universality and particularity of human rights and steadily raise

the level of human rights protection. It is important for the international community to respect and reflect the will of the [human rights protection.]"[3].

In the broader context, China is now the second largest economy in the world and the largest trading nation. Its imports of energy and industrial new materials have supported commodity prices and offered better terms of trade for developing countries heavily dependent on exports of resources. As a major aid donor and source of foreign investment, China has presented itself as a competitive alternative to the U.S. and the European Union. It has refused to join hands with the latter to exert pressure on the Third World countries to improve their governance, and instead insists on respect for national sovereignty. This position backed by substantial economic power, including foreign exchange reserves of more than US$3 trillion seeking investment outlets, means that China's position on human rights easily attracts the support of the non-democratic developing countries. Under the Xi Jinping administration, China has been much more active in building an international united front articulating the fundamental tenets of China's traditional human rights perspective.

The self-confidence of the Xi Jinping administration was perhaps best illustrated by the release of a book entitled *China's New Achievements in Human Rights (2012-2017)*, with a preface written by Foreign Minister Wang Yi, which was released to welcome the holding of the Nineteenth Party Congress. The preface was published in full by the *People's Daily* on September 14, 2017. Wang quoted Xi Jinping's claim that "China has combined the universal principle of human rights with China's reality, and found a route suited to China's national conditions" (Gao, 2017). Wang also indicated that China had broadly participated in international human rights governance; in the first term of the Xi Jinping administration, China conducted more than fifty dialogues

on human rights with more than twenty countries. Moreover, China had twice deterred the attempts of some countries to interfere in China's internal affairs in the name of human rights, and China managed to preserve its image (Gao, 2017).

China continued to participate at a formal level with international human rights mechanisms, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council's universal periodic review process (see Inboden, 2017: 17). But the Chinese authorities placed serious barriers to visits by United Nations human rights officials. From 2005 to the autumn of 2017, Beijing had not allowed a visit by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights; and continued to delay fifteen requests for visits by special rapporteurs working on political and civil rights issues. China, however, allowed visits by four rapporteurs between 2005 and September 2017 on issues like poverty, debt and the status of women. But their visits were restricted, and contacts not sanctioned by the Chinese authorities posed risks to those involved.[4]

In August 2016, the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty, Philip Alston, visited China. In his departing press conference, he noted some improvements made but condemned the "dramatically shrinking space for civil society". Subsequently, the United Nations expressed concern about the detention of Jiang Tianyong, a prominent human rights lawyer who had met Alston in Beijing; Jiang disappeared for several months and was later charged with subversion[5] (see Human Rights Watch, 2017: 12).

The deteriorations in the human rights conditions in China began to attract international attention in the recent years. In February 2016, the United Nation High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern regarding China's continued arbitrary detention and interrogation of human rights lawyers, harassment and intimidation of government critics and NGO workers, and the negative impact on basic rights of the new

Foreign NGO Management Law.

In the same month, the European Parliament adopted a strong resolution condemning human rights abuses in China; and in the following March, a dozen governments led by the U.S. issued a statement condemning China's "deteriorating human rights record" at the United Nations Human Rights Council. The United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, in his first China visit in July 2016, also expressed concern about its crackdown on civil society, and urged the Chinese authorities to give "citizens a full say and role in the political life of their country" (Human Rights Watch, 2017: 11).

On the whole, these criticisms were rare, and they were not accompanied by any pressures on China to change. Chinese leaders correctly interpreted them to be gestures in response to domestic public opinion pressures, and that the governments and international organizations concerned had no intention to impose sanctions on China, instead they were prepared to maintain good relations with China. Hence Chinese leaders ignored these criticisms.

The Xi Jinping administration has been relieved to note that the Donald Trump administration is not interested in human rights issues. President Trump's "America First" policy demands Beijing to exert pressure on Pyongyang and make concessions in trade issues, reducing China's trade surplus and allowing the U.S. to increase domestic investment in its re-industrialization and enhance employment. Xi Jinping seems willing to respond in a measured manner. In March 2017, when eleven countries signed a letter criticizing China for torturing its human rights lawyers, the U.S. was not one of them, marking the first time the U.S. refused to sign this type of joint statement (Rothschild, 2017).

4. The Human Rights Violations under the Xi Jinping Administration

From the point of view of removing threats to the Party regime, human rights lawyers, autonomous labour groups and underground churches became major targets in the Xi Jinping administration's political crackdown. At the same time, to ensure social and political stability, control of the Internet and social media had been much tightened. Xi even demanded the official mass media to declare absolute political loyalty to the Party.[6]

Human rights lawyers were perhaps a good example to illustrate this political crackdown. Teng Biao, a famous human rights lawyer in China, was lauded by state media in 2003; he was detained in 2011 and subsequently exiled.[7] Chinese leaders advocated the rule of law and was supported by the human rights lawyers, hence they were praised. But when they really wanted to uphold the rule of law and defended the rights of dissidents and various types of political activists, they themselves became targets of a political crackdown. In fact, they had no intention to challenge the Party regime, but the latter perceived them as a threat (Pils, 2015).

In July 2015, the Chinese authorities disappeared, detained or questioned at least 159 lawyers and activists throughout China, including Wang Yu, Zhou Shifeng, Li Heping and Sui Muqing. They were well known for their rights defence work, such as representing clients facing persecution for their religious beliefs, forced evictions and rights defence activities. Sharon Hom, executive director of Human Rights in China, stated: "The massive rounding up of frontline legal advocates whose roles are to protect rights exposes the government's 'rule-by-law' policy for what it is: a weapon for repression. It also seriously undermines China's international credibility and domestic legitimacy."[8]

Official media now characterize these human rights lawyers as a "major criminal gang", accusing them of "stirring up several serious public opinion issues" and "disrupting the legal process". This crackdown on human rights lawyers continues till now, and interested readers may go to the website of China Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group for an updated list.

The Chinese authorities in recent years increasingly use ill-defined public order charges against human rights lawyers and various types of activists, including "creating disturbances" and "disturbing social order". Charges of "subversion" since the mid-2010s have been extended to human rights lawyers and other activists, and this crime may carry prison terms of ten years or more. They are also frequently put on trial on national television to "voluntarily" confess to their crimes (see Human Rights Watch, 2017: 3; Rothschild, 2017). This helps to justify the arrests and trials on the part of the Chinese authorities, and humiliates the activists concerned. But it also shows that the Chinese authorities have no respect for basic human rights, though they are very skilful in exploiting human weaknesses. It is believed that torture is widely practised in China's public security apparatus (see, for example China Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group, 2017).

In 2014 or so, labour unrest was exacerbated in the coastal cities in China because the global economic slowdown and rising wages due to labour shortage were forcing some factories to close or move inland, often without proper compensation for the workers affected. The number of strikes more than doubled from 656 in 2013 to 1,378 in 2014, according to China Labour Bulletin, a Hong Kong-based advocacy group. In April 2014, it was reported that 40,000 employees of Adidas and Nike supplier Yue Yuen went on strike to demand social insurance payments.[9]

Autonomous labours groups were active in helping the workers and they were perceived by the Chinese authorities as troublemakers because the latter saw strikes as mass incident threatening social stability. Social media platforms such as Wechat, QQ and Sina Weibo were facilitating news of industrial action to spread. Zeng Feiyang, director of the Panyu Migrant Workers Centre in Guangzhou and a prominent labour activist, was detained overnight without charge in a police station for the first time in December 2014. Many labour activists could not find accommodation and/ or maintain offices because police told their landlords that they were politically dangerous.[10]

In January 2016, Zeng and three other labour activists were arrested, and Zeng was charged with "disturbing social order". Human rights groups indicated that this wave of clampdown on dissent was the most sweeping in two decades in China. In 2015, the number of strikes in China further doubled that for the previous year to a record 2,774.[11] Meanwhile, the Chinese authorities launched a smear campaign against Zeng Feiyang.[12] The Xinhua report appeared in the *People's Daily* the next day.

In the beginning of the 2010s, the Chinese authorities attempted to absorb the autonomous labour groups and NGOs into the official orbit by making it easy for them to formally register and involving them in service delivery for the official social service programmes. Those which were absorbed had no more worries of political suppression and funding support, though they lost their autonomy and had to operate according to official guidelines. Those which refused became obvious targets of political crackdowns.

Christianity, especially its family churches, is seen as a threat by the Chinese authorities because it has been affecting China in an important way in the cultural globalization process, and China's democratization process is a part of the cultural globalization process too. Family

churches have been causing serious changes in China's state-society relationship as well as having an impact on the values and thinking of the Chinese people (Cheng and Li, 2014). This explains why the Chinese leadership tolerates the traditional temples and forms of worship but not the spread of Christianity.

According to Micklethwait and Wooldridge (2010), by 2050, China's Christian population will be the largest of all countries. It will probably reach 200 million by 2020 on the basis of 5 per cent growth per annum; and may eventually reach 300 million. In April 2016, Xi Jinping gave a major speech on religion, and he warned against "overseas infiltration through religions means" as well as called on religions to "Sinicize" or "adopt Chinese characteristics" (Human Rights Watch, 2017: 9). Apparently, he very much had Christianity in mind.

Many businessmen in Wenzhou, Zhejiang, famous for its entrepreneurship, have been converted to Christianity. They attempted to practice Protestant ethics, set a good example in their way of life and actively engage in charity work. But in recent years, even the churches there could not escape suppression. In 2015, many Christians were detained for resisting the provincial campaign to remove crosses from churches, though some of them were released in the following year. In February 2016, Zhejiang (known as "China's heartland of Christianity") state television showed a coerced confession of human rights lawyer Zhang Kai, who had been detained incommunicado for providing legal advice to Christians affected by the cross removals. Zhang was released in the next month. In Jinhua city in the same province, pastors Bao Guohua and Xing Wenxiang were sentenced to fourteen and twelve years respectively, in a case widely believed to be retaliation for their opposition to the anti-cross campaign.

In August 2016, a Tianjin court sentenced Hu Shigen, a prominent activist and a Christian, to seven and a half years in prison. Hu's crimes

included "rising illegal religious activities as a platform" to "spread subversive thoughts". In the following month, the Chinese government publicized draft revisions to its restrictive Religious Regulations promulgated in 2005, demanding that religion "protects national security" and prohibiting individuals and groups not approved as religious bodies from attending meetings abroad on religion (Human Rights Watch, 2017: 8-9).

After the riots and protests in Tibet and Xinjiang in 2008 and 2009 respectively, there were some brief attempts to adopt a more relaxed policy line towards the Tibetans and Uighurs. But the soft line was soon abandoned. The severe restrictions on fundamental human rights and pervasive ethnic and religious discriminations have led to widespread resentment against the Chinese authorities, many protests and even some acts of terrorism from radical Muslim Uighurs. Xinjiang and Tibet consist of almost one quarter of the land mass in China, and naturally have been a very significant issue of national security in the eyes of the Chinese leadership. But policies of forced assimilation and integration imply severe disrespect of the ethnic minorities' cultures, religions and languages; and they are blatantly unsuccessful in bringing peace and harmony. Yet the Chinese leadership has obviously failed to overcome its ideological and cultural arrogance. Since the repressive policies go against the Chinese Constitution as well as the Chinese authorities' declarations and pledges, the Tibetans and Uighurs naturally deny the party regime legitimacy and trust. Chinese leaders still believe that pumping money into the ethnic minority areas to raise living standards and public services will win the hearts of the people, but they have been proven wrong.

In 2016, the Chinese authorities promoted "anti-splittism" and "stability maintenance" campaigns despite the absence of tangible threats, and all residents of Tibet were barred from foreign travel. The

Thirteenth Five-Year Economic and Social Development Programme (2016-2020) as usual sets ambitious goals for major infrastructure and urban development projects; and the Tibetan areas in Qinghai and Sichuan provinces have been slated for more resource extraction. These development plans generated many public protests including those involving rural land grabs.

The restrictions on religious freedom included a programme of demolition and evictions at Larung Gar monastery complex in Serta county, Sichuan; and the world's largest Tibetan Buddhist mark community would be reduced from at least 10,000 in 2016 to about 5,000 by September 2017. Meanwhile, the self-immolation campaign of Tibetans continued (Human Rights Watch, 2017: 7-8).

In Xinjiang, the Ili police announced that applicants for passports must supply a DNA sample, fingerprints, a voice recording, and a "three-dimensional image". The requirement added to existing restrictions on foreign travel for Xinjiang residents, and heralded the advanced technological *1984* version of surveillance and control. Local government authorities continued to ban civil servants, students and teachers from fasting and ordered restaurants to stay open during the month of Ramadan. In August 2016, the Xinjiang authorities issued a new directive to implement the national Counterterrorism Law (Human Rights Watch, 2017: 7).

In early 2018, the Xinjiang authorities sent thousands of Uighurs to "political re-education camps" to learn Putonghua, sing pro-CPC songs and articulate praises of the Party regime. It was reported that about 120,000 people in southern Xinjiang had been admitted into these re-education camps. The inmates also had to confess their crimes such as visiting mosques or travelling abroad. A BBC reporter visiting Xinjiang was said to have been monitored and harassed.[13]

Finally, the severe restrictions on freedom of expression in China were solid evidence against the self-confidence articulated by the Xi Jinping administration. In early 2016, there was campaign to shut down the microblog of prominent bloggers including that of Ren Zhiqiang who had 35 million followers, after Ren criticized Xi Jinping's appeal to the major state media to pledge absolute loyalty to the Party. In the following May, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) net video companies and asked them to sell company equity stakes to the government as a means to increase control over content.

In June 2016, the Cyberspace Administration issued new rules demanding app providers to keep user logo for sixty days to reduce the spread of "illegal information". It also ordered news websites to "clean up" comment sections to remove views prohibited by the government. In the next month, the Beijing Cyberspace Administration shut down seven web-based news channels of Sohu, Sina, NetEase and Ifeng; and *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, a moderately liberal magazine backed by some Party elders, was closed. Then in August in the same year, the Cyberspace Administration imposed new requirements on websites, including demanding staff to monitor content round the clock; and the SAPPRFT released a notice ordering all media "not to promote Western lifestyles" or "to poke fun at Chinese values" when reporting entertainment news (Human Rights Watch, 2017: 4-5). The above of course is a limited sample.

5. Conclusion

In the Nineteenth Party Congress in October 2017, Xi Jinping managed to consolidate power, generating speculation that he may even seek a third term in 2022 against the established political convention. It is

therefore expected that the policy programmes and inclinations discussed in this article will continue; and there are no signs that the human rights situation in China will improve.

To a considerable extent, the Party regime has been able to maintain legitimacy through economic growth, a basic social security net covering the entire population and effective governance. The Xi Jinping administration has been spending a higher proportion of the budget on public and social services, and his combat of corruption and his efforts to enhance China's international status and influence have been popular among the people. It is not likely that an Arab Spring kind of situation would arise in China in the coming five years or so.

Meanwhile, civil society is still developing under increasingly difficult conditions. It is in no position to confront the Party regime yet, and probably will not be able to do so in Xi Jinping's second term. But the intelligentsia has become more and more exposed to the developments in the Western world. The latter's appeal has been well demonstrated by the middle class families' enthusiasm to send their children to the elite universities in the U.S. and Europe. The weakness of the Party regime is also exposed when it can no longer hide that a considerable segment of the political elites has moved their families and wealth to the Western world.

The latter has become impatient in recent years with the lack of convergence in values in China despite its embrace of capitalism and impressive economic development. More criticisms have emerged, though there is still an absence of political will to impose sanctions. The Western world has to bear with the escalating arrogance of the Xi Jinping administration in ignoring its protests and continuing to propagate Beijing's discourse on human rights in the international community. In his political report to the Nineteenth Party Congress, Xi, for the first time, declared that "by the mid-21st century our people's

armed forces have been fully transformed into world-class forces" (Xi, 2017: 48).

In the long term, one should still have confidence that a regime which denies its people their human rights will not last long, but one has to admit that at this stage, this optimism is difficult to maintain.

Notes

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