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China's National Congress sacrifices the economy for politics > The new Five-Year Plan is dedicated to maintaining the Party's leadership

China's National Congress vows "unwavering conformity" with the leadership of the Communist Party, while more and more power is concentrated in President Xi Jinping's hands. This augurs very dire times for all those who had hoped for increased liberalism and progress in citizen's rights.

The eagerly-awaited session of China's National People's Congress (NPC) has passed the new Five-Year Plan for 2016–2020. It is hoped that the plan will reveal first and foremost how China is going to remedy the grave structural challenges in its economy, so that the Chinese people can maintain a positive outlook and the world can continue to rely on China's growth to keep the global economy afloat. Decisions include cutting high debt, streamlining state-owned enterprises, and reforming financial markets.

Furthermore, the NPC passed a series of laws aimed at alleviating poverty, boosting the protection of the environment, and combating climate change.

However, all these measures may prove futile because of the most important economic decision passed at the NPC, namely to set economic growth at 6.5–7%. This decision has very little to do with any realities but is simply calculated so that China will be able to reach its goal of making itself "a moderately prosperous society" by 2020. Moderate prosperity has previously been stated to mean that China's GDP must be double that of 2010. Simple mathematics reveals that the required growth rate to reach that goal is at least 6.5%.

The goal is an important one because it coincides with the first of two centennial goals on the path to realizing the Chinese Dream, which President Xi Jinping has set as the ultimate objective. The first centennial goal is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party in 1921. The second, by which time the Chinese Dream is to be realized in the form of "the grand rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

For the Communist Party, the importance of the new Five-Year Plan lies solely in it being the crucial period for finishing the project to build the moderately prosperous society. If the Party has set the growth target at 6.5%, it is almost certain that such growth figures will be reported by the provinces to please the central government. The central government, in turn, can be expected to make sure that the completed statistics will show that the goal of doubling GDP has been reached by 2020. As such, it is an exceptionally important issue for the Communist Party's legitimacy.

While the reliability of the publicized statistics in China has often been questioned to some degree, the statistics are in danger

of becoming completely unreliable during the next five-year period. This is tragic because the economy is in dire straits, and both China as well as the world would need concrete and reliable evidence on the ability of the corrective measures to mend the structural problems.

Therefore, the key outcome of the NPC session is political. The Party will do everything in its power to ensure that nothing rocks the boat en route to the first centennial. This augurs very dire times for all those both within and without China who had hoped for increased liberalism and progress in citizen's rights. During recent years, the freedom of movement for Chinese civil society, including the freedom of opinion and of the press, which had started to develop in a very promising manner during the Hu Jintao era (2003–2013), has diminished drastically. Even lawyers working on civil rights cases have been detained.

These kinds of developments are sure to continue and intensify. While massive lay-offs in the coal-mining industry have been announced recently, and the number of labour disputes have sky-rocketed over the past year, the Party cannot be expected to meet the strikers and demonstrators with anything more comforting than riot police.

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The NPC, while always considered just a rubber-stamp outside of China, has now admitted as much itself. It has called for “unwavering conformity” with the leadership of the Communist Party, recognizing that “leadership is vital for China’s countdown in building a moderately prosperous society by 2020 as well as for the country’s future destiny”. Furthermore, the NPC has put added emphasis on the “consciousness” of the concepts of “core” and “line”. Consciousness of the core stresses adherence to the Party’s core leadership, while consciousness of the line reminds officials to conform with the Party theories, guidelines, principles and policies.

At the same time, the cult of personality around Xi Jinping has been further strengthened by describing him as the “core of the core” of the Party’s leadership. China seems to be moving away from the principles of collective leadership which were deemed crucial after the disastrous experiences caused by the ability of both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping to dictate the nation’s direction single-handedly.

This is potentially a very precarious development because it will lead to increased opaqueness in China’s decision-making process and will give rise to rumour-mongering

in the country and among China watchers. The next Party Congress in 2017 will reveal Xi Jinping’s intentions, but there seems to be no doubt that he will continue to gather more power into his own hands while suffocating all forms of opposition. Factor in the worsening economy, and this adds up to a dangerous equation.