



China's Zero-Covid Policy Has Largely Failed

The public outcry over China's stringent zero-Covid measures, which provoked historic mass nationwide protests, finally compelled authorities in the communist state to ease restrictions that lasted for around three years.

Although its overseas counterparts have mainly tried to live with Covid-19, China has only begun to consider this route.

On December 7, China's National Health Commission announced a decrease in the frequency and scope of PCR testing, while lockdowns will be minimized as much as possible.



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According to directives from the central government, local authorities are to liberate areas that display no positive cases after five days, and to permit people with milder Covid-19 symptoms to isolate at home rather than designated facilities.

People no longer have to display a green health code on their smartphones for entrance to most public buildings and spaces. Instead, authorities have begun to speed up the "vaccination" of the elderly against Covid-19. Such efforts to inject as many older people as possible are despite the widespread deaths and injuries across the world that have arisen due to the so-called experimental vaccine.

Yet these aforementioned new measures signal China's eventual departure from its zero-Covid position. After all, the communist state's draconian measures brought about great socioeconomic costs and psychological anxieties, arguably worse than the Covid-19 virus itself.

As lockdown measures never seemed to end, public resentment accumulated through the past years. Enraged netizens vented their frustrations on social media over challenges obtaining food due to overloaded delivery services as well as getting medical care.

To add fuel to the fire, last month's nationwide protests were the first major demonstrations in years, involving university students, business owners, as well as the ordinary man on the street. Such a massive display of public discontent showed Beijing that the virus control measures were socially, psychologically, as well as economically unsustainable and untenable. Should the government fail to do its part in ensuring the well-being of its people, it could face a wider and longer-term political backlash.

On a more realistic note, it is impossible to completely eradicate Covid-19, given that many Chinese provinces failed to keep the number of cases at zero due to reports of newer variants emerging.

Also, the Chinese authorities have been digging the economic grave for the world's second-biggest economy with their never-ending lockdowns. Such prolonged and abrupt lockdowns have exacerbated supply-chain disruptions, increased unemployment, and dampened domestic consumption.

After all, the Chinese authorities had other mass protests against Covid-19 lockdowns in places such as the United States and the Netherlands as past references and should have known the consequences of



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harsh lockdown and quarantine efforts.

Yet, in an apparent disconnect with harsh socioeconomic realities on the ground, Chinese leader Xi Jinping in October 2022 praised the zero-Covid policy in his speech at the Communist Party Congress. Xi's promotion of the zero-virus approach was on the pretext that it adhered to the principle of the "supremacy of the people and the supremacy of life." Nonetheless, in his October speech, Xi failed to provide more details on what exactly zero-Covid would entail.

Observers could sense the double standards applied to China's elites versus ordinary citizens. At the end of the Party Congress, China's top leaders began traveling internationally on diplomatic visits, while Chinese citizens were forcibly subject to widespread quarantine and lockdown measures in many parts of the country. Some could not even get out of their residential compounds for considerable periods of time.

To make matters worse, early coverage of the 2022 World Cup soccer matches in Qatar depicted crowds of maskless spectators cheering their teams on. The juxtaposition between the maskless spectators gathered in an enclosed stadium and Chinese citizens in major cities trapped in their homes fuelled the anger of many Chinese.

An open letter challenging the country's Covid-19 policies and asking if China was "on the same planet" as Qatar was circulated on the popular WeChat messaging app, before censors scrubbed it from the platform.

Subsequently, China's state broadcaster censored close-up shots of maskless fans at the World Cup. For example, during a match involving Japan and Costa Rica, state broadcaster CCTV Sports showcased images of players, officials, or the football stadium instead of close-up shots of spectators. When CCTV Sports did show crowds, it merely depicted faraway shots of the crowd where it was difficult to distinguish individual faces, and fewer crowd shots compared to the live telecast of the same game on online platforms including Douyin — China's version of TikTok.

Other citizens chafed at being locked down at home or on campus, as they could not celebrate the World Cup like people in other nations.

"The World Cup has allowed most Chinese people to see the real situation abroad, and worry about the economy of the motherland, and their own youth," one user wrote in a message translated from Chinese.

The obvious contrast between the packed Qatari stadiums and the deserted Chinese streets has increased resentment and alienation within China.

Additionally, the significance of the recent nationwide protests cannot be underestimated by Beijing's top echelons of government.

First, these protests openly urged for governmental and political change. Such demands were the first time in recent history that massive demonstrations entailed calls not just for a change in Covid-19 policies but in governance.

Next, these apparently organic and uncoordinated demonstrations happened in multiple cities, including Beijing and Shanghai. Protests differed in messaging and intensity, as some called for the relaxation of zero-Covid policies while others called for Xi to step down.

The protests were triggered by a tragedy in Ürümqi, thousands of miles away from China's major cities. The fact that such a distant event was able to spark such widespread demonstrations showcases a



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noteworthy degree of public resentment. The Ürümqi tragedy was merely the catalyst that fanned the already-kindling flames of ire among Chinese residents.

Given Xi's entrenchment in his position of power at October's Party Congress, it may seem a tad far-fetched to assert that a revolution is brewing in China. Yet the protests show that disillusionment and anger are prevalent. After all, abrupt and never-ending lockdowns that greatly restrict people's freedoms and hurt the economy would not be received well by anyone, Chinese or not.

Furthermore, recent protests have indicated that China's youth still are a force of political activism. After all, youth-led protests have been a regular leitmotif in modern Chinese history. For instance, the May Fourth movement in 1919, the 1989 Tiananmen incident, as well as the 2011 Jasmine revolution were led by students.

Beijing has to regard the concerns and resentment of China's youth seriously, in light of soaring youth unemployment. For China's youth, the period of rapid economic growth experienced by their predecessors has passed.

The combination of China's economic slump, exorbitant property prices, and dwindling population due to years of the state-enforced contraceptive one-child policy does not augur well for the future of China's youth. Such a farrago has eroded the Communist Party's legitimacy and claims to ensure economic prosperity in exchange for political restrictions.

Simply loosening Covid-19 controls is only a short-term palliative to appease protesters and the general Chinese population. Yet with more deep-rooted problems remaining, a failure to address them could lead to more social unrest.





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