

Decentralization and Authoritarianism in China

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Review of: Landry, Pierre F.: *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China. The Communist's Party Control of Local Elites in Post-Mao China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008, 320 pp. ISBN: 9780691134536

Great attention has been paid to the post-Mao reform era in China in political science literature. However, research is usually focused on various questions concerning economic policy, social policy or international relations. The change in the Chinese political system itself has been studied much less in recent years.¹ It seems that the Chinese political system did not undergo any substantial change, but the case is quite the contrary. The authoritarian regime in China is not unique for its persistence (because other authoritarian states had or have similarly long durations), but by its reliance both on authoritarian rule and decentralization. This special feature we cannot find in any other non-democratic states.²

Pierre F. Landry explores in his book the development of administrative decentralization and inquires into its impact on the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He shows important changes in 'accumulation and redistribution of political resources' and tries to explain, how China was able to achieve a high level of economic and administrative decentralization and keep its regime authoritarian at the same time (pp. 3–4).³ According to the most reliable measure of decentralization, the

subnational share of total governmental expenditures, China is one of most decentralized states in the world (following the same measure its level of decentralization is three times higher than in the case of the Czech Republic). The reform process initiated in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping and still ongoing caused an even higher level of decentralization than in the periods of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which makes it even more remarkable than it would be in its own right (pp. 3). One of the main reasons of the decentralization process was the Chinese government's effort to achieve higher economic efficiency. Central planning has been abolished and moved to the level of local administration, where various regions compete with each other. Central government nowadays determines only general guidelines of state policy; however, it controls personnel policy of all administrative structures.

China is the only stable authoritarian state with such a high level of decentralization. No other authoritarian regime achieves even half the ratio of contemporary Chinese decentralization (compared to, for example, the former Yugoslavia). Empirical data show that normally democracies have a far greater level of decentralization than authoritarian states. Nevertheless, the Chinese political system behaves in this way more like a federal democracy than a non-democratic regime (pp. 9).

What can be the explanation of this unique development, where we have a non-democratic state combined with a high level of political decision-making made by local elites? The author tests the hypothesis to what level decentralization undermines the stability of an authoritarian regime and finds that the effects are direct and indirect. Decentralization undermines an authoritarian regime directly by creating the opportunity for opposition among local government officials, which are granted more power by the process (as was the case in Mexico). Indirect threats to the regime's stability come from economic decentralization. The intuitive assumption is coherent with empirical findings that a higher level of political and economic decentralization leads to a lower possibility of authoritarian regime occurrence. But that only holds true for a 'naive economic model,' which ignores the specific character of the Chinese political system being the decisive factor explaining the unprecedented stability of the regime co-existing with high level of fiscal and administrative decentralization (pp. 11–12).

The decentralization strategy of the Chinese government after Mao's death differed to great extent from policies pursued by him. Since the Deng Xiaoping era many decision-making powers have been transferred to local governments; however, new mechanisms ensuring administrative control of the decentralization process have been institutionalised. Landry sees the main explanation in the CCP's personnel policy, which established strict rules for bureaucratic cadres' career advancement. This move enables effective control of the reform process, as well as helps to ensure regime stability and the power of the ruling party.

The stability of the Chinese regime cannot be elucidated only by the possibility of central government control powers. Landry makes his argument that the solution lies in the organisation and policy of the CCP. The party holds firmly in its hands mechanisms for cadres' appointment and promotion, which makes bureaucratic control and maintenance of the party's power at the same time possible. The method of this control is crucial, because the central government cannot directly control all higher officials in the country (hundreds of thousands of them), because of the high administrative costs. Rather, the goal is that local government's policies would be in accordance with the broader goals stated by the centre, without it being forced to directly control all levels of government itself.

The main question is what was the impact of the decentralization process on the position of the CCP? Prevailing opinion holds that the ruling party's power has diminished since decentralization began, because the CCP was not able to adapt sufficiently to a changing political, social, and economic environment. The party has not established adequate mechanisms of non-violent competition among party elites after the Mao Dzedong era of chaotic and sometimes violent power struggles in the high echelons of the party. The political process is not conditioned by institutional mechanisms, but rather is based on personal connections and widespread corruption (see Dickson 2000). However, Landry holds a contrary opinion and sees the CCP as stronger than it was 30 years ago. In this regard corruption can serve as a symbol of the party's power, which refuses to accept interventions by an independent judiciary to its policies and potentially dangerous cases of corruption are treated by the party itself.⁴

Landry's main thesis is that decentralization has to be considered in the framework of the political institution's reform, but not as democratisation. The whole process should be seen as a change of the central government's strategy to control the bureaucracy. Every level of government (provincial, municipal, county and township) is subordinated to one level higher executive and party institutions in the hierarchy, with the party holding decisive powers. Local governments have wide autonomy in their decision-making, but the appointment and promotion of their officials is determined by the CCP's relevant authorities. Landry provides a detailed analysis of cadres' preferences on lower than municipal level using data from the Jiangsu province. He focuses mainly on assessing the cadres' knowledge of mechanisms and policy guidelines affecting their career development. He is concerned about the question whether local officials adopt official 'rules of the game' ruling career promotions stated by the central government and to what extent it affects the whole system of government. Chinese bureaucracy is multidimensional in sense that appointment of particular official is influenced both by executive and CCP authorities, which are in turn subjected to higher authorities themselves.

Using the example of applied game theory Landry shows that information available to local level government officials play crucial importance in stability and efficiency

of the whole regime. For example, Khrushchev's and later Gorbachev's attempts to reform the vast Soviet bureaucracy failed, because low level cadres were not able to assess the impact of the reforms on their careers. Sufficient information was not available to them, in spite the future of administrative system being unpredictable. Players of the complex bureaucratic 'game' need not to have perfect information, but for the efficiency of the whole system it is crucial for them to have enough information as to how their behaviour would be assessed, monitored, and what impact it can have on their potential promotion. Therefore it is necessary for them to have general ideas about the government's personnel policy (119). Promotion of officials is an important process influencing the stability of the regime, because non-transparent institutionalisation of this process can lead to cadres' alienation, lower support for the central government and, in the end, to an overall destabilization. Even though it seems that higher level of decentralization demands more control from the central government concerned; the contrary is the case. Most developed provinces and cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Fujian) have relatively low level of party employees showing high discipline and stability of party's policies among those officials. On the contrary, highest level of party employees can be found in politically unstable regions, such as Tibet or Xinjiang (pp. 159).

Landry also inquired into the real development of officials' career, apart from their individual preferences. According to his findings it seems that the CCP still has unquestioned primacy in the political process, even though it does not control all policies on lower than central level directly. The Party's power affects the whole society and in the absence of free elections promotion of officials represents the only means of power allocation in Chinese political system.

Last chapter of the book considers establishment of elections on the lowest government level, in the villages. The aim of the central government for introducing elections in the villages was to ensure election of officials with high support of the local population, which would strengthen the support for party policies in the area as well. This was deemed as necessary, because rural areas are far behind cities in terms of social and economic development and are the main source of political instability. Implementation of free elections on local level enables the authoritarian regime to incorporate local elites, often hostile to the regime, and maintain political power at the same time. An example of this strategy could be the policy pursued by the Kuomintang in Taiwan after 1987, which held power for a long time after these elections had been introduced (see Dickson 1996, 1997). However, it should be noted that until 2000 the elections were not democratic and free because many limits to curb free political competition existed and still exist today in many areas (such as the presence of few or only one candidate, candidates only approved by the CCP, manipulation by the party authorities, etc.). Landry reaches the conclusion that widespread and much more democratic elections in rural areas in the future

would bring higher popularity for the CCP, but it is still premature to evaluate the impact of village elections, because truly democratic and free elections were held only in very small minority of rural areas.

Landry's book has very good methodology and the author describes methods, data, and their interpretation in great detail. Every chapter ends with a description of methods used and presents the advantages and disadvantages of particular methodological procedures adopted. The author's political and economic comparisons between the Chinese and Soviet regimes are very useful. Landry persuasively shows the importance of the gradual implementation of a decentralized government in China's case, contrary to the hurried bureaucratic reforms of Gorbachev's era in the USSR. On a general level the reviewed book acknowledges that decentralization does not have to be proportional to democratisation or liberalization, if the administration is strong enough to control the bureaucracy and does not alienate its members. The Chinese system of administration has a high level of integrity, even though the central government's power for direct control of lower administrative levels is less than at the beginning of decentralization process. Contrary to Gorbachev's *perestroika*, China was able to adapt its government structure to the new environment after economic reforms, without compromising the power status of the ruling CCP.

The Chinese case shows that it is possible without strict ideological control. The bureaucratic structure under the rule of the CCP is strongly institutionalised, notwithstanding strong pressures caused by the reforms (regional disparities, fiercer elite competition, etc.). Beijing adopted efficient institutional mechanisms, which hinder the possibility of administrative destabilization. One very important feature is that the system of cadre promotion is not completely connected to their results. Chinese mayors having worse economic results are not simply fired, but their career development is slower and they reach a lower position in the bureaucracy than in the case of their more successful colleagues. This ensures that even the less successful members of the administration support central political institutions. Pragmatic solutions are generally inherent to the Chinese leadership, as can be seen in the whole course of economic reforms, as well as in the case of the CCP itself, when it allowed that people from the private sphere (mainly businessman) to become party members (see Dickson 2003). The question remains: how would the Chinese leadership be able to tackle the problem that many perspective individuals give priority to working in the private sphere, not in the administrative structures? Landry warns at the end of his book that Chinese government will have to answer the still rising demands for more efficient public policies (contrary to just ensuring economic growth), which can lead to alienation of the bureaucratic elites not being able to answer these demands.

Notes

- ¹ But see Dethier (2000), Whiting (2001, 2004) and Dickson (1997, 2003).
- ² For good general treatment of this topic see Bunce (1999).
- ³ All page references in the text refer to the reviewed book.
- ⁴ See Marion (2004) for more in-depth treatment of corruption in China in the same vein.

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