

What is the Color of a Non-Revolution? Why the Jasmine Revolution and Arab Spring Did Not Spread to China

by John James Kennedy

While thousands of protesters led a revolutionary wave of demonstrations in Tahrir Square and the streets of Cairo, Tiananmen Square and the main avenues in Beijing remained politically silent. The Jasmine Revolution that began with a massive outpouring of citizen dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regime in Tunisia and spread to Egypt and other North African and Middle Eastern countries did not extend to China. Why not? A few Chinese bloggers attempted to capitalize on the spirit of revolt and start a color revolution in China, but their efforts fell on deaf ears. However, there was a swift response from the Chinese security police to silence the whispers of revolution.¹ Color revolutions imply massive anti-regime protests. While local protests and dissatisfaction with local offices exist in China, there is currently no mass movement against the central leadership.

The massive protests and subsequent fall of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt resulted from a complex combination of factors, which included widespread discontent with the central leadership, a strong anti-government social network, the presence of social media, and an organized elite opposition. Separately, neither popular discontent with a country's leadership, nor social networks have the potential to bring down an authoritarian regime. For example, Tunisia and Egypt experienced rising popular dissatisfaction and protests with their respective regimes long before December 2010. Many of these protests were local and focused on socioeconomic demands.² However, the combination of discontent, social networking, and elite opposition can turn a local protest over economic grievances into pervasive political demands for national change. So far, this combination does not exist in China. While China has experienced widespread discontent and protests, citizens currently direct their dissatisfaction towards their local government rather than the central leadership.³ Moreover, during the last two decades the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has enjoyed a considerably high level of citizen satisfaction. At the same time, Chinese authorities disallow any organized opposition that is not registered with (or co-opted by) the CCP, including monitoring and limiting the

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Internet and social networks. Any attempt to maintain illegal political organizations, especially independent trade unions or religious associations, typically results in the arrest of potential opposition leaders. These characteristics make it unlikely that China will experience massive anti-government demonstrations that can bring about regime change any time in the near future.

This essay examines the factors that contribute to the CCP's ability to avoid a Jasmine Revolution at this time. First is a look at predictions of regime change and possible reforms. Many excellent China scholars have made predictions about the CCP's collapse and rise of a new democratic regime over the last twenty years. While most of these predictions have not come to pass, previous inaccurate predictions can be useful in evaluating regime stability or the possibility of change. The second topic this article will address is popular satisfaction and support for the central leadership. The CCP enjoys a much higher level of popular support than Egyptian or Tunisian leaders enjoyed before the Jasmine Revolution. The third part discusses the use of social media in China. Scholars (and activists?) inside and outside of China have hoped that the Internet would provide greater access to news and information beyond the traditional state-run media, and would contribute to the spread of democratic ideals. While the Internet and cell phones have become more pervasive in Chinese society, the combination of popular entertainment such as stories of television and movie stars (infotainment) and online games as well as government attempts to control political and social bloggers has blunted the democratic influence. The last section concludes that popular dissatisfaction towards the regime and the use of social media networks, are not enough to bring about regime change. Regime change also requires elite opposition from organizations such as autonomous trade unions and political parties, whether legal or illegal, and the CCP has effectively subdued any viable national opposition organizations or leadership.

PREDICTIONS

Is it possible to predict whether regime change in China will come about through revolution or reforms? The short answer is no. Predicting regime change, especially revolutionary change, is very difficult. However, as Bruce Gilley correctly points out, predictions are an important part of our academic endeavor and "even wrongful predictions have served a useful role in stimulating debate about the future."⁴ Indeed, making inaccurate predictions is part of being an academic, especially in China studies. One joke about China scholars reflects this situation well: What do television meteorologists and China scholars have in common when it comes to making predictions? They are both wrong most of the time, but they still get to keep their jobs. This does not only pertain to China studies. Most Soviet specialists, in both academia and in the CIA, did not foresee the abrupt end of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although these specialists had to change the title of their specialties from Soviet to Russian studies, they were able to maintain their professional positions. The same can be said of the Arab Spring. Few Arab scholars

predicted the fall of President Mubarak in Egypt or of Ben Ali in Tunisia, let alone the spread of massive demonstrations across the Middle East. However, even in hindsight it is difficult to determine the exact cause that led to regime change in Tunisia and Egypt. It seems to be a combination of complex factors coupled with a trigger event. Nevertheless, previous predictions, both accurate and inaccurate, play a role in evaluating the possibility of revolution and regime change.

Over the last twenty years, some very good scholars have predicted the coming collapse of China as well as its democratization.⁵ However, neither prediction has materialized. The CCP has adapted to the international market and adjusted social policies to address some of the many social changes that accompany market reforms and rapid modernization. The CCP in 2012 is almost unrecognizably different from the CCP of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, the CCP looks more like a resilient Leninist single party than a monolithic and rigid Communist Party.⁶ The current leadership has allowed for greater economic and social reforms, and at the same time has retained control over political competition and the media. So far, the CCP has maintained a level of stability due to a combination of meeting social demands and prohibiting the legal organization of national opposition groups.

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Popular support for the CCP seems to rest on three pillars, comprised of two promises and one threat: the promise of sustained economic development, the promise of legal reform (rule of law), and the threat of chaos. Double-digit growth over the last two decades has generated greater economic opportunities and improved the lifestyles of most Chinese. While income and education gaps continue to grow, the quality of life has improved for the majority of Chinese over the last ten to twenty years. This is especially true for the new urban middle class and this connection between regime support and greater economic opportunities.⁷ The second promise is the central leadership's enactment of national laws aimed at protecting citizens from local abuses. Although these laws are weakly enforced by the central government, it is the local governments that receive the brunt of public dissatisfaction. Reports from the state-run media frequently show local officials being arrested for corruption and for not following the central government's laws and policies. This promotes the notion that the central party-government is on the side of the people and that local officials attempt to subvert national laws and policies. These two promises contribute to popular support for, or satisfaction with, the national party-government. Indeed, in comparison with the levels of popular dissatisfaction for governments in Tunisia and Egypt before the Arab Spring, the CCP enjoys a relatively high level of popular support. However, while these tactics

have short-term benefits for the central leadership, high economic growth and the constant shifting of blame to local officials may not be sustainable. Resolving the problems associated local mismanagement of public services and corruption requires major political reforms and legal development at the national and local level. Thus, it may be a race against time to determine whether or not the central government will enact significant political and legal reforms before the public shifts their dissatisfaction to the central leadership.

The CCP leadership frequently stresses the importance of social stability, claiming that without the CCP, China would break apart and disorder would ensue. Political competition and organized opposition groups are threats to social stability. This is the threat of chaos. Thus, the assurance of social stability requires disallowing any organized opposition that is not fully sanctioned by the CCP, including independent unions and labor organization, political parties, and religious groups. However, the problem with justifying policies through threats is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The CCP has successfully prevented the formation of an independent elite opposition both inside and outside the political system. As a result, any sudden collapse or implosion of the regime would leave the country without central leadership. Unlike in Egypt, where there were elite opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and leaders from the Kifaya Movement, there is no other national party or political organization in China that can successfully replace the CCP and maintain social stability.⁸

REGIME SATISFACTION

In 2010, the Pew Survey showed that only 28 percent of Egyptian respondents were satisfied with the way things were going in their country, down from 31 percent in 2009.⁹ However, the central leadership in China has enjoyed a relatively high level of support. Figure 1 shows the results for the same Pew Survey conducted annually in China and Egypt from 2006 to 2011. Satisfaction with the national condition and the performance of the central government has been steadily declining in Egypt, from a high of 55 percent satisfaction in 2006, to a low of 28 percent satisfaction in 2010. After President Mubarak resigned from office in February 2011, the Pew Survey shows a dramatic increase in satisfaction with the way things are going in Egypt. The same Pew Survey displays a high level of continued respondent satisfaction with the way things are going in China. From 2006 to 2011, over 80 percent of the respondents were satisfied with their government. Looking back further to 2000 and 2001, the World Values Survey for Egypt and China also display the difference in the level of confidence respondents had for the national government. In Egypt, 53 percent of the respondents had confidence in the national government, compared to 95 percent in China.¹⁰ Although the Pew and World Values Surveys did not conduct surveys in Tunisia and Libya, reports suggest popular support for the national government in these two countries was quite low.¹¹ Thus, over the last decade, there was a significant difference in popular support between

China and the North African countries that experienced a color revolution and regime change.

Indeed, the literature on public opinion in China suggests that public support for the CCP has been consistently high over the years.¹² All surveys examining public opinion toward the CCP conducted since the early 1990s show that over 70 percent of respondents support the central party-government. No matter how the survey questions are phrased or whether or not the survey is conducted by Chinese or international firms, the results are the same. There are several explanations for these survey results, including fear of saying anything negative about the authoritarian party-government and the persuasive impact of state-controlled media and propaganda.

So why has the CCP been able to maintain such a high level of popularity? There are three convincing explanations currently advocated by China scholars: the ability of the central leadership to direct public dissatisfaction towards local government officials and away from the central leadership, continuous economic growth, and nationalism. One of the strongest indicators that Chinese citizens are not fearful of expressing their opinions is the rising vocal discontent for local government. In fact, the personal risk for citizens alerting higher officials about local abuses can be higher than vocal criticism of the central party-government. In both national surveys as well as national reports on protests and social disturbances, citizens tend to be dissatisfied with local government officials while displaying satisfaction with the national party-government. Indeed, current reports estimate that the number of social disturbances has increased in recent years, from 90,000 in 2006 to over 180,000 in 2010.¹³ The numbers may sound alarming, but these protests are directed towards local officials. In fact, these are atomized protests with no unified movement, as this would require an organized elite

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opposition. There are various types of protests, from urban labor disputes to ethnic conflicts. However, according to Yu Jianrong, an expert on civil unrest at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, most of these recent protests are over local government land grabs and rural residents' demands for justice.¹⁴ This type of resistance is based on citizens using the national laws, such as land use contract laws or regulations on worker safety, to protect themselves from local abuses.¹⁵ While many protests are suppressed without resolving the initial problem, other demonstrations have had significant influence on pressuring local governments to act, or make changes. Over the last few years a number of urban, middle-class environmental protests have witnessed success in getting local governments to fully enforce pollution controls for local factories in coastal cities such as Xiamen and Dalian.¹⁶ Moreover, many disputes with local governments are resolved through mediation before they become major social disturbances.¹⁷

Thus, popular support for the central leadership is not based on fear, but rather on a combination of economic promises and central party-government legal attempts to protect citizens. Some segments of Chinese society support the central party-government due to the recent increase in economic opportunities for themselves and their families. Although the gap between the rich and poor is increasing, the central leadership continues to enjoy support from the majority of rural residents.

The Chinese media have been very skillful in directing discontent away from the CCP, helping avoid a popular protest against the central party-government.¹⁸ Media reports on corruption cases and cadre offenses focus on local-government officials. There has been an increase in muckraking journalism at the local level, where municipal and provincial news media have actively investigated illegal activities of officials at the township, county, municipal and even provincial levels. Of course, these stories of local corruption may also be interpreted as an ineffective central leadership unable—or unwilling—to control local party-government officials. Yet so far, the central leadership has been able to keep the blame for corruption focused on local officials.

The media also uses nationalism, by directing popular attention towards China's adversaries, including Japan, Taiwan, and the conflicts over islands in the South China Sea. Anti-Japanese sentiment is very real in Chinese society. Since the early 1990s, every few years there have been reports of large anti-Japanese protests, the most recent of which occurred in October 2010. While the central government

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allows these protests against Japanese policies or actions, the authorities also quickly control these demonstrations. Still, the media news and internet bloggers tend to fan the flames of nationalism. For example, the story of a fisherman detained by Japanese authorities in 2010 received extensive coverage on television, in print, and on the internet. Chinese television stations provide a continuous and pervasive nationalist influence through anti-Japanese movies, documentaries, and soap operas that are broadcast every evening. On any evening, one can flip through the cable television lineup and find several examples of anti-Japanese programming. Additionally, Taiwan and the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea are key topics regarding territorial integrity that incite nationalism. Thus, media reports from the state-run news sources can generate popular nationalist sentiments and contribute to support for the regime.

Another important dimension of popular support for the central government in China is the growing urban middle class. In recent years, Chinese scholars and foreign scholars studying China have been conducting surveys and analyzing opinion data to determine whether or not the Chinese middle class tends to hold more liberal views than the other classes of Chinese society. This research is premised on North American and Western European theories of democratization, and the importance of the middle class in resisting authoritarian values and adopting more liberal views.¹⁹

However, data does not reveal a clear picture of the Chinese middle class. A 2006 Chinese General Social Survey involving over 7,000 households in a national sample found that the Chinese middle class does not share common social attitudes.²⁰ Another study found that the middle class in China does possess a common political attitude, but that this attitude does not support democratic values.²¹ Finally, researchers using a nationally representative survey from the Asian Barometer found that the Chinese middle class displays more democratic attitudes than respondents categorized as lower class.²² Nevertheless, the high level of confidence in the government and satisfaction with the way things are going in China reflects a wide range of support from the lower, middle, and upper classes.

SOCIAL MEDIA

In Tunisia and Egypt, protests by students and workers that were narrowly focused on local socioeconomic demands were transformed into national anti-government demonstrations with the assistance of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and online blogs. However, in China, social media, so far, has not led to a national anti-government movement. In fact, the political discussions and calls for collective action from the social media mainly reflect opposition to local government and nationalist sentiment. Still, the Internet and mobile telecommunications have broader political potential, and in China, the central party-government has been relatively successful in limiting and monitoring political discussion, while at the same time allowing greater access to social entertainment.

While many scholars have discussed the democratic potential of the Internet to provide China's citizens with access to a wide range of political information from outside China, as well as a greater ability to communicate with likeminded critical thinkers, Internet use in China tends to be used for entertainment rather than for political organization.²³ A glance into any Internet bar in Beijing, Shanghai, or smaller city, reveals a packed, smoke-filled room of young Chinese playing online games and participating in romantic matchmaking activities. Few youths are reading the New York Times or visiting Internet salons discussing political reforms and democratic alternatives in China. Indeed, online gaming in China is a multi billion-dollar business that is growing every year. The industry in China earned 25.8 billion Yuan (or \$3.79 billion) in 2009, an increase of 39.5 percent over 2008.²⁴ Thus, while the Internet can provide access to important news sites as an alternative to the state-run media, there is a broad use of the Internet for "infotainment" as well as pro-government blogs and chat rooms.

However, the use of social media has been successful in coordinating protests—only not anti-government protests, but anti-Japanese. The Internet and text messages played a significant role in the large 2005 and 2010 anti-Japanese protests. In April 2005, what started out as online petitions urging Chinese to boycott Japanese products and oppose Japan's ascension to the United Nations Security Council ended with online collective action and calls for massive street protests that

did occur in over fifteen large cities, including Shanghai and Beijing.²⁵ In October 2010, there were major anti-Japanese protests coordinated through web pages, e-mails, and text messages in the three second-tier cities of Wuhan, Chengdu, and Xian.²⁶ This reflects the ability of the Chinese youth to coordinate large multi-province protests through online social networks. Of course, one of the central leadership's fears is that unified anti-Japanese protests may inspire future anti-government movements, yet the central party-government has avoided this outcome so far. If anything, bloggers seem to be critical of the central leadership for not being more aggressive towards Japan or the United States. In addition, high profile bloggers in China also function as whistleblowers, alerting higher officials to local cadre abuses and corruption. In fact, similar to muckraking investigative journalism, these bloggers post stories and insider reports on the corrupt activities of local government officials. This not only helps high-level officials identify local corruption, but it also contributes to the idea of "bad" local officials and a "good" central leadership.

These pro-government activists and nationalists within the authoritarian regime

A RECENT REPORT SUGGESTS THAT OVER A MILLION WEBSITES WERE SHUT DOWN IN 2010, MEANING THERE WERE 41 PERCENT FEWER WEBSITES AVAILABLE IN CHINA IN 2010 THAN IN 2009.

represent what several researchers have recently referred to as the dark side of the Internet and online nationalism in China.²⁷ Indeed, the widespread use of social media, as well as the Internet, is a double-edged sword that can contribute to nationalism and support for the authoritarian regime, while at the same time promote the spread of democratic ideals. Social media can be used in favor of the oppressors as well as the oppressed by allowing greater access to infotainment and greater expression of nationalist sentiment. Thus, permitting only a certain level of Internet freedom is actually a form of control whereby the authoritarian leadership can direct attention towards a foreign enemy, local officials, or benign news and entertainment. This has created a higher sense of nationalism and a greater support for the central leadership among Internet users in China than in there was in pre-revolutionary Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.

While allowing some online freedom is a form of indirect control over the Internet, the central party-government has also been successful in limiting access to some of the more sensitive (or, successful) social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as general Internet censorship. Internet censorship in China is based on the Great Firewall (also known as the Golden Shield) that consists of laws, regulations, and individuals who monitor the Internet using sophisticated filtering programs. This combination of high-tech programs and low-tech human monitoring has been successful in identifying sensitive topics by redirecting web content or eliminating websites altogether. A recent report suggests that over a

million websites were shut down in 2010, meaning there were 41 percent fewer websites available in China in 2010 than in 2009.²⁸ The targets are varied, from pornography and “matchmaking” sites to micro-blogs. The remaining popular websites tend to practice self-censorship in order to remain online and commercially viable. Still, there are ways for dedicated bloggers and political commentators to get around the Golden Shield, including the use of virtual private networks (VPNs). However, VPNs require a fee, and most Chinese tend to accept Internet censorship and the freedom to visit the two to three million websites currently available.²⁹

While many activists and political bloggers are using the Internet and social media to promote democratic ideas and practices, they only make up a small proportion of Chinese Internet users. Moreover, most cases of protest seem to take place offline and in the streets. In 2010, it is estimated that over 180,000 social disturbances occurred in rural and urban China.³⁰ Although the Internet and cell phones may have played an organizational role in some of these disturbances, these protests consist of community members fighting for a common cause. Indeed, some of the most recent social disturbances were organized against with local government land grabs, and the protesters were drawn together and mobilized through face-to-face interaction with persons sharing concrete common interests, such as saving their homes. Thus there is a clear difference between online whistle-blowing and mobilizing the community for social justice.

CO-OPTING THE POTENTIAL OPPOSITION

Sustained anti-government protest that can bring about regime change requires committed elite opposition leaders and organized opposition groups. While social media played a role in bringing young people together for massive demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt, Facebook and Twitter are not enough to direct and unify an anti-government movement that can lead to regime change in China.³¹ Moreover, social networking cannot provide a viable alternative to the established authoritarian leadership. In Tunisia, the General Tunisian Worker’s Union (UGTT) was an organized opposition to the authoritarian regime, boasting over a half million members in a country of only ten million. In Egypt, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was state-controlled until its demise in 2011, but an independent Union of Tax Collectors did form outside the ETUF in 2008.³² The important contribution of these labor associations in Egypt and Tunisia was that they had the capacity for face-to-face organization and communication. In addition to labor groups, there were several elite opposition leaders from illegal political parties and former social movements who participated in the Egyptian protests, including the Muslim Brotherhood and the Kefaya movement.³³ While these opposition movements were restricted under the Mubarak regime, they were allowed to exist and maintained relative autonomy. In China, no such political parties or national association could achieve the same level of autonomy within or outside the single-party system.

China's society has a stark contradiction between the general social and economic freedoms of everyday life and the rigid restrictions on political activity. All political and religious associations must register with both local and central government offices. There are no nationwide organizations allowed outside the political system. For example, no independent political-religious organization, such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, or an autonomous union such as the UGTT, can exist in China. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was a banned political party, but they ran independent candidates for the national assembly and thus won influence in the legislature.³⁴ This is not possible in China at this time. The CCP has sanctioned eight opposition parties as part of the regime, and there are no outside political parties that are tolerated like the Muslim Brotherhood was in Egypt. Additionally, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is unlikely to evolve into a more autonomous trade federation like the Tunisian UGTT, as there are no fully independent trade unions in mainland China. There have been some attempts at establishing independent unions, but these labor leaders have been arrested.³⁵ Thus, China lacks a significant elite opposition that could help organize a massive anti-government protest and provide a viable and realistic alternative to the CCP.

CONCLUSION

What is the color of a non-revolution? In China, it seems to be the same color as the old one, red. The CCP has managed to avoid a Jasmine Revolution through a combination of support and suppression. It is difficult to predict whether or not the CCP can avoid this kind of massive anti-government protest in the future, but the evidence suggests that it may not happen any time soon. The CCP has been relatively successful in allowing the public through the internet blogs and even local protests to express dissatisfaction with local government officials. Simultaneously, the central government continues to place controls and restriction on the social media and organized political groups in an attempt to keep the public discontent atomized and focused on local issues. While the central leadership enjoys public support at the moment, resolving the source of local discontent requires major political reforms and legal development. Although the central leadership does not face an immediate threat from public discontent, only time will tell whether or not the CCP will enact the type of political reforms needed to avoid a color revolution in the future.

Notes

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