

Analysis based on our daily newsletter, Conversations in Chinese Media (CiCM)

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CiCM **INSIGHTS**

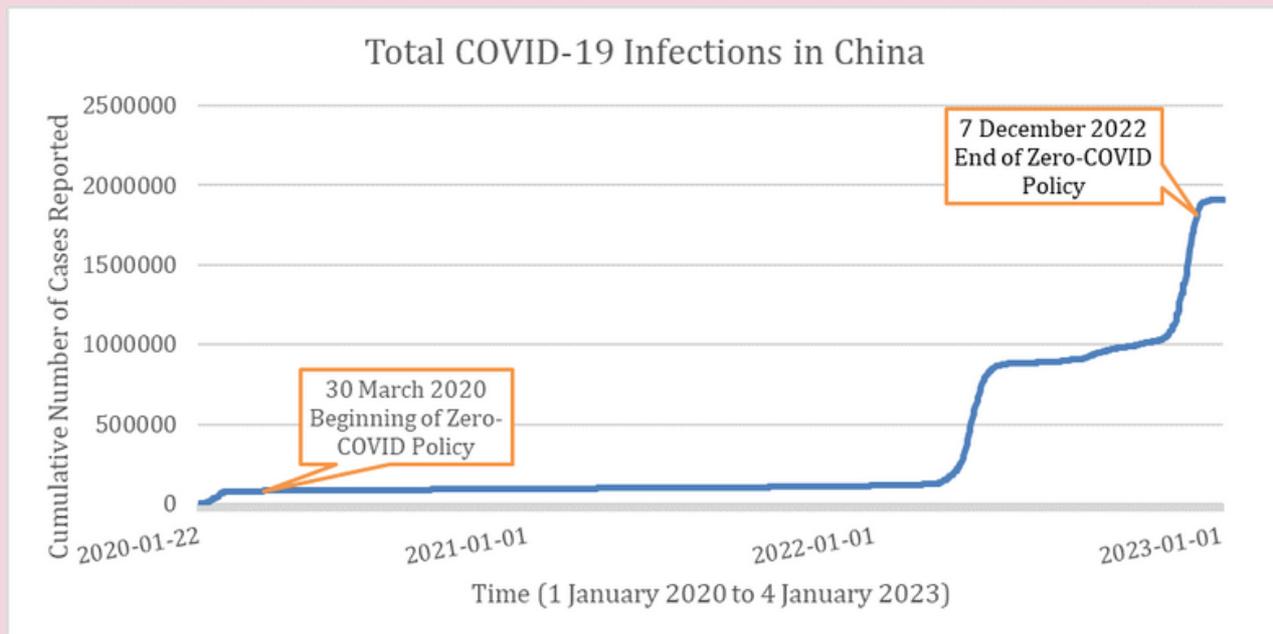
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Issue 10: Protests Against Zero-COVID Policy: A Political Turning Point

Protests Against Zero-COVID Policy: A Political Turning Point

Background

- Countrywide anti-government protests in mainland China have been unheard of since the dawn of the century. Until the second half of 2022, heavy regulation of public discourse in China had effectively suppressed growing frustration over lockdowns and livelihoods. Last November, through spontaneous protests throughout the country, the Chinese people not only broke these barriers of censorship, but also forced an authoritarian government to concede to their demands. Demonstrations against the draconian Zero-COVID policy have been historic in their nature, scope as well as consequences.
- The Zero-COVID policy began in early 2020 as the official strategy to end the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19) in China. The initial outbreak of the virus was largely contained inside Hubei province, where Wuhan is located. In March 2020, China relaxed travel restrictions owing to a fall in the number of infections. Thus, when most other countries were shutting down their borders to contain the virus, China had opened its own borders for foreign travellers. However, this led to a new wave of infections brought to China by foreign travellers, and hence, the government resorted to a policy of complete elimination of infections known as 'dynamic zero' (动态清零) or Zero-COVID.
- Major steps in the policy included mass testing and vaccination, strict lockdowns, quarantining infected people in government facilities, monitoring of people's movement and health status through mobile devices and stringent quarantine requirements for international travellers. While the long-term impact of the policy on containing the virus is debatable, the lockdowns caused an immediate disruption in people's livelihoods and the economy. The policy continued till as late as December 2022, when the rest of the world had slowly eased lockdowns while Chinese borders still remained largely closed. Many important cities such as Shanghai were in lockdown for several months, leading to food shortages, unemployment and social distress. These effects, coupled with excessive policing and censoring of public criticism, culminated in nationwide protests in November-December 2022.



COVID-19 infections in China over time. Data Source: *Our World in Data (JHU CSSE)*

Protests against COVID restrictions

- Signs of public discontent had started to appear long before the widespread recent protests. In February 2020, the death of “whistleblower” Dr Li Wenliang caused a wave of condolences on Chinese social media. Dr Li had been accused of spreading misinformation when he tried to warn about the COVID-19 virus long before it was publicly acknowledged by the government. Trending conversations on Chinese social media (including “#WeWantFreedomOfSpeech”) called on the government to apologise for these accusations. In subsequent months, tensions began to rise as people clashed with the authorities over lockdown policies in several places.
- In May 2022, Chinese social media was flooded with anger and grief as an anonymous video went viral. It contained an audio montage of Shanghai residents’ sufferings during a lockdown that had persisted for more than 3 months. Despite clampdown by online surveillance authorities, people reposted the video several times. Around the same time, students at Beijing Normal University protested against rules which were preventing them from exiting campus or returning home. After the protests, the administration allowed them to return home with strict rules in action to prevent infections. In July, hundreds of people gathered in Zhengzhou, Henan to protest since they could not withdraw money from rural banks. Later, the protestors claimed that their health codes inevitably turned red upon arrival in the city, alleging government officials of tampering with the movement monitoring system. These incidents were significant examples of misuse of Zero-COVID measures, since people

were protesting about matters which affected their daily lives and demanding amendments in policies.

- In October, days before the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), a unique protest was staged at the Sitong bridge (四通桥) in Beijing. A large banner hanging over the bridge read: "We want food, not PCR tests. [...] We want to be citizens, not slaves." Other banners reportedly called for the removal of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Such a demonstration preceding a highly important political event in the national capital signified the intensity of the protest as well as the risks the protestors were willing to take. Later that month, the Tibetan capital of Lhasa saw massive protests against Zero-COVID, which are said to be the first major protests in the province after the Tibetan uprising of 2008.
- As the stringent lockdowns persisted despite these demonstrations, tensions began to escalate in early November. The southern city of Guangzhou saw clashes in mid-November as people defied the lockdown and refused to comply with the police. A similar major development was observed at the Foxconn manufacturing hub in Zhengzhou, also called the "iPhone city". After about a month of uncertainty caused by 'closed-loop management' COVID controls and mounting pressure to work overtime to make up for production lag, workers at the factories revolted. They claimed that their bonuses had been delayed, while the protests involved workers wielding sticks causing damage to property.
- The tipping point of these frustrations came after an accident in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang province. A deadly fire in an apartment building took the lives of at least 10 people, who allegedly could not escape the building as it was sealed due to the lockdown. This incident sparked nationwide protests in the last week of November, in part to mourn the victims of the fire accident and in part as dissent against anti-COVID restrictions. People in cities across the country took to the streets to express their sympathy for the Urumqi victims. These gatherings soon turned into protests where people chanted slogans including "We want democracy!" and "Xi Jinping, step down!" University campuses including prestigious institutes such as Tsinghua University and Nanjing Technical University saw students protesting in solidarity with people on the streets. These events continued for a few days as the protests spread sporadically around China, eventually gaining popularity as the "A4 Revolution". Foreign media drew global attention to this protest as Chinese people held up blank white placards as a symbol of censorship, suggesting that their voices were being silenced. The Chinese diaspora also came out in support of the

Chinese population, protesting in front of Chinese consulates in the USA.



Anti-government protests in Shanghai (top) and Sitong Bridge, Beijing (bottom). Image sources: [BBC News](#) (top), [The Guardian](#) (bottom)

Significance

- The anti-Zero COVID protests were unprecedented as they were nationwide and multidimensional in nature and consequences. Dissent was expressed on

social media, on the streets, in university campuses as well as on international avenues. These protests arose spontaneously in various places and involved all sections of society participating for a common cause. Although the protests were centred on the perils of lockdowns, there were significant political and cultural undertones. Not only did the Chinese voice their anger against the policies of the CPC and the current administration, but they also showed social solidarity and empathy about their sufferings.

- Scholars and analysts have pointed out various dimensions and implications of these protests. The underlying causes of the unrest can be traced back to the shift in the Chinese government's policies towards greater control of enterprises and stricter censorship. This has created a relatively hostile political climate in China today. Additionally, the mass protests may have been triggered by uncertainty arising from inconsistencies in the CPC's guidelines about COVID at the time, giving provinces more leeway and less clarity about regulations. Scholars elucidate that public frustration was inevitable due to the striking contrast between the Party's slogan behind the policy – “People first, life first” (人民至上 生命至上) – and the ground reality. People's support for the Urumqi fire victims may be a particular blow for the government, which has stressed on cultural decoupling of the Uyghur community from the rest of China. The progression from opposition to lockdowns to large-scale street protests indicates discontent among the young generation of China. As some scholars have pointed out, the CCP's demand for political discipline and loyalty is against the wishes and aspirations of the youth, whose exposure to a globalised world has made them value freedom and individuality. The anti-Zero COVID protests thus signify a shift in Chinese public opinion, with dissent and criticism emerging from all social strata.

Consequences

- Following the unprecedented protests, the Chinese government effectively rolled back the Zero-COVID policy and instituted new rules for containing the virus. Although the authorities claimed that the protests were fuelled by “hostile outside forces,” a new 10-point plan for opening up the country was announced within a week of the countrywide demonstrations. The new rules allowed asymptomatic patients to self-isolate and ordered local governments to ensure medical supplies and vaccinate the elderly and school children. COVID-positive patients were allowed to self-quarantine. Local authorities

were prohibited from imposing large-scale lockdowns or declaring high-risk areas.

- Moreover, the Chinese government announced that COVID-19 will be downgraded from Class A to Class B management from 8th January 2023, which would officially open up Chinese borders for international travel. As a result, the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau opened travel pathways to the Chinese mainland in the second week of January. At the same time, national authorities opened travel for the beginning of the Chinese Spring Festival. Around 2 billion people are expected to travel to their hometowns during this period.
- As a consequence of releasing domestic restrictions, the COVID-19 infection toll in China has been rising. Public health facilities have witnessed a massive surge in patients and the demand for essential drugs has also been mounting. People have expressed fear on social media about contracting the virus and the new XBB variant is being discussed with anxiety. However, authorities maintain that infections will remain under control and measures are underway to ensure increased supply of healthcare and medical equipment. In order to push economic recovery, the government has adopted various schemes including lowering of interest rates on loans, new facilities for payments and encouraging festive spending during the upcoming Chinese New Year festivities.
- The message being circulated by the authorities has now changed, encouraging people to take up responsibility for their own health. Chatter on social media is also responding to the changes by coming up with new trends and slangs such as:
 1. "Political openness" ("政治出柜"): Describes people openly voicing their opinions, mostly regarding the Zero-COVID policy.
 2. "Sudden, sharp turn" ("急转弯"): Chinese people are describing the end of Zero-COVID as a sudden move from strict containment to quick opening up.
 3. "Ten new rules" ("新十条"): The new guidelines issued by the government on opening up the country are also widely being talked about.
 4. "Green channels" ("绿色通道"): Priority status given to the vaccination of elderly citizens.
- Scientists have expressed concerns about the new policies, pointing out that the policies have been rolled out hastily during winter, a time when the population faces a greater risk of contracting influenza-like diseases such as

COVID-19. Observers say that the new rules provide ambiguous definitions of high-risk zones and other facilities, which may cause confusion. Although vulnerable groups in the population are being prioritized for vaccination, there is considerable vaccine hesitancy. With the rekindling of business and upcoming festivities, these challenges are likely to persist.

Conclusion

- The historic nature of the 2022 protests is signified by the CPC's response to them. To avoid fuelling resentment, Chinese media blocked out footage of maskless audiences from the FIFA World Cup going on at the time. The state also reportedly deployed bots to suppress the circulation of protest information on social media, notably Twitter. Yet, the large-scale protests made the government give in to the people's demands. The Zero-COVID policy, supported by massive propaganda, strict implementation by the state apparatus as well as monitoring by the CPC staff at all levels, was brought down solely by the expression of people's true emotions and demands. In other words, Zero-COVID policy was a case of an authoritarian system being humbled and forced to concede to popular demand by the power of public voice.
- In conclusion, historic protests against the Zero-COVID policy in China have exposed and likely increased the rift between the Chinese government and people. The draconian rules, silencing of dissent and long sequence of protests indicates systemic tensions in Chinese polity which may be vulnerable to future shocks. The success of Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream" now depends not only on economic growth, but also on public opinion and political transparency.