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Red Ghost Over China

Maoism makes a comeback as economic and political reform ebb.

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Despite a huge police presence, protests continue in China's Inner Mongolia's provincial capital of Hohhot as ethnic Mongolians vent their anger with Party cadres over environmental problems and other issues. The unrest parallels similar incidents in Tibet in March 2008 and Xinjiang in July 2009, but the phenomenon is hardly limited to minority areas. A Tsinghua University sociologist estimated that across China there were 180,000 large-scale protests last year.

Violence is also on the rise. Last Thursday, a farmer in Jiangxi province detonated three bombs outside government buildings, killing himself and three others. Qian Mingqi left behind Internet postings saying he was angry his home had been illegally seized and demolished by the government—an all-too common complaint throughout China. He had been petitioning the government for redress since 2002.

It is no longer controversial in ruling circles to acknowledge that the Chinese Communist Party and "the masses" have drifted apart. But there is no clear consensus on what to do about it. That has led to some speculation that there is a split within the Party, a development that could upset the planned leadership transition next year. But it's probably more accurate to say that the Party is paralyzed by fear, with economic and political reform dead in the water.

Observers of the Party's remarkable recovery after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre have attributed it to the leadership's ability to adapt to changing circumstances with creative policies. That ability is no longer in evidence. The current leadership is leaning heavily on two old standbys: crackdowns and propaganda. Both are favorites of the leftist wing of the Party, which explains why China is having a neo-Maoist moment.



The crackdown is effective, at least in the short term. China's security apparatus doesn't lack for resources, having grown to claim a larger share of the national budget than the military. The Party justifies this with the need to protect against "external hostile forces" that they blame for the unrest in

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Associated Press

Mongolian herders and students hold a banner that reads, "Defend our homeland," during a protest in China's Inner Mongolia province.

Inner Mongolia and elsewhere. The anonymous Internet calls for a "Jasmine Revolution" have generated fears in Beijing that the people power movements in the Middle East will spark similar uprisings among discontented Chinese youth.

Meanwhile, Bo Xilai, the party secretary of Chong-qing, is poster boy for the new propaganda. Since he moved to the western industrial city, he has reinvented himself as a born-again Maoist. His back-to-basics campaign includes sending cadres and students to work in the fields and factories, promoting the public singing of revolutionary songs, and sending quotations from the late Great Helmsman to residents on their mobile phones.

One problem with these responses is that they hamper the Party's ability to listen, and the truth is that Chinese are increasingly independent-minded—and cynical. When Party Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao started their decade-long term in 2002, they put greater emphasis on the welfare of workers, but the abuse of citizens' rights by local cadres has only worsened. In the past, faith in the Party and central government remained strong, prompting people like Mr. Qian to petition higher officials. Now they are losing hope.

The other danger is that leftist thinkers are genuinely trying to turn the Party back toward Marxist ideology. A Maoist website recently ran pictures of leading reform advocates with nooses around their necks. A forum in Shanxi last week called free-market economist Mao Yushi a "traitor" for criticizing Mao's legacy.

The writings of these true believers are alarming because they evidently have the ear and protection of some higher-ups. Wu Bangguo, the Party's No. 2 man, recently gave a speech in which he attacked private property. Earlier this month, leader-in-waiting Xi Jinping gave graduates of the Central Party School the same message, telling them to use the classics of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to resolve current problems.

The Party may yet regain its footing under new leadership next year. For now it seems increasingly adrift, and in danger of a confrontation with the Chinese people.

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