

Beijing's political tightrope-walk

By Kerry Brown,
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China's premier Wen Jiabao has said that he is the world's most worried man. Across his desk pass reports on the many issues that could endanger the country's stability and halt its steady growth: [environmental](#) [1] damage, energy-supply problems, social unrest among them. At night, in the peaceful seclusion of the central Zhongnanhai compound next to Beijing's "forbidden city", the worries must if anything intensify. Wen's years as a consummate political [insider](#) [2] and survivor may have brought him to a commanding political position - but nothing can have prepared him (or indeed anyone) for the task of steering the mighty entity that the People's Republic of China has become on a stable and sustainable course (see "[China goes global](#) [2]", 2 August 2008).

The premier's annual [report](#) [6] to the eleventh national people's congress ([NPC](#) [7], which met in Beijing on 5-18 March 2008) is a regular fixture in the Chinese calendar. It can also be supreme political theatre. In the days of [Zhu Rongji](#) [8] - Wen's predecessor in the 1990s - the wily, brilliant Zhu would swipe away pesky questions with a [dazzling](#) [9] insouciance that enthralled visiting foreign journalists. Here was a man consigned to forced labour in jail in the 1950s for being a "rightist", subsequently rehabilitated, and now with little left to fear. As a journalist friend said to me in Beijing, there will certainly never be another Zhu. It's an impossible act to follow, but Wen has been doing a good, competent job: lower profile, but respected and reasonably popular.

That is, until the snowstorms and [associated](#) [10] energy shortfalls of late January 2008, which left the government in chaos and provoked significant disgruntlement among Chinese citizens stranded in the attempt to travel home for the new year.

The worst winter weather for decades left millions stranded at the worst possible time. China's migrant workers - the very people whose loyalty the government of [Hu Jintao](#) [11] (president) and [Wen Jiabao](#) [12] (prime minister) have tried so hard to enlist and secure - were left to languish in railway stations throughout China's coastal regions. This combination of elements - a large, prolonged public assembly of Chinese wage-earners denied a rare chance to see their families - came dangerously close to igniting the social tinder-box that the Chinese government spends a huge effort day after day seeking to contain (see [Struggling Giant: China in the 21st Century](#) [13] [Anthem Press, 2007]).

The government belatedly went into crisis-mode. Wen even presented himself to the throng

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gathered at Changsha station in central China - voicing concern, even (in an unprecedented gesture) apologising [14] on behalf of the government. Xi Jinping, elevated to the politburo at the seventeenth party congress [14] of 15-19 October 2007 (and a favourite [15] to be China's next president) was dispatched to the poor province of Guizhou to express contrition.

Those less on-message received a scolding. The central government sternly rebuked the leadership of Yunnan (southwest China) for its inefficiency in face of the weather-induced travel chaos. The widely reviled Jia Qingling [16], head of the China people's political consultative conference (CPPCC [17]), was another target: when in preceding Wen at the NPC meeting to deliver his work report he largely ignored the travel problems and offered no explanation for the failures of China's disaster planning, attendees and delegate openly criticised him.

A people's burden

Wen Jiabao's own report to the national people's congress was important [18] less for the mantras about "thought liberation" and "(breaking) the shackles of old ideas" than for a more prosaic reason: his setting of targets both for economic growth and for inflation. He has already been criticised for over-optimism in these areas, itself a signal of the nervousness of the political climate.

China's current inflation rate - the consumer price index rose [19] by 8.7% in February 2008, and food costs by an astonishing 23.3% - presses greatly on its people's livelihoods. In the popular mentality at least, the two things that combined to destroy the legitimacy of the nationalist government that fell in 1949 were inflation and corruption. In truth, the forces leading to the communist takeover were larger: most of all the country's utter devastation by twelve years of war, both internal and external. But no one can dispute that by the end of the regime's life, a ruined economy - to which spiralling inflation had contributed - meant also an exhausted government that had lost the love of the people.

In 1989, the same coupling of corruption and inflation was a factor in the disturbances that so unsettled the party (albeit these factors were overshadowed by more directly political ones). In the mid-1990s too, the inflationary spectre required adept intervention (a famed "soft landing") by then premier Zhu Rongji to cool the Chinese economy. More than a decade later, the problem looks more intractable [20], and Wen's annual inflation target of 4.8% seems ambitious.

The rises in the price of meat and other staple foods (some of them steep) make living conditions tougher for the very constituency Hu and Wen must keep happy - farmers, migrant workers, factory workers; that is, the billion Chinese not yet part of the burgeoning middle class the post-1978 reforms have created. For these people, every *yuan* matters. The budgets even of urban-dwellers are stretched to the limit. They are already saving furiously to cope with a host of responsibilities: health [21] costs, housing costs, the educational costs of their children, the growing number of older folk in their families, as

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well as unexpected emergencies.

In these circumstances, a hike in food prices is very unwelcome to people all over China. For the Beijing leadership, inflation much beyond 5%-6% could become a major political headache - and Wen's crisis-management crash-course during the deep-freeze [22] prove only the precursor to a much harsher sequel.

A balancing-act

All of this makes the billions of dollars spent on the Olympic games [23] look increasingly incongruous. The main buildings are finished, and Beijing is now attending to the details. But the cold international atmosphere - assiduously reinforced by campaigners who have sought to brand the extravaganza as the "genocide Olympics" - has exposed the Chinese leadership's obvious lack of preparation in the arena of images as opposed to infrastructure. The reaction in China to Stephen Spielberg's resignation [24] from the creative committee of the opening ceremony - both defensive and insinuating - is revealing of a deeper confusion. Despite seeking counsel from western public-relations firms, Chinese officialdom still has a long way to go in dealing [25] with a story-hungry, fractious and sceptical foreign media that is very far from the pliant creature it is used to at home.

Thus, the great event on 8-24 August 2008 - far from the smoothly spectacular entry onto the global stage that Beijing envisaged - is shaping up to be a big test for the Chinese leaders (see Li Datong, "Beijing's Olympics, China's politics [25]", 22 August 2007). The problem for Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao and their comrades [26] is that the international spotlight on their hosting of the Olympics (with all the criticism this entails) requires them to show to the Chinese people that they are standing up strong and proud for China's interests at the very time when they must (in jittery economic [27] circumstances) continue to deliver the all-important growth that they need to remain secure in power.

True, they are tough and realistic people, and are probably in as good a shape as any rival elite would be to meet the challenge. But they face a balancing-act as difficult as any that will earn gold during the games; and if the leaders get through reasonably unscathed [28], they will merit a place on the Olympic podium for political acrobatics.

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