Local governments under pressure: The commodification of stability maintenance

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Analysis by Jérôme Doyon based on:

- Xu Kai and Li Wei’ao, “The stability maintaining machine,” Caijing, 6 June 2011. (1)
- Gao Jun, “The trap of maintaining stability and how to avoid it,” Lilun daokan, no. 11, 2011. (3)
- Zhang Qianfan, “The origin and disruption of the system for petitioning the higher authorities,” Tansuo yu zhengming – Exploration and free views, 10 May 2012. (5)

In 1994, the Chinese government carried out a tax reform that limited the revenues of local governments and made them dependent for funding on central authorities. Since then, local governments have been caught between the people, who want more social policies that local authorities cannot afford, and the central government, which is focused on maintaining social stability. Xu Kai, Li Wei’ao, and Xi Nan say that social stability has become the main priority of local governments. So, for example, in Yun’an district in the province of Guangdong, out of 6,700 people on the public authorities’ payroll, 1,800 have jobs related to maintaining stability. The success of local administrations is evaluated largely on their ability to maintain social stability. In 2009, “The temporary provision on the enforcement of the responsibilities of Party leaders and the State” (guanyu shixing dangzheng lingdao wenze de zanxing guiding) reaffirmed local government’s responsibility for incidents that threaten stability, with particular reference to riots and other mass demonstrations. These articles show that this method of evaluation puts pressure on local governments. The central authorities have said that they want to develop the system of “letters and visits” (xinfang), as reaffirmed in 2005’s “Regulations on letters and visits” (xinfang tiaoli). This administrative practice, which exists parallel to the judiciary system, allows citizens to appeal local decisions by presenting a petition to central authorities. But evaluating local administrations on the basis of social stability maintenance undermines the system of letters and visits.

In order to appear to be making progress on social stability, local governments have adopted a logic of “zero incidents” (buchen luoji). Whatever the cost, they have to make sure they present an image of stability – even at the risk of not addressing the root causes of various problems.

1. Xu Kai and Li Wei’ao are journalists at Caijing.
2. Zhong Weijun is an associate professor at the School of Political Science and Public Management at the Zhejiang Institute of Technology.
3. Gao Jun is a professor at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Jiangsu Teachers University of Technology.
4. Xia Nan is a lawyer in the Beijing law firm, Hua Yi.
5. Zhang Qianfan is a professor at Peking University Law School.
lems. Zhong Weijun and Gao Jun say this logic forces the local authorities to deal with problems in a very superficial way. They spend more time trying to stop the authorities in charge of their evaluation from finding out about problems than they do on actually resolving them. The seriousness of a problem is judged only in terms of how higher authorities will perceive it. Zhong says this has contributed to a deterioration of relations between local authorities and citizens, as the relationship between the two has moved from one of service to one of “seizure” (juequ).

Under the system of letters and visits, local governments are supposed to contact and meet with petitioners (jiefang). Xu Kai and Li Weiq show how, in practice, petitioners are obstructed (jiefang) to keep local government evaluations artificially high. Local authorities use several different tactics to “buy peace” (huaiqian mai ping’ an).

Petitioners’ names are deleted from the official registers (xiaohao) at every administrative level. Local governments set up watch lists of likely nuisances, especially at times of important local festivals or around the annual plenary sessions of “the two assemblies” (the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) in Beijing. Gao Jun says that the political fallout from an incident on one of these occasions would be extremely serious. Xia Nan says local authorities have been known to issue fines or to illegally detain petitioners, sending them to work camps and complicity between the local authorities and their direct superiors, the names of many petitioners are either not registered at all or are wiped off official registers in return for kickbacks. The Caijing journalists say that this turns the political problem of government evaluation into an economic cost.

Another option for local authorities is to arrest petitioners. This can be done locally through the “centres for maintaining stability” (weiwen ban) at every administrative level. Local governments set up watch lists of likely nuisances, especially at times of important local festivals or around the annual plenary sessions of “the two assemblies” (the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) in Beijing. Gao Jun says that the political fallout from an incident on one of these occasions would be extremely serious. Xia Nan says local authorities have been known to issue fines or to illegally detain petitioners, sending them to work camps or psychiatric hospitals, in order to keep them from appealing to higher authorities. To encourage administrative staff to take action in this way, local governments have established a system of bonuses. Xu Kai and Li Weiq say functionaries who resolved an “incident” at the village level earned bonuses of 50 or 100 yuan in 2011, and the reward is even greater for people further up the administrative ladder. Xu and Li say that the budget for “bonuses” in Guangdong’s Yun’an District in 2010 was 20,000 yuan – extremely cost-effective compared with the potential political and economic cost of even a successful complaint in Beijing.

Local authorities can also carry out judgements on petitioners in Beijing through liaison offices (zhujing banshichu). The president of a local court told the Caijing journalists that all young male judges are obliged to work in the Beijing liaison office of their locality, and that their main job is to keep local authorities informed of complaints, especially those involving illegal detention centres, black jails (hei jianyu) or blackmail. Zhang views this as the height of cynicism that the effect of closing liaison offices was to enable these sordid enterprises to get rich.

Between wiping names from official registers, issuing bonuses to local staff to resolve “incidents,” and hiring private enterprises to stop petitioners, a national market for stability maintenance is opening up. Zhang and the Caijing journalists see this market as the natural consequence of the current structure of stability maintenance and the method used to evaluate local governments. Zhang points out some positive developments, such as the closure of the liaison offices in Beijing and some innovations in the letters and visits system in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, where petitioners’ cases are publicly heard in front of experts and deputies of the local People’s Congress and Political Consultative Conference. But Zhang says that measures like the simple reform of the rules surrounding letters and visits cannot resolve these problems, which have their roots in the power relations of the petitioning system. As illustrated by the use of private enterprises to obstruct petitioners, local authorities can always pay lip service to any new orders (yangfeng yiwen) to make them go away. As it stands, the system is structured so that citizens voice their problems and then go home – as if simply articulating them will somehow make them go away.

The system costs local governments a great deal in terms of both legitimacy and financial resources. Xia Nan says it is a vicious cycle that serves to reinforce the dual pressure on local governments from the people and from central authorities. The “mafiasation” (heisehua) of the practices associated with maintaining social stability increases tensions between the government and the people, while the cost of these practices further financially weakens localities, and thus can affect local governments’ evaluation by the central authorities. Xia says that in the long term, the most serious concern is the deterioration of the authorities’ relations with the people, as well as relations among the people. He points to the toxic climate these methods create, giving the example of an old man denounced by the employees of a photocopy shop in Shanxi when they discovered he was preparing a petition file. After ten years, the current policy of maintaining stability has resulted in untenable fiscal practices and inconsistent results.

Translated by Elizabeth Laederich.