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What China's Zero-COVID Drama Foreshadows

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CHICAGO – China's leaders always knew that they would have to abandon their zero-COVID policy eventually, and that the longer they waited, the more painful the transition would be. Yet they seemed mired in the policy, unable to leave it behind and move on. Then, an apartment-building blaze in locked-down Xinjiang killed ten people whose escape was thwarted by locked doors and blocked entrances. This sparked China's largest anti-government protests since the Tiananmen movement of 1989 and became the catalyst for the authorities' decision finally to begin easing restrictions.

The protests were an expression of the frustration and anger accumulated over nearly three years of aggressive lockdowns, with families stuck in their homes for months, unable to visit dying loved ones, access regular health care, or even buy food.

Compared to 1989, the government's response was notably moderate: police dispersed demonstrations with relatively little violence, though this partly reflected their ability to use new surveillance technologies to track down and discourage protesters. China's government has also apparently listened to the protesters. It has now scrapped some of its harsher COVID policies, such as the requirement to quarantine in state facilities.

But the path out of zero-COVID will be long and difficult – and not only from a health perspective. The recent upheaval points to broader political challenges that China will face in the years to come.

The action plan for exiting zero-COVID has been known to Chinese leaders for some time. They must boost the population's immunity – especially that of the elderly – through some combination of higher vaccination rates and more effective foreign vaccines. Otherwise, epidemiologists estimate that opening up could cause 1-2 million COVID deaths in China.

To be sure, for a population of 1.4 billion, even two million deaths would amount to a much lower mortality rate than in the United States, where more than one million have died in a population of 330 million. But, after years spent suffering under strict lockdowns as the government touted its zero-COVID credentials, the Chinese people are unlikely to find this distinction comforting.

China has attempted to ease its pandemic restrictions before, only to tighten them when cases surged. This pattern is likely to continue until enough of the elderly are vaccinated and both the government and public accept the increased risk of infection and death. In this sense, China will follow the unsteady path to a post-pandemic “normal” that other countries have taken.

What sets China apart are the political stakes. Zero-COVID was the subject of a power struggle, which played out largely behind closed doors, between President Xi Jinping, who was committed to the hardline approach, and moderates, such as Prime Minister Li Keqiang, who advocated less stringent rules for the sake of economic growth.

Xi won hands down. China maintained zero-COVID, he was appointed to an unprecedented third term as the

Communist Party of China's General Secretary, and the leadership of the Standing Committee, including Li, was replaced by his loyalists. Notably, in his moment of political victory – at the CPC's 20th National Congress in October – Xi re-emphasized the importance of zero-COVID. Abandoning the policy less than two months later is a blow to Xi's credibility.

But this is not about one man. The zero-COVID drama could threaten the legitimacy of the entire Chinese government – and nearly 75 years of one-party rule.

This is because Chinese autocracy masks systemic instability. When citizens of democracies are dissatisfied with their politicians' performance, they vote them out of office. The change in leadership does not destabilize the system, because elections are part of the political framework. But China lacks a formal mechanism for citizens meaningfully to affect policy, so unhappy citizens must resort to “illegal” forms of expression, like protests.

Since these activities are outside the rules, they erode the country's institutional structure. Moreover, in a one-party system, a protest against government policy amounts to a protest against the Party, and thus, the entire regime.

This is especially true today, because Xi has consolidated his hold on power by concentrating it in his own hands. In fact, during the recent demonstrations, some protesters called for Xi's removal as General Secretary and even for the end of CPC rule. This is a much more radical position than that taken by the Tiananmen movement, which occurred at a time when power was more dispersed.

In today's China, disagreeing with any government policy is tantamount to disagreeing with Xi – and, thus, the CPC. This creates a dilemma for moderate figures: if they disagree with the official government position on an issue, they must choose between challenging it and defending the Party's legitimacy and the regime's stability.

As for the protests, the government will undoubtedly adopt measures to prevent them from recurring. Before the pandemic, protests in Chinese cities were often followed by increased investment in police surveillance and a decline in popular resistance. This time is unlikely to be different. The CPC does not want its capitulation on zero-COVID to encourage Chinese to take to the streets whenever they disagree with a policy decision. Even as the government eases pandemic restrictions, it will further tighten control over the public sphere.

Recent developments thus bring mixed tidings for the Chinese people. Optimists can say that the end of zero-COVID is finally in sight, the government responded to the demands of the people, and the protests were dispersed with little bloodshed. Pessimists, meanwhile, will point to the public's rejection of the government's COVID rules, note how it raises the political stakes of the next controversial policy, and predict that the coming years are likely to bring ever tighter government control amid rising instability.

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