



## Prospects & Perspectives



The tragedy of the car attack in Zhuhai on November 11, 2024, in which 35 people were killed and 43 more injured, is believed to be China's deadliest act of random violence in decades. Picture source: Didaictor, November 12, 2024, *Wikipedia*, <<https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-tw/%E7%8F%A0%E6%B5%B7%E5%B8%82%E9%AB%94%E8%82%B2%E4%B8%AD%E5%BF%83%E9%A7%95%E8%B%8A%E6%92%9E%E4%BA%BA%E4%BA%8B%E4%BB%B6#>>>.

## Cracks in the Pillars: The Rising Tide of Random Violence and the Crisis of China's Authoritarianism

By *Thung-Hong Lin*

**T**

he tragedy of the car attack in Zhuhai on November 11, 2024, in which



35 people were killed and 43 more injured, is believed to be China's deadliest act of random violence in decades. However, it is just the tip of the iceberg, as the incident follows a string of attacks, including a stabbing spree at a Shanghai supermarket and a knife attack at a Beijing school. While Xi Jinping vowed severe punishment for the perpetrator and comprehensive inspection of potential suspects, the horse has already bolted. The recent trend of radicalized and skyrocketing random violence reveals the failure of three institutional pillars of China's authoritarianism: rapid economic growth, socialist legality, and encompassing social control. With the cracks in the pillars widening, the political legitimacy of China's party-state is on the edge.

### **The dysfunction of China's authoritarianism**

By definition, authoritarianism involves the domination of social hierarchies by individuals or groups at the top, who continuously exert power to extract conformity and maintain their privileges. These dominant actors control and suppress potential challenges to their authority, preserving existing power structures and preventing any alterations to the established social order.

In this sense, the remarkable growth of the Chinese economy since the Reform and Openness (*gaige kaifang*) era has been the key to the political legitimacy of the party-state in exchange for people's political loyalty. However, as the economic growth rate slackened and youth unemployment rose, the resulting crisis of legitimacy became more prominent. As the economic problems were gradually exposed, the China-U.S. trade war and the Covid-19 pandemic landed the fatal blow. In 2024, China's economic growth rate was around 4.8%, while youth unemployment was 17.1% in October.

A series of real-estate enterprise bankruptcies and shrinking domestic consumption also highlighted the dire economic situation. When the chain effects of the macroeconomic downturn began affecting desperate college students and led to layoffs in the private sector, the lack of job security and huge pressure to survive became the potential fuel for social disorder.

The second failure of Chinese authoritarianism is the socialist legality, which the party-state promotes as "ruling the country by law" (*yifa zhiguo*) in official propaganda. Ideally, as Xi claimed a decade ago, the state administration should obey the law. However, with Supreme People's Court President Zhou



Qiang issuing a declaration against judicial independence in 2017 and the Constitutional amendment allowing Xi's life-long rule in 2018, the stormy debate on "either the party or law" was closed with the arbitration of Xi's concentration of power.

Consequently, the party-state's approach to the rule of law has been fundamentally instrumental in that law is seen as a tool of state control rather than an independent mechanism for protecting individual rights and resolving social conflicts. The subordinate status of the judicial system to the party-state widened the social justice deficit, with the legal process possibly inducing random acts of violence. When formal legal channels are perceived as ineffective or biased, individuals may resort to extra-legal forms of conflict resolution or expression of discontent. Random killings could represent an extreme manifestation of violent responses to perceived systemic injustice.

Last but not least, Xi's centralization of power requires comprehensive social control institutions, including pervasive surveillance systems, social credit score mechanisms, and strict censorship of personal life by grid members at every level of administration. The institutions imposed significant costs related to staffing and operational infrastructure. However, local governments have suffered massive budget deficits since the Covid pandemic. It has been widely reported that local governments are in serious debt and unable to pay the wages of social maintenance (*wei wen*) personnel who played a critical role in collecting information and preempting potential public dissatisfaction.

The decline of the social maintenance system indicates that the systems of encompassing social control have been unable to predict the burst of potential incidents. As recent incidents have shown, the central and local governments can only patch things up case by case, further intensifying public insecurity. Does the dysfunction of China's authoritarianism mean that the monopoly of power of the party-state has reached an impasse? Is there a coming crisis of the party-state?

### **The crisis of China's authoritarianism?**

When the cracks in the three pillars of China's authoritarianism appeared, they were not properly filled with structural political reforms or inclusive public participation in policy making. On the contrary, the party-state remains politically arbitrary; the frequency and the extent of radicalization of random



violence are both increasing. Moreover, the unpredictable collective actions such as the “White Paper Movement” and the “Nighttime Bike Ride to Kaifeng” seem to provide fertile ground for the outcry of political reform to spread and sow doubt about the legitimacy of the party-state. All the signs suggest that the cohesion of Chinese society may be eroding and that Xi’s concentration of power may be on the wane.

That said, it is too early to conclude that China’s authoritarian regime is on the verge of collapse. The violence, while significant, is more likely a symptom of institutional dysfunction rather than an immediate existential threat to the party-state and Xi’s power, which have repeatedly demonstrated remarkable resilience in managing internal tensions. The outcomes of the “White Paper Movement” and the “Nighttime Bike Ride to Kaifeng” suggest that the party-state’s ability to swiftly pin down social remains unchallengeable. The repressive apparatus remains highly effective. In the short term, the structural problems can be contained by the existing party-state governmental system.

For youth who find their life prospects intolerable and citizens who refuse to accept the status quo, nonetheless, the turbulence caused by acts of random violence, a catastrophic breakdown of social conflict-resolution mechanisms, or mass collective action could occur more often. The pillars could eventually melt down if the cracks are allowed to widen perpetually.

Random Violence Incidents in China, 2024 (until November)						
No.	Date	Location	Type	Casualties		Note
				Death	Injured	
1	March 1	Dezhou City, Shandong	Car Rampage	2	6	
2	May 7	Zhaotong City, Yunnan	Stabbing	2	21	
3	May 20	Chenzhou City, Hunan	Stabbing	3	2	
4	May 20	Guixi City, Jiangxi	Stabbing	2	10	



5	June 11	Jilin City, Jilin	Stabbing		4	Targeting Americans
6	June 19	Shanghai City	Stabbing		3	
7	June 24	Suzhou City, Jiangsu	Stabbing	1	2	Targeting Japanese
8	July 4	Shenyang City, Liaoning	Slashing	3	1	
9	July 27	Changsha City, Hunan	Car Rampage	8	5	
10	August 13	Zhongshan City, Guangdong	Car Rampage		8	
11	August 31	Fangshenggang, Guangxi	Stabbing	5	1	
12	September 3	Tai'an City, Shandong	Car Rampage	11	13	
13	September 18	Shenzhen City	Stabbing	1		Targeting Japanese
14	September 30	Shanghai City	Slashing	3	15	
15	October 8	Guangzhou City	Slashing		3	
16	October 8	Tai'an City, Shandong	Car Rampage	2	3	
17	October 23	Qingdao City, Shandong	Car Rampage		3	
18	October 28	Beijing City	Slashing		5	
19	November 10	Kaiping City, Guangdong	Car Rampage		8	
20	November 11	Zhuhai City, Guangdong	Car Rampage	35	43	





21	November 16	Yixing City, Jiangsu	Stabbing	8	17	
22	November 17	Guangzhou City	Slashing			Unknown
23	November 19	Changde City, Hunan	Car Rampage			Unknown

(Thung-Hong Lin is Research Fellow, Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica)

---

**Editor's Note:** The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy or the position of the Prospect Foundation.

***Prospect Foundation** is an independent research institution dedicated to the study of cross-Strait relations and international issues. The Foundation maintains active exchanges and communications with many think tanks of the world.*

**Prospect Foundation**

No.1, Lane 60, Sec. 3, Tingzhou Rd., Zhongzheng District

Taipei City, 10087, Republic of China (Taiwan)

Tel: 886-2-23654366 Fax: 886-2-23679193

<http://www.pf.org.tw>

