

How Will China's Leadership Change Impact House Churches?

China introduced its new Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party to its people and the world last Thursday. The seven-man team sits at the very top of the government that will run the world's most populous country for the next 10 years.

The team is the product of backroom deals made among Communist Party elite and China's powerful families. The previous Standing Committee had consisted of nine men until last Thursday morning, when only seven emerged to stand on a deep-red carpet in the Great Hall of the People, near Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

To those watching for clues to China's new direction, if any, under new leaders, the elimination of two positions within the Standing Committee was a significant sign, indicating the new team intends to spend less time deliberating and more time acting. Still, by most news accounts, the new Standing Committee members are a conservative lot known more for their party orthodoxy and loyalty than for reformist tendencies.

That the power transfer happened at all is notable. For a country whose legacy has been built on dynasties and strongman leaders, Thursday's peaceful transition to new leadership is evidence of normalcy and continuity, autocratic as it may be.

As expected, Xi Jinping emerged from the secretive politicking within the underlying Central Committee as the general secretary of the party, the top leadership position. In his introductory remarks, he stressed the need to improve education and income, and to root out government corruption.

The once-a-decade transition is important to China's 80

million Christians, who have enjoyed greater openness and toleration during the past 20 years, yet still must navigate a complicated relationship with the government, which has no tolerance for competition. To discuss what the new government leadership means for China's Christians,

Open Doors News turned to Brent Fulton, Ph.D and president of China Source, a Hong Kong-based nonprofit formed in 1997. China Source collaborates with hundreds of China-oriented churches and organizations through conferences, publications and consulting. What follows is an edited version of the conversation. It began with a recollection of the previous leadership transition.

Take us back 10 years. What were the conditions in China in 2002 that were of most concern to Christians?

In the '80s and '90s, really the **spiritual stronghold** of the church was the countryside, rural **house church movement**. But with urbanization, which really moved ahead rapidly in the late '90s, early 2000s, even to today, there was concern about the future leadership of those little house church movements. Many of the people who would have moved into leadership in those movements were moving to the cities. And there was a struggle, in a sense, throughout the house church: Are we going to "sell out," as they saw it, and go to the cities? Or are we going to stick with what the Lord is doing here in the countryside?

The second would be the emergence of what we would call the urban professional church ... I know of one leader who 10 years ago was in the process of starting a seminary in a major city, specifically to train church leaders, and that has grown and developed and become quite a force at this point. At that time, 10 years ago, Christians in the cities—intellectuals—were thinking about what was their future going to look like? And what would their churches look like in the cities? We've seen them really develop and flourish during

the last 10 years.

Year-to-year change can be difficult to discern. Over the span of 10 years, however, changes can be more visible. What have been the most significant changes for Christians in China since 2002?

I would say it is the growth of the urban church. There are a number of dimensions to that. You've got the emergence of what we probably would call NGOs, but they're not really official. Entities like publishing entities, counseling centers, schools started by Christians, organizations that are trying to help families. And then of course, kind of the catalytic event in all that was the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, which rallied Christians from across China to go to Sichuan to get involved in the relief efforts, and some of them are still there. That galvanized the energy within the urban church to reach out and touch their society. And so I would say a major component of the growth of the urban church has been the development of these sorts of parachurch entities.

Another development has been related to that function. There has been a groundswell of Christian material published in China legally, within the last 10 years. I don't think in 2002 people could have imagined how much material would have been published by now, and that continues.

Then there's the whole returnee element, where people have gone overseas to study, become Christians and come back to China, and now are playing a role in the emerging urban churches in the ministries I've just described. If you look at who's doing these things, there are a very high proportion of returnees involved. So these have all contributed to the phenomenon of the urban, professional church.

Looking to today's unveiling of the central leadership, I have a few questions related to that. I don't know if you've had a chance to catch up on the news today, but ...

I haven't seen the news this morning. How many are on the Politburo Standing Committee, is it seven or nine?

It is seven, and I was going to ask you straightaway, what does the number seven indicate to you?

It had been seven. When Hu (Jintao) came into power, [he] had to compromise, and in order to do that they had to move it up to nine because there were certain people [others] really wanted on the Standing Committee. So it grew in size.

Getting back down to seven, I think the key word here is manageable. The leaders are realizing they need an efficient way of governing, and the fewer people on that Standing Committee, the easier it's going to be to reach consensus. It's important because China no longer has a strongman leader. Deng Xiaoping was the last strongman leader. And China of course has a tradition of thousands of years of emperors, and some people would say Mao was just another one of them who wielded absolute power. Well, now there's no one man in China who can really call the shots, so it has to be leadership by consensus. It's easier to reach consensus with seven people than nine. And I think the leadership is realizing they need to be more rational, more efficient in the way they operate.

It appears that the internal-security apparatus, formerly led by Zhou Yongkang, no longer is among the portfolios of the Central Standing Committee, perhaps demoted to the larger Politburo. Is that also your understanding, and if so, what importance does this development have for the church in China?

It could be a positive development for all of society. China is basically a police state. And the whole security apparatus, which would include both the public-security bureau inside China but also ministry of state security, which is sort of like the FBI, has grown immensely in its power. This year the budget of the whole security apparatus was larger than the budget of the military.

With the whole Bo Xilai scandal [he faces corruption charges, and his wife was jailed in connection with the murder of a British businessman], and then Zhou Yongkang's involvement in who-knows-what [the security chief was seen as a Bo defender with a fondness for Maoism], but it became apparent that the whole security apparatus had really become a behemoth and had amassed incredible power. So it's significant that they're seeming to be wanting to put that in its proper place.

The problem with that is that the security people know more than anybody else about the lives of all the top leaders. And it's very hard to put them in their place when they know—I mean ... they have the goods on everybody. It would be very easy for another scandal to be blown open. It would be very easy for the corruption of yet another top leader to be publicly known. And of course none of the top leaders want that to happen. I think they have to tread very carefully as they deal with the security apparatus.

The portfolio of the propaganda ministry appears to remain in the new Standing Central Committee. It was not one of the two positions removed as the total size of the committee was reduced by two people. What significance for Christians is to be found in the survival of the position of propaganda czar?

It's not surprising. The fight that the party has domestically right now is very much a battle of words and information. As social media in China has proliferated, people are being more vocal about their complaints, and the government is feeling more and more of the pressure to respond to that ... They have to figure out how to continue to tell the Communist Party story in a compelling way that is going to keep the majority of people in China on board with them, because there is, frankly, growing discontent in the society.

At the same time freedom of expression in China, within certain limits, has continued to grow—as long as people don't directly attack the party, as long as people don't get

involved with politics or do something embarrass a leader—it's quite remarkable how much freedom there is to talk about a variety of issues in China. And for the Christians, that has translated into not only what I mentioned before—publishing—but also on the internet, there's just an amazing amount of Christian-generated material that is largely uncensored. . . .[Y]ou can expect the party to continue to try to maintain the upper hand in the dialog within China because they need to continue to tell their story, but at the same time there are many other stories being told, including by Christians.

Have Christians figured out how to avoid that bright line? Or is this something likely to be tested?

Most Christians are not political in the sense of wanting to organize, to oppose the party, or to start some other political movement outside of the party. They just don't have that ambition. What they have organized, of course, are alliances among different churches, for example the whole network of leaders that got together a few years ago and tried to go the Lausanne conference in South Africa. And there are other networks, of Christian teachers, Christian counselors, Christian lawyers, a lot of Christian businessmen's groups now in China. So, they are organizing for purposes of trying to extend the Kingdom in different ways. But they're not organizing vis-a-vis the government or to oppose the government. They really don't have that agenda.

I suppose the issue, then, is making sure the government doesn't misinterpret their agenda as a political one.

That's always a fine line.

In a sense, the definition has changed over the years. Back in the '80s or '90s, simply gathering in a legal gathering might have been considered as political. But now there are many gatherings in China that are pretty much left untouched. Where

they would cross the line would be, for example, the Shouwang [Church] in Beijing, where they tried to go head-to-head with the government and they say "You've got to allow us to register. You've got to allow us to be legal." The government simply wasn't prepared to do that. And they suffered the consequences of that.

But I think for the most part, believers are pretty savvy when it comes to doing this dance, to make sure they're not perceived as having political motives. I would say that one exception to that would be the lawyers. Several years ago there were a number of Christian lawyers basically put out of business, because they were trying to handle human-rights cases in China, and that was seen as crossing the line. That was seen as a direct threat to the party, unfortunately.

In his opening remarks today, Chairman Xi said the goals for the next 10 years include improvements to education, higher incomes, environmental protection and others. Religious freedom tends to correlate with education levels. Is there cause for Christian optimism in Xi's remarks?

I think so. In particular, the area of education, for example. There's a lot of discontent among young families about the whole education system in China, which is very tech oriented and is not very holistic in its approach. Many families [seek] alternatives to that, including Christians. You've got Christians now setting up schools—you know, primary schools, kindergarten, setting up home-schooling networks. There's a movement of Christian families even sending high school students abroad for study in a Christian high school. And so, I think as education re-forms . . . the Christians are going to be there. They're going to be involved.

As incomes have increased in China, and certainly urban incomes are projected to continue to increase, that has given people more power. . . People with resources are beginning to travel, [there are] more opportunities in a lot of ways, and

that of course has been a factor in the whole growth of the urban church. So I think the overall direction of society, if the party leaders keep their word, does have some good things in it as well for Christians.

At the same time, the direction of society has moved toward being increasingly materialistic and increasingly high-pressure. [There is] a lot of pressure to do well, to succeed. You have Christians having discussions about How do you maintain your walk with the Lord when there's so much pressure to work all the time, and make as much money as you can? Whereas the countryside church, a decade, a couple decades ago, they had a lot of time to seek the Lord, to equip themselves to ministry. The urban church is a totally different animal in that respect. I see as society continues to develop, one of the big questions is: Will the materialism and the desire for success crowd out the church and really dilute its influence?

Among the critiques of China's power transition is that its political system remains closed, and that a tightly controlled political system stands in the way of economic and social advancement. Do you think religious freedom in China is at least partly a function of political reform? If the new leadership does little during the next 5 years, 10 years, about political reform, what will that mean for religious freedom and the rights of Christians?

That's a good question: Can you have an autocratic government and allow **religious freedom**?

The whole question of how they're handling religion was discussed at the Party Congress [which concluded Wednesday]. So they have been, and they continue to think about, how to do this better. They know their current religious policy didn't work. But as soon as you get into the details, it becomes very messy. Even if they recognize the Christians are basically very helpful people, and if they were just to be given more

freedom they would do good things, what do you do about the other faiths, the other religious groups? For example the . . . Muslims out in the West, who are seen as an active political threat. Or, what do you do about cults that are active in China that . . . haven't been recognized to date? So, how to open up things, but yet maintain stability, has always been a really thorny issue for them.

How motivated party leaders are to really do something about it kind of depends on what else is on their plate. There's a lot going on. But ... if political reform is able to move ahead, it should bode well for the church. It should result in greater freedom and legal recognition.

To the degree that China's diplomatic ties and trade agreements extends its influence into other nations, do you expect that what happens in China with respect to minorities and Christians can have influence on the fate of Christians persecuted in other countries?

I don't think so.

Unlike the U.S., China does not see itself as having a cultural mandate, if you will. It goes into other nations to do business. And that's pretty much the extent of it. ... Now, of course, it may seek to have political influence as well, in terms of getting other nations to vote its way in the U.N., or participating in some political initiative on a global scale. But the Chinese don't really seek to change in any way the cultures of the nations that they go into.

Is it a question, then, of the degree to which other countries look to China as model, and not so much to what degree does China expect to impose its model?

So far, I don't see a lot of evidence of that.

What have I missed? What's the element of the transition we need to be aware of?

The fact that a leadership transition has taken place is something so obvious that we might overlook it. And it seems normal in every other country, particularly in the West. But this is only the second orderly leadership change. ...Suddenly, we're at a place where ... there's no dynastic connection any more. That, in and of itself, is very significant. The fact that they're having this Party Congress and moving toward a more orderly, more rational way of governing the country is significant. I think it bodes well for Christians and everybody in China, if they're able to really follow through on what China's trying to do.

The other significant thing is the (Bo Xilai) corruption scandal that erupted before the party congress really forced their hand to ... face the corruption issue, the graft issue head-on, which it seems like they're taking moves to do. It's not business as usual. ... [S]uddenly these things blew up in their face, and I think it has forced a good bit of introspection, and obviously some reshuffling as a result. In that sense, it's been a good thing.

It sounds like overall, your take on this transition is fairly sanguine.

I don't see any huge negatives in it. Of course, we don't know a lot about Xi Jinping or (propaganda chief) Liu Yunshan or the other people. So who knows what they have up their sleeves? Who knows what they're thinking?

That's not to say there are not people in the party, or especially the military, that could tip the balance the other way, but overall I think it is a moderate leadership.