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Politburo

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Every significant decision affecting China's 1.3bn people is first discussed and approved by a handful of men who sit on the party's political bureau (politburo), the nexus of all power in China.

The 24-member Politburo is elected by the party's central committee. But real power lies with its nine-member standing committee, which works as a kind of inner cabinet and groups together the country's most influential leaders.

How the standing committee operates is secret and unclear. But its meetings are thought to be regular and frequent, often characterised by blunt speaking and disagreement.

Senior leaders speak first and then sum up, giving their views extra weight. The emphasis is always on reaching a consensus, but if no consensus is reached, the majority holds sway.

Once a decision has been made, all members are bound by it. Although policy disagreements and factional fighting are widely believed to take place in private, it is extremely rare for these to break into the public domain.

When they do – as happened in 1989 when the leadership battled over how to deal with the Tiananmen protests – it is a sign of all-out power struggle. New politburo members are chosen only after rigorous discussion and investigation of their backgrounds, experience and views.

To reach the top, people need a strong record of achievement working for the party, to have the right patrons, to have dodged controversy, and to have avoided making powerful enemies.

**Regional power**

Members of the standing committee also share out the posts of party general secretary, premier, chairman of the National People's Congress, and head of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission.

The full politburo tends to include party secretaries from big municipalities like Beijing and Shanghai, and from important provinces like Guangdong.

Recently, the wealth generated by China's economic reforms has led some analysts to suggest the power of the centre is waning.

It is pointed out that party secretaries of large provinces like Sichuan and Guangdong are in charge of populations bigger than most European countries, and that their tax revenues are vital to Beijing.

But it is difficult to see them getting free from Beijing's political grip so long as the country's political system remains so closed.

Communist Party

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The Chinese Communist Party's 73-million membership makes it the biggest political party in the world. Its tight organisation and ruthlessness help explain why it is also still in power.

The party oversees and influences many aspects of people's lives - what they learn at school and watch on TV, their jobs and housing, even the number of children they are allowed.

It is an elite group made up largely of government officials, army officers and model workers. Business people are also now being invited to join its ranks.

It is unrepresentative of China as a whole. Only 20% of members are women, 77% are over 35 years old and 31% have a college degree. It is also obsessive about control, regularly showing itself capable of great brutality in suppressing dissent or any challenge to its authority.

Joining the party brings significant privileges, which explains why membership continues to rise. Members get access to better information, their children get better schooling, and many jobs are only open to members.

Most significantly in China, where personal relationships are often more important than ability, members get to network with decision-makers influencing their careers, lives or businesses.

**Pyramid structure**

To join, applicants need the backing of existing members and to undergo exhaustive checks and examination by their local party branch. They then face a year's probation, again involving assessments and training.

The party has a pyramid structure resting on millions of local-level party organisations across the country and reaching all the way up to the highest decision-making bodies in Beijing.

In theory, the top of the pyramid is the National Party Congress, which is convened once every five years and brings together more than 2,000 delegates from party organisations across the country.

The congress' main function is to "elect" a central committee of about 200 full members and 150 lower-ranking or "alternate" members", though in fact almost all of these people are approved in advance.

In turn, the central committee's main job is to elect a new politburo and its smaller standing committee, where real decision-making powers lie.

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National People's Congress

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Under China's 1982 constitution, the most powerful organ of state is meant to be the National People's Congress (NPC), China's parliament. In truth, it is little more than a rubber stamp for party decisions.

The congress is made up of nearly 3,000 delegates elected by China's provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities and the armed forces. Delegates hold office for five years, and the full congress is convened for one session each year.

This sporadic and unwieldy nature means that real influence lies within a standing committee of about 150 members elected from congress delegates. It meets every couple of months.

In theory, the congress has the powers to change the constitution and make laws. But it is not, and is not meant to be, an independent body in the Western sense of a parliament.

For a start, about 70% of its delegates - and almost all its senior figures - are also party members. Their loyalty is to the party first, the NPC second.

**Independence**

What actually tends to happen, therefore, is that the party drafts most new legislation and passes it to the NPC for "consideration", better described as speedy approval.

The NPC has shown some signs of growing independence over the past decade. In a notable incident in 1999, it delayed passing a law bringing in an unpopular fuel tax. It has also been given greater leeway drafting laws in areas like human rights.

The congress also "elects" the country's highest leaders, including the state president and vice-president, the chairman of the government's own Military Affairs Commission and the president of the Supreme People's Court.

But again, these elections are very different from the Western ideal.

**PARALLEL HIERARCHIES IN CHINA**

**(Just for reference)**

**MILITARY PARTY GOVERNMENT**

Central Military Standing Committee, President, Prime

Commission Politburo Minister, State Council

Ministry of State Central Committee Central Government

Security, Ministry of Ministries, Bureaus

Public Security, People’s

Armed Forces

National Party Congress People’s National Congress

Provincial Party Provincial People’s

Congresses Congresses

and Committees

Local Level Party Local Level People’s

Organizations Congresses

Primary Party Village Councils

Organizations