

China Under one Decade of Hu-Wen Empire: 2002-2012

Yukteshwar Kumar, Course Director, Chinese Stream, University of Bath, UK
Former Associate Professor, Delhi University & Visva-Bharati

For Chinese media, under the strict control of the Communist Party, one decade of rule by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao is a golden period but for several western experts and academician, it was a “Lost Era”.

Last week, new leaders of China were anointed with Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang to serve at the helm of Chinese political affairs. Let us here briefly assess the contribution of the previous leaders during their rule of one decade.

One would not disagree from the fact that in the last decade, China showcased itself on the world stage by magnificently and very successfully hosting Beijing Olympics in 2008 and Shanghai Expo in 2010. During the world financial crisis of 2007-08, China remain unaffected and continued to rise by over 8%—an envy to the most of the world economies and China became the second largest economy of the world from being Sixth when Hu and Wen started commanding the country’s politics and economy in 2002. Chinese Foreign exchange reserve grew from 287 billion USD in 2002 to almost 3.3 trillion USD now.

With the rise in the economy, people started becoming affluent and even after solving their basic needs, they had enough cash left to go abroad on holidays and while in 2002, only 17 million Chinese could go abroad; by 2011, 70 million could afford this. Inside the country, length of highways doubled in one decade and people saw bullet trains running across the length and breadth of the country with a speed of more than 300 KM per hour. In 2004, Shanghai witnessed running of the fastest train on the earth in regular commercial services. The maglev train in China achieved a world record speed of even 501 KM per hour.

China had a long history of agricultural taxation, however under the rule of Hu-Wen this agricultural tax was rescinded and primary education in most of the areas became free. In the last 10 years, China also saw a significant rise of Internet users—netizens, which rose from approximately 60 million in 2002 to 560 million in early 2012. However, one would hasten to note here that there is cruel censorship on Internet and Facebook, Twitter and Youtube are completely blocked. News and report which the party and the government do not like are instantly blocked and any remarks by the common man on the micro blogs are immediately deleted as well.

Several of my Chinese friends also wrote to me that the development in the last decade has been quite quicker and their salary has risen by more than 80%. Medical support system in most of the areas has improved vastly and there has been rapid growth and improvement in small and medium class cities. In big cities, traffic

remains a problem but there are a lot more metro lines and overall standard of common people has meaningfully improved.

Hu-Wen regime was also successful in not allowing any “Jasmine Revolution” inside their country after several autocratic governments in Asia and Africa came under its tornado affect.

One may on the contrary argue that as Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao inherited good foundation, they should have achieved much more than what they have been able to. Peoples’ discontent and hence uprising and demonstration has gone up-to 180,000 per year to what used to be only 40,000 ten years ago.

Their policy on Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang has failed and in 2008, several Tibetans were able to attack Hans and ethnic harmony was completely misplaced. In 2009, social friction between Han and ethnic Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang boiled over into riots and several people lost life. More than 50 Tibetan monks have also immolated themselves in the recent few years after they completely lost their faith in Hu-Wen administration.

Despite improvement in economic and business ties between Taiwan and the mainland, cross-strait relationship in political arena has not improved and Taiwanese President Ma Yingjiu has completely ruled out that he would be willing to visit mainland only as President Ma and never as Professor or Chairman Ma.

Inflation and rise in property price has been phenomenal and common people cannot afford to buy their own house. Mo Yan, the first official Chinese Nobel-laureate wanted to buy a good house from his recent prize-money in Beijing and only realized that even Nobel-prize was not enough for him to procure a decent house in Beijing!

Corruption, bureaucracy, red-tapism, nepotism and formalism has only improved in the last decade and the new leader Xi Jinping unmistakably emphasized this during the press conference after being elected as the General Secretary of the CPC.

Overall, I would agree with a Chinese expert who summarized that the last decade of Hu-Wen rule was not a completely lost decade; neither was it a golden era. It was almost an unchanged decade. The economy has made strident progress but politics remained where it was ten years ago. On the top of it, corruption and inflation has proved to be big monster shelving into the fruits of any development.