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'POPULAR PROTESTS UNDERMINE CHINESE PRESIDENT XI JINPING'S CREDIBILITY'

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Popular discontent and dissatisfaction with Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) simmering since March 2018 erupted into overt public criticism from the end of January 2020, prompted by news of the Wuhan virus epidemic becoming public. There is presently little indication of it abating till at least the epidemic begins to peter out. By then it would have palpably dented, if not damaged, the credibility and image of Chinese President Xi Jinping and the CCP.

The immediate provocation for this outburst has been the mishandling of the 'Wuhan virus', or '2019-Codiv', by the Chinese authorities. China's social media has been awash with angry posts criticising the excessive secrecy of the system and tardy response of the authorities, reluctance to admit to the epidemic and its spread, and the absence of transparency. Interesting was a report in the authoritative, official news agency Xinhua on February 10, which revealed that Beijing's Ditan Hospital was treating coronavirus patients as early as January 12, more than 10 days before the city's first cases were publicly announced at another hospital in the Daxing district and Chinese epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan confirmed that the disease was being transmitted from person-to-person! Video clips being posted on China's social media show that preparations to tackle the epidemic were inadequate with overcrowded hospitals and medical personnel pleading for medicines and medical supplies. The death of the 34-year old Doctor and 'whistle-blower' on February 7, gave a fillip to the criticism and sharp condemnations. Xi Jinping's disappearance from the official media and public functions from January 29 till February 10 were commented upon. The spate of public criticism has questioned the system of governance, the CCP's legitimacy and undermined Xi Jinping's credibility.

Criticism has been unusually blunt. People posted criticisms on their personal accounts despite the certain personal risk. Critics include at least two prominent Chinese intellectuals and academics and a Judge of the Supreme People's Procuratorate. A prominent Chinese civil rights activist and former lecturer at the Beijing University of Post and Telecommunications, 46-year old Xu Zhiyong, posted an article on social media on February 3, urging Xi Jinping to step down for his "inability to handle major crises". He cited several examples, including the China-US trade war, the anti-government protests in Hong Kong and the coronavirus outbreak. He called Xi Jinping's political ideology "confusing", his governance model "outdated" and said he had ruined China with "exhaustive social stability maintenance measures". Xu Zhiyong said "Seven years ago, I appealed to you to lead China to become a nation that respects democracy and the constitution, but in return I was thrown in jail for four years. And now, your men are still looking for me trying to throw me back in jail again. I don't

think you are a villain, just someone who is not very smart. For the public's sake, I'm asking you again: Step down, Mr Xi Jinping."

Reputed Tsinghua University Professor Xu Zhangrun, on February 5, posted a scathing 6246-character criticism of Xi Jinping and the Chinese authorities captioned 'Angry People No Longer Fear', which went viral on China's social media. The article accused the authorities in Zhongnanhai and specifically Xi Jinping of being out of touch with the peoples' needs and perpetuating an elite with so-called 'Red Genes'. It accused Xi Jinping and a "small circle of leaders" of creating a "state within a state and engaging in "big data terrorism". He charged that "The political system has collapsed under the tyranny, and a governance system [made up] of bureaucrats, which has taken [the party] more than 30 years to build has floundered". He accused the authorities of spending the "taxpayers' hard-earned money for feeding the massive Internet police to monitor every word and deed of nationals". Xu Zhangrun said they have not only "stifled public discussion of all ideas of life, but also stifled social communication and early warning mechanisms that existed originally" and blamed this for the failure of the authorities in Hubei to take precautions to control the epidemic. The article, which called Xi Jinping a "political tyrant", declared "the people no longer fear" and "the Sun will eventually come to this land of freedom!" Another major 10,000-character article published by Xu Zhangrun on July 24, 2018, had ricocheted across China creating a stir among Chinese academics and students. He was suspended from his post, banned from leaving China and not allowed to publish his writings freely in China.

Pertinent is that though both Xu Zhiyong and Xu Zhangrun have been penalised and prohibited from writing, yet they have been able to post their articles on China's social media.

Unprecedented is the lengthy article posted on February 13 on the public social media account of Duan Zhanjiang, a Judge of China's Supreme People's Procuratorate. The article on the account criticised the shortcomings in governance, not allowing civil society to have a larger role, suppression of free speech, prediction of a far serious fallout for the Chinese economy etc. It referred also to Tsinghua University Professor Xu Zhangrun's recent lengthy article. The article is a clear indictment of Chinese President Xi Jinping. The article did, though, end with the curious disclaimer that these are not the personal views of the Judge.

Surprising was the instigation via a Twitter account calling on the people of Wuhan to protest "the communist government's suppression of freedom of speech and its hiding of information". It urged the people to protest from their homes from 8 pm to 8:30 pm on February 14, 2020 by: turning off the lights for one minute at 8 pm; simultaneously knocking on pans and shouting "Protest"; the slogans "Cheers, Wuhan People!"; "Wuhan People, Save Ourselves!"; "Release Chen Qishi!" and "Release Fang Bin!" (both arrested for revealing the truth about the epidemic situation in Wuhan); singing China's National Anthem; throwing flyers and other pieces of paper from their homes; and doing a live broadcast or recording short videos to spread on the Internet.

But dissatisfaction with Xi Jinping and the regime has been simmering since at least 2018. The economic slowdown, unemployment, rising cost of living and consumer inflation at a near six-year high have all contributed to the discontent. Accentuated by the US-China trade war, the economic slowdown resulted in the closure of factories and restaurants and lay-offs of

millions of workers. The relentless campaign against corruption, which has felled hundreds of senior Party, Military and Government cadres along with millions of Party members, added to the pools of popular discontent. The negative sentiments would have got accentuated as people met relatives in their hometowns and villages during the annual Chinese New Year holidays in end January. Onset of the epidemic and quarantine regulations will have compelled many to extend their stays.

Clear indication of discontent were the sharp reactions to the proposal mooted at the National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2018 to abolish term limits on the posts of China's President and Vice President. Senior prominent academics, students and others reacted negatively to the proposal saying they did not want a return to Mao's 'one-man rule' and asked Deputies to the National People's Congress (NPC) to reject it. Many Party members, including in the CCP Central Committee, still retain unpleasant memories of the Cultural Revolution. Popular resentment has mounted since then.

Popular discontent was further heightened by the imposition of controls and Party ideology on academia. Party cadres have been posted in classrooms since 2018 to monitor the content of lectures, libraries were inspected and books deemed to contain 'liberal' western thought were weeded out. 'Student spies' were recruited to monitor the utterances of University professors within and outside the classrooms. The effort to strengthen the Communist Party's leadership in universities included, for example, the removal of "freedom of thought" as a core value from the charter of the prestigious Fudan University in Shanghai and its replacement by references strengthening the Communist Party's leadership. Students at Fudan protested with sit-ins and demonstrations on December 18, 2019 and sang Fudan University's anthem, which specifically mentions "independent thinking." Lu Xiaoping, Vice President of the literature school at Nanjing University, whose charter was similarly rewritten, posted a comment on Weibo on December 18 -- which was later deleted -- saying "If we do not speak out today about such a blatant challenge to the bottom line of education and academic ethics, I am afraid we will never have the chance!"

The increasingly intrusive and strict security and 'social stability' measures being enforced over the past few years have upset the people. Numerous reports in the official Chinese media refer to implementation of the 'social credit management' programme in a growing number of cities across China. Often they indirectly point to the inconvenience caused. This was brought out by Tsinghua University Professor Lao Dongyan on October 31, 2019, who expressed her worries about facial recognition technology. In a 2900-word post on her public Wechat account she wrote: "I cannot accept this type of kindness...We must know that in our society, any personal data, as long as it is controlled by enterprises or other institutions, is also controlled by the government. Because this huge organization is run by specific people, this is equivalent to saying that all personal data, including highly recognizable biometric data, are controlled by a few people in that group...The people who control our data are obviously not God. They have their own selfish desires and weak points. Therefore, it is unknown how they will use our personal data and how they will manipulate our lives. Not to mention, such data may be leaked or hacked due to improper storage, leading to harmful results that may be exploited by criminals." Interestingly, Professor Lao Dongyan was one of nearly 300 faculty and students at Tsinghua who signed a letter in support of Tsinghua Professor Xu Zhangrun, suspended for criticisms of the Communist Party.

A BBC report (in Chinese) on December 6, 2019 reflected the public sentiment about the usage of security controls and facial recognition software. Commenting on a new Chinese government initiative requiring Chinese people to undergo facial scanning while registering their new mobile phone numbers, it referred to an online survey on facial recognition done by a research center affiliated with the Guangzhou-based official Southern Metropolis Daily. Among the respondents, 57 percent were worried that their personal whereabouts were recorded while nearly 50 percent were worried that criminals may use fake information to perform fraud or theft. Nearly 84 percent of the respondents wanted operators of the facial recognition system to provide them with a channel to view or delete facial data. 74 percent of respondents wanted to choose whether to use facial recognition or traditional methods. However, the survey also showed that about 60 percent to 70 percent of respondents believe that facial recognition makes public places safer.

In addition to the poor economy and imposition of security and ideological controls, Chinese President Xi Jinping is viewed as responsible for the set-backs in China's foreign policy, namely the US-China Trade War, situation in Hongkong and recent victory of the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan. Some Chinese strategists and academics have said the China-US relationship was mishandled due to arrogance and over-confidence. According to them, China is not powerful enough to challenge the US and Xi Jinping's declaration at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 of the 'China Dream'-2021, 'Made in China-2025' and China reaching the level of the world's advanced global powers by 2049, challenged US primacy. They assess the US-China Trade War has placed China in a difficult situation, is isolating it and could delay it realising its ambitions. Chinese academics have suggested that Beijing revert to its earlier policy of 'biding one's time'.

The situation in Hongkong is directly linked to Xi Jinping's 'China Dream', which includes reunification of China. By not acting swiftly, Xi Jinping has allowed the situation in Hongkong -- which reverted to China's rule 23 years ago -- to slip into the control of the protestors for almost 10 months and provide an example to others, like Taiwan, of a successful challenge to Beijing's rule. While Chinese analysts say that Xi Jinping did not want a repeat of the Tiananmen 'event' or to shed Chinese blood, the indecision points also to differences within the Politburo that possibly hamper a consensus. The inaction despite concerns about a 'colour revolution', being voiced by Xi Jinping at a Politburo Standing Committee meeting and other Directors of Provincial Public Security bureaus, is inexplicable. It is only on January 4, that Xi Jinping took steps to apparently demonstrate he is taking charge and replaced the head of the Liaison Office in Hong Kong with 65-year old former Shanxi Province Party Secretary Luo Huining. But till the Hongkong issue is resolved, the matter of Taiwan's reunification with mainland China will stay in limbo and Xi Jinping's 'China Dream' will not be achieved.

A lot is at stake for Xi Jinping and the CCP. Unless the economy picks up, unemployment is checked and gains made in foreign policy and the 'China Dream', the CCP and Xi Jinping risk their legitimacy being seriously dented. In event of there being no substantive visible improvement Chinese President Xi Jinping, who has consistently pushed ideology and nationalism since coming to office in 2012, might be coerced by the Party and its veterans to share power in the run up to the upcoming 20th Party Congress and not continue thereafter.

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