Communist and Post-Communist Studies 47 (2014) 13–25

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

Coercive capacity and the durability of the Chinese communist state

Yuhua Wang

Department of Political Science, The University of Pennsylvania, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 14 February 2014

Keywords:
Coercion
Coercive capacity
Authoritarian durability
China
Police

ABSTRACT

Why has the Chinese communist state remained so durable in an age of democratization? Contrary to existing theories, this article argues that the strong state coercive capacity has survived the authoritarian rule in China. We demonstrate that the Chinese Communist Party has taken deliberate actions to enhance the cohesion of its coercive organizations—the police, in particular—by distributing "spoils of public office" to police chiefs. In addition, the state has extended the scope of its coercion by increasing police funding in localities where the state sector loses control of the population. We use and rely on mixed methods to test this theory.

1. Introduction

Why has the Chinese communist state remained so singularly durable in an age of democratization? The Chinese case seems to contradict modernization theory's prediction that "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy." (Lipset, 1959: 75) China has far surpassed the "threshold" of per capita income for democratic transition, as calculated by Przeworski et al. (2000: 94) to be $4,115, whereas China's per capita GDP in 2011 was $8,394. China has also entered the intermediate income level ($7,000–$10,000), which, according to Huntington (1968: 43) and Przeworski et al. (2000: 92), is the most destabilizing period for dictatorships. A higher level of economic development, rapid economic growth, dramatic social transformations, deep involvement in the international economy, and increasing number of democracies in the world—all these factors that have been said to be conducive to democratization have only made the authoritarian rule in China more robust.

We argue that *one* reason for the durability of the Chinese authoritarian rule is the state coercive capacity. In the face of challenges from home and abroad, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has successfully strengthened its coercive organizations, especially the police, to deal with potential threats both domestically and internationally.

We argue that there are two critical challenges to authoritarian rulers' survival. One is the possibility of defection of coercive leaders in the face of domestic rebellion. The second is the limited ability of the state to monitor and control the masses in the face of economic reforms.[1] Authoritarian rulers' survival, therefore, depends on first, their ability to secure the loyalty of their coercive leaders and second, on the coercive apparatus' capacity to reach every corner of the society.

[1] Svolik (2012) makes a similar argument with a slightly different angle. He argues that all dictators face two fundamental challenges. The first comes from the masses over which they rule—this is the problem of *authoritarian control*. The second challenge arises from those with whom they rule—this is the problem of *authoritarian power-sharing*.

0967-067X/$ – see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2014.01.009

We demonstrate that contemporary China is facing these two challenges at the same time. On the one hand, the CCP needs to keep the loyalty of its coercive organizations, especially the police, in the face of numerous protests every year. On the other hand, the Chinese state finds it more difficult to reach every corner of the society as the state sector declines and the economy diversifies. However, the Chinese state is still robust because the CCP has taken deliberate actions to enhance the "cohesion" and to extend the "scope" of its police. The CCP enhances the "cohesion" of the police by incorporating police chiefs at every level of the government into the core decision-making organ: the leadership team. Empowered police chiefs not only have a higher ranking in the bureaucracy, but also enjoy stronger bargaining power vis-à-vis the government. In addition, the CCP extends the "scope" of the police by allocating more police funding to localities where the state sector controls a smaller proportion of the population. Thus, the high "cohesion" and extensive "scope" of the Chinese police have contributed to the survival of the Chinese authoritarian state in the context of intensive domestic and international oppositions.

We rely on mixed methods—including fieldwork, qualitative interviews, bureaucratic analysis, reading of Party documents, and statistical analysis—to test our theory.

The paper is structured as follows: The second section will reveal a gap in the existing explanations for authoritarian resilience in China, and present our theory based on the coercive capacity of authoritarian states. The third and the fourth sections will examine two dimensions of China's coercive capacity respectively: cohesion and scope. The fifth section will discuss why the CCP is able to control its coercive organizations while focusing on the Party's revolutionary heritage. The last section then concludes with major findings and broader significance of the research.

2. Coercive capacity and authoritarian resilience

Nathan (2003: 6) once wrote, "After the Tiananmen crisis in June, 1989, many observers thought that the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would collapse. … This particular authoritarian system, however, has proven resilient." The resilience of authoritarianism in China is indeed puzzling.

Scholars have made serious efforts to explain the puzzle from various perspectives. These include Perry (2012) on the CCP's revolutionary tradition and cultural resources, Nathan (2003) on institutionalization, Manion (2008) and Cho (2008) on congress[2], Shi (1997) on political participation, Whiting (2004) and Landry (2008) on the cadre evaluation system, Sheng (2007) on the central committee[3], Stockmann and Gallagher (2011) on the media, Zhao (1998) on nationalism, Dickson (2003) and Tsai (2006) on private entrepreneurs, and Gallagher (2002) on foreign direct investment. In addition, scholars have noticed the "stabilizing" effects of social protests, for example, O'Brien and Li (2006), Chen (2009), Solinger (2009), Hurst (2004), Dimitrov (2008), Lorentzen (2013).

While existing theories have contributed to putting the pieces of the "jigsaw puzzle" together, there is still a very important missing piece: coercion.[4]

Skocpol (1979: 32) reminds us that "[e]ven after great loss of legitimacy has occurred, a state can remain quite stable—and certainly invulnerable to internal mass-based revolts—especially if its coercive organizations remain coherent and effective." Bellin (2004: 143), when explaining the stability in the Middle East and North Africa, argues, "The will and capacity of the state's coercive apparatus to suppress democratic initiative have extinguished the possibility of transition."

The recent uprisings in the Arab world again call our attention to authoritarian regimes' control of their coercive organizations. The loyalty of the coercive force has explained the survival of the Bahraini monarch, whereas the defection of the military has contributed to the breakdown of the ruling autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt (Bellin, 2012).[5]

In Serbia and Georgia in the late 1990s, the non-compliance of under-financed or unpaid security forces left incumbents without a means to suppress opposition protest (Way and Levitsky, 2006: 396). In Georgia, the police in 2003 were unwilling to crack down in the midst of a regime crisis because they "had not been paid at that point for three months. So why should they have obeyed Shevardnadze?"(Karumidze and Wertsch, 2005: 39)

What determines a state's coercive capacity? Way and Levitsky (2006: 388–393) distinguish between two distinct dimensions of state capacity: *cohesion* and *scope*. First, cohesion refers to the level of compliance *within* the state apparatus. In cases of high cohesion, the leader is able to rely on subordinates—the police, for example—to fulfill even controversial orders. In contrast, cases of weak cohesion are characterized by open or disguised disobedience by subordinates. Second, scope refers to the effective reach—across territory and into society—of the state apparatus. Where scope is extensive, states possess a developed internal security sector—including extensive intelligence networks and specialized police and paramilitary

[2] Both Manion (2008) and Cho (2008) focus on the strengthening of the people's congress as an institution and its implications for the Chinese Communist Party.

[3] Sheng (2007) discusses how the Chinese Communist Party uses its central committee to co-opt powerful local leaders.

[4] Cai (2008) is an exception who also focuses on repression. Pei (2012) identifies three key factors for the resilience of the Chinese authoritarian regime, which include repression.

[5] A direct comparison between China and the Arab states should carefully acknowledge the fact that none of those Arab countries have achieved over thirty years' double-digit economic growth like China. However, as Huntington (1968) contends, instability is more likely under rapid economic development. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.