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Analysis of Current Trends in China



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BIPARTISANSHIP IN CHINESE LEADERSHIP

When we in the West think of China's Communist Party, we rightly observe that the Party is the only political party authorized to hold political power in China. While China's economic rise is being watched closely around the world, the country's changing political landscape is intriguing as well. As we study Chinese elite leadership, we come to realize that China's top decision makers are not a monolithic group of elites who share the same views, values and visions. Instead, we see that there are two distinct factions within the Communist party. These two groups, the elitist coalition, better known as the princelings and the Youth League group, also known in China as the populists or 'tuanpai', compete against each other for power, influence and policy initiatives. Both the mass media and the scholarly community in the West have been very slow to grasp the changing nature of Chinese elite politics and the emergence of these two factions in Chinese politics. In this article, we'd like to explain the formation of these two competing coalitions, present core evidence of a growing bipartisanship between them and analyze what this may mean for people of faith in China.

Formation of the Two Groups

Today in China, there are two political coalitions that presently balance one another in the CCP leadership. The differences between these two coalitions are reflected not only in their leaders' distinct personal careers and political associations, but also in the socio-economic groups and geographical regions they represent.

One coalition can be identified as the "populist coalition" led by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. The core faction of the populist coalition is the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL), the so-called tuanpai who worked in the national or provincial leadership. Most of the populist coalition's members have advanced their political careers through local and provincial administration, many have leadership experience in rural areas, and many have worked in the fields of Party organization, propaganda, and legal affairs.

Like Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, leaders of the populist coalition often come from less-developed inland provinces (China's "red states" or more commonly known in China as "yellow states"); they usually have humble family backgrounds. Leaders of the populist coalition are more effective in addressing the concerns and needs of the population at the grassroots, especially the so-called "vulnerable social groups" such as farmers, migrant laborers and the urban unemployed.



Xi Jinping, current VP of the PRC

The other coalition might be called the "elitist coalition," led by former Party chief Jiang Zemin. Often called princelings, they are leaders who are the children of former high-ranking officials. Princelings probably form a less cohesive network than other political factions, but their shared political identity and interests may push them to work together as a formidable elite group. A majority of princelings have advanced their careers in the more prosperous coastal regions, as Xi Jinping, current Vice President of the PRC, did by serving as a top provincial leader in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai, the power base of former President Jiang Zemin. Many have advanced their careers and, therefore, have expertise in the areas of finance, trade, foreign affairs, information technology, and education. Some are returnees from study abroad (so-called haiguipai). An overwhelming majority of returnees come from, and work, in the

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coastal regions. These leaders often represent the interests of entrepreneurs, the emerging middle class, and the economically advanced coastal provinces (China's "blue states").

A New Spirit of Bipartisanship

With these two factions within the Communist party, we are seeing a new spirit of Bipartisanship within the leadership in China. Factional politics is, of course, not new in China. What is new is the fact that factional politics takes place at a time when strong-man politics as characterized in the Mao and Deng eras comes to an end. The decisive role of the "strong-man" in decision-making has been replaced by a collective leadership in which the top leader, Hu Jintao, is no more than the "first among equals." Hu, Wen, Xi Jinping and other leaders have to be constantly engaged in coalition building, political negotiation and compromise. What is new is the fact that these two coalitions should not be simplistically categorized in ideological terms such as liberals and conservatives, pro-market and anti-market, or reformers and hardliners. While these two factions represent different regional and socio-economic interests and divergent policy priorities, both have valid socio-political concerns. The two coalitions tend to fix each other's problems, thus avoiding a single-minded approach. What is new is the trend that factional politics is no longer a vicious power struggle and zero-sum game in which a winner takes all. Neither the elitist coalition nor the populist coalition is willing to, or capable of, defeating the other. Tuanpai officials are long in terms of organizational and propaganda skills and they often have had experience in rural administration, especially in poor inland regions, but they are short on skills in handling the international economy. To a great extent, both coalitions share a common purpose: to ensure the survival of the CCP rule at home and retain China's status as a major international player abroad. This makes Chinese bipartisanship sustainable. In our analysis, this "one Party, two factions" formula will remain as the dominant feature of Chinese elite politics in the next 10 to 15 years.



President Hu Jintao, member of the populist faction of the Communist Party

Analysis of Impact on People of Faith

One of the most encouraging parts of this bipartisanship is that the two factions are clearly helping each other govern more effectively and clearly offer a set of checks and balances. As China continues to reform its ability to govern with rule of law, these checks and balances will help China's people of faith as the Communist Party in China governs with a more even hand. Since 2006, President Hu has promoted a 'harmonious society' as one of the key tenants of his administration. This platform signifies a move away from the party's focus on all-out economic growth to solving the worsening social issues and tensions that have come to the forefront in China today. Not only can the two factions use their unique experiences to help move China forward into the future, but they each bring to the table experiences that will lessen harassment of people of faith, seeing them as more and more of a benefit to society. And because many of the princelings have either had experience studying at an overseas University or have traveled the

world extensively, they are more open to working together with foreign organizations who have a heart to serve China and its people. We believe that these two factions should be viewed as a positive for people of faith in China and we will continue to monitor the bipartisanship that ensues. By having tuanpai who understand rural issues (where many of China's Christians live) and princelings who are more economically and business minded, could be a match that will be very beneficial for people of faith in China!