

A republic sans people



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Amid much fanfare that marked the 60th anniversary celebrations of the People's Republic of China the main absentees were the 'people', who were told to stay inside their homes. Even today ordinary people in China have no say in the system of governance and succession

The parade was great. *The New York Times* said: "The celebration of the founding of the People's Republic of China was immense, powerful and flawless, down to the crystalline skies that, just a day earlier, had been laden with smog."

Sixty years earlier, Dr Li Zhisui, Mao Zedong's private physician, was on the rostrum of Tiananmen Square to attend the ceremonies of the foundation of the People's Republic of China. He later wrote of "the crisp, clear, and chilly day that makes autumn in Beijing the most magnificent season". The organisers of the 60th anniversary couldn't afford not to have a "crystalline sky" in 2009.

But let us go back to 1949. The Great Helmsman appeared on the stage, Dr Li recalled: "Mao was a truly magnetic force. Mao's voice was soft, almost lilting, and the effect of his speech was riveting. 'The Chinese people have stood up', he proclaimed, and the crowd went wild, thundering in applause, shouting over and over: 'Long Live the People's Republic of China!' I was so full of joy my heart nearly burst out of my throat, and tears welled up in my eyes. I was so proud of China, so full of hope, so happy."

Though a foreign correspondent described the celebrations as "slightly kitschy and indisputably retro," Xinhua news agency reported: "A total of 52 types of new weapon systems, all Chinese-made, including new generation tanks, missiles and warplanes were displayed. Ninety per cent of the weapons were paraded for the first time."

The Second Artillery Force stole the show with a display of five types of missiles, "China's core strategic deterrent". Xinhua affirmed that "the gigantic weapons in camouflage colours rolled by on long-bed trucks, triggering cheers from spectators." Experts already knew that the dreaded DF21 medium range ballistic missiles could be well camouflaged and launched from trains (from the Qinghai-Tibet train, for example), but to see them all at the same time was awesome.

It was followed by 151 warplanes which



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flew over Tiananmen Square, including China's most advanced J-10 and J-11 fighter jets, airborne early warning and control aircraft, bombers and aerial tankers.

Though Dennis J Blasko in the last issue of the *China Brief* of the Jamestown Foundation had warned: "No judgment about Chinese military capabilities can be rendered simply by watching this parade. And more importantly, based on the weapons on display no judgment can be rendered as to the Chinese intention behind the deployment of these weapons," but one can guess what the probable targets are.

If there was Glamour Award, it would have gone to the ladies (said to be a female militia unit) clad in red miniskirts with white jackboots carrying the latest sub-machine guns (probably making our anti-diluvian-equipped AK47 NSG, jealous).

The kitsch part of the grandiose parade was President Hu Jintao reviewing the troops in an open roof 12-cylinder Red Flag limousine dating from Mao's times. For the occasion Mr Jintao was dressed in a high-collar Mao-style jacket (while other members of the Standing Committee of the Polit Bureau and former President Jiang Zemin wore ordinary suits and ties). During the review the President stood stiffly in front of four microphones fixed on the limousine, shouting "Greetings, comrades!" with the troops answering "Serve the people!"

In his speech, Mr Jintao proclaimed that the Chinese people "cannot be prouder of the development and progress of our great motherland," however observers noted the main absentees at the celebrations, the people of China. Apart from a few thousands appa-

ratchiks, some foreign diplomats and journalists and 1,00,000 extras, where were the Chinese people?

They were told to remain inside their homes and not emerge. To make sure that the party's instructions were followed to the letter, some 8,00,000 volunteers had been engaged. Such tight security had not been seen in 60 years (it is said to have been even tighter than during the Olympics). Does it mean that the party is scared of its own people?

What else to conclude? Sixty years after its foundation, the 'Republic' (from the latin *res publica* or 'public matter') is not for the 'public', but for a party. China is still not a "republic".

This is the tragedy of modern China. This is visible at all levels of the state, even at the highest level such as the Standing Committee of the Polit Bureau.

It is probably the most serious failure of the Middle Kingdom which has been unable to introduce a modern system of governance. Though the word 'people's' is recurrent in all state organs, the nation is run by a single party since 1949. Ordinary people have no say in state affairs.

National People's Congress chairman Wu Bangguo recently declared that China will "never go down the devious path of Western institutions." But whether Beijing agrees to it or not, human rights, basic personal laws or universal suffrage are today values accepted by all non-rogue nations.

Supreme opacity adds to the undependability of the system; *glasnost* (transparency) has never been a Chinese forte.

This issue is so serious that China's stability could be endangered. It has recently been reported that Xi Jinping, the Chinese Vice-President was not elevated (as expected) to the all-powerful Central Military Commission. Nobody knows what happened; it can only be guessed that Mr Jintao does not see eye to eye with Mr Jinping.

The Chinese heir apparent is the son of Xi Zhongxun, one of the senior-most leaders of the First Generation of the CCP. In 1962, he fell out of favour, accused of disloyalty to chairman Mao. Is old Jinping's son following the same road?

Interestingly, some of the opacity was lifted by Zhao Ziyang, the former general secretary of the CCP. In his secretly recorded memoirs, he explained that he once wrote to Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader about "perfecting the system of the central leadership" and "how to really establish democratic centralism within the Central Committee, especially within the Polit Bureau and its Standing Committee;" in other words, to have a tested and accepted system to succession.

Zhao told Deng: "Maintaining the stability of the fundamental laws of the nation is certainly one aspect; however ... I believe that fundamentally and most importantly, we must tackle the system of the party leadership."