



Thursday, Oct. 04, 2007

## In China, Hu is the Man to See

By Simon Elegant/Beijing

About once a month, a stream of black sedans with heavily tinted windows snakes through the gates of Zhongnanhai, the sprawling headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party, which occupies the southwestern corner of Beijing's Forbidden City. The limousines bear the 22 members of the party's Political Bureau, or Politburo. In legend, Communist Party meetings are endless, but since 2002, when Hu Jintao became General Secretary of the party (he became President of China the next year), Politburo sessions have been quite brisk. Typically, they are over by lunchtime, and then two top academics are ushered in to brief the assembled leaders on trends in energy supply, patterns of urbanization or intellectual-property rights. The discussion can last until the evening, when Hu sums things up, though he reportedly rarely expresses his own opinion. "It's amazing," says Alice Lyman Miller, a China scholar at Stanford University and editor of China Leadership Monitor, "the thought of the entire Politburo sitting around and listening to academics for hours."

The study sessions are very much a product of Hu's leadership and personality, reflecting a methodical, consensus-seeking approach to problems. At the midpoint of what is expected to be a 10-year period in office, Hu can reasonably think that his low-key style has served China well and that he has done his best to manage the fissures that a quarter-century of breakneck economic growth have torn in Chinese society. But far, far more needs to be done to deal with the country's daunting list of crises--a ravaged environment, rising inflation, rampant corruption and widespread social unrest.

For Hu and the rest of China's leadership, a chance to start addressing those issues will come when the party's 17th Congress, the first in five years, opens in Beijing on Oct. 15. More than 2,000 party members will gather for a few days of factional maneuvering and backroom deals. New policies will be adopted and new appointments made to the Standing Committee of the Politburo--the nine-member inner Cabinet of China--but so opaque are China's politics that the tea-leaf readers will be busy for years. "Even when you know the names and positions of the new appointments," says a Western diplomat in Beijing who tracks Chinese politics, "you still have to wait for policy changes to be sure what they mean."

One thing about the Congress seems assured: Hu, 64, will be re-elected to a second five-year term as party General Secretary. The former hydraulic engineer's sense of China's future is rooted in his own experiences. Though he came from a moderately prosperous family of tea merchants, Hu was thrust into the turmoil of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution soon after he graduated from Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University in 1964. Along with millions of others, he was sent to the countryside to "learn from the masses." After a year spent carrying bricks at a construction site in Guizhou province, Hu began a gradual rise through the ranks.


In contrast to that of other leaders, many of whom were the children of senior officials based in Beijing, Hu's path took him through some of China's poorest regions. During spells in the western provinces of Guizhou and Gansu and later in Tibet, Hu is said to have displayed a concern for the less privileged that, analysts believe, lies at the root of his policies. He has made it clear he seeks to rein in the to-get-rich-is-glorious mentality that has gripped the nation since Deng Xiaoping launched China's economic reforms in the 1980s--and that is now blamed for a brand of unfettered capitalism that has spawned everything from adulterated medicine to semislavery. Instead, the President and his allies have promoted policies that emphasize social stability and focus on the millions of Chinese left on the margins of the boom. He has his eye on his legacy. "Personally, I found Hu to be a very serious man," says Michael Green, a former U.S. National Security Council official under President George W. Bush. "You get the sense that he feels the burden of responsibility--how history will judge him--weighing very heavily on his shoulders."

#### Populists and Elitists

Hu does not have everything his way. Cheng Li, a China scholar and professor of government at Hamilton College, identifies two party factions, which he calls the populists, led by Hu and his allies, and the élitists, made up of so-called princelings--children of top officials--and supporters of former President Jiang Zemin. Many in the latter camp have close ties to Shanghai, China's commercial capital. While both groups share the goal of keeping the party (and themselves) in power, Li argues that they represent "two starkly different sociopolitical and geographical constituencies," with the élitists speaking for the interests of China's most economically advanced coastal regions. Li notes that a recent government study showed that the vast majority of the country's 3,000 richest entrepreneurs are children of high-ranking officials who use their connections to gain favorable business deals. Mindful that anger at corruption was the original motive for the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, Hu's government has promoted a nationwide antigraft campaign that has brought down a slew of senior officials, including Chen Liangyu, party secretary of Shanghai, who is under arrest and reportedly awaiting sentencing for his alleged role in a scheme that channeled enormous sums in pension funds into private investment. Hu and his close ally Premier Wen Jiabao have also sought to shift growth from the coast to the interior and tackle China's dreadful environmental problems.

How effective has Hu been at recalibrating China's policies? The country's problems are immense, and if all you did was taste its foul air or look at the huddled masses who have been left out of the boom, it would be easy to conclude that Hu's job had hardly started. In his first years in office, it was often said that Hu was unable to get his vision adopted by powerful provincial leaders. But the old judgment that he is a weak leader may be changing.

Li notes that the President has spent the past five years ensuring that the top bureaucratic and party ranks were staffed by his allies. Green detected a growing assurance in the times he met Hu. "In the beginning," he says, "Hu would conduct his meetings with a large number of officials in the same room and only reluctantly agree to one-on-one sessions with [Secretary of State Condoleezza] Rice or the President. But as time went on, the amount of time he spent in one-on-ones grew, as did his confidence. I think he has gained control over the apparatus." Sometime after the party Congress, those tea-leaf readers will tell us if that is really the case.

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