



## Wen Signals Something New

by Francesco Sisci

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After years of delay, crackdowns, and failures, the time seems to have arrived for political reform in China. This coincides with a major demotion in the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): on March 15 controversial Chongqing party chief Bo Xilai was replaced by Jiang Dejiang.

In his last press conference as prime minister, Wen Jiabao announced March 14 to Chinese and foreign journalists —and to the billion Chinese who followed his remarks on TV — that without political reform, the economy could face serious problems. Thus he ideologically reversed the previous order of things, which called for economic reforms first and then, later or never, political changes. Moreover, he hinted that without political changes the economic situation, which buttresses the CCP's hold on power, could be shaken.

We do not yet know the timing and content of these reforms, but the urgency with which the prime minister brought up the issue points to a change in policy emphasis, as the Chinese often only make allusions and vague references. The point was raised in a manner that was at times dramatic, as when Wen explained that without political reforms China would likely repeat the serious mistakes of the Cultural Revolution. This would be a nightmare for the country, which considers that decade (1966-1976) a period of devastation. The political reforms Wen outlined would help to undo the negative legacies of the Cultural Revolution, the “feudal past” (the ancient imperial tradition), and the modern phenomena of corruption and social inequality.

This last issue is crucial for China's development. Wen said that in the near future, Beijing will propose an increase in gross domestic product (GDP) of 7.5 percent. This is a reduction in the goal for the coming years — a period during which many economists believed that China could not afford to grow the GDP by less than 8 percent a year.

The change in the target growth rate is due to various factors. On the one hand, the government no longer feels an urgent need to create an avalanche of jobs every year for people who migrate from rural to urban areas. The migration flows, although important, are decreasing because life in the countryside is improving. Furthermore, the government wants more balanced growth, with a focus on protecting the environment, and decreasing the disparity in income between rich and poor. Beijing wants to expand the middle class.

Finally, there is the issue of political stability. The government feels more confident and no longer thinks of having to “buy” consent by accelerating growth to above 10 percent per year. Because over 80 percent of the urban population own their homes, and over 90 percent of rural people have been awarded a parcel of land, the overwhelming share of the Chinese population has an interest in not losing what they have and in maintaining political stability — so they do not believe in sudden political changes.

It is also confidence about the lack of substantial internal opposition that pushes the government to press on with political reforms, “especially the reform of the state and leaders of the party,” to use Wen's phrase.

This phrase is opaque, with only the glimmer of a suggestion of political reform. We don't know if this indicates the choice, election, or simply better management of the country's ruling class. Certainly, it is in the government's best interest to continue in the spirit of the reforms first put forward by Deng Xiaoping. That means managing changes and keeping ahead with their flux and not simply adapting to them.

Wen gave another important sign when talking about foreign policy, but clearly referring to internal issues. In the controversy surrounding Syria, Wen didn't mention China's veto of UN intervention, but argued that Beijing respects the Syrian people's need for change and has sympathy for their suffering. Most importantly he stressed that, “the demand for democracy of the Arab peoples must be respected and answered. I also think that no power can oppose this trend toward democracy.”

If that is true for the Arabs, then it must be true for the Chinese — even if the how and the when need to be clarified. Wen focused on the spread of the democratic process. Today, many villages (*cun*, the lowest administrative unit of China) elect leaders in democratic elections. This process should extend upward, to the county (*xiang*) and district (*xian*; of which there are over 2,000 in China). Through these elections, the Chinese are learning what democracy is.

Will these steps pave the way toward political reform in China? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. Certainly, it is another form of political experimentation, as when the metropolis of Chongqing fished out slogans and chants of the Cultural Revolution — an experiment that seems to be over.

Wen, while admitting some success in Chongqing, said that after Wang Lijun's attempted escape (the former city police chief fled to the US consulate in Chengdu), city officials “need to reflect deeply and learn well the lesson of the case of Wang Lijun.” In other words, China cannot go back in history in any way. This is a very important political statement, and a de facto sealing of Bo Xilai's destiny even apart from Wang Lijun's attempted flight. His was, as seems

apparent from Wen's statement, a deep political error, and Bo's demotion marks a future political direction, far from the experience of the Red Guards. This could have deep import for the leadership taking the helm in October. They may be former Red Guards, but they are supposed to have learnt that that history should not be repeated.

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