

China Opens Party Congress To Begin Power Transfer

BY CHARLES HUTZLER
Associated Press

BEIJING — China’s ruling Communist Party opened a congress Thursday to usher in a new group of younger leaders faced with the challenging tasks of righting a flagging economy and meeting public calls for better government.

The weeklong congress starts a carefully choreographed but still fraught power transfer in which President Hu Jintao and most of the senior leadership will begin to relinquish office to a new slate of leaders for the coming decade headed by the appointed heir, Vice President Xi Jinping.

Delegates filed into Beijing’s Great Hall of the People, bedecked with red banners, and the congress was declared open after the national anthem played. The 2,268 delegates are drawn from the 82 million-member party where the real deal-making is done by a few dozen power-brokers behind the scenes, even as China is ever more connected to the world through trade and the Internet.

“We are faced with unprecedented opportunities for developments as well as risks. The party must keep in mind the trust of the people,” Hu said in a speech aimed at summarizing successes of the past five years and outlining challenges for the future. “The fight against corruption remains a serious challenge for us.”

Coming so soon after President Barack Obama’s re-election in the United States, the congress has drawn unfavorable comparisons from politically minded Chinese who have bemoaned how little direct influence they have in choosing their leaders.

“I am doing nothing but staring at the television before Obama gets re-elected. As for China’s party congress, there is no need for me to worry. On the contrary, it would be a waste of my time,” Xu Xiaoping, a celebrity entrepreneur who co-founded a successful chain of English language cram schools, said on a Chinese version of Twitter where he has 6 million followers.

To many Chinese, China is at an inflection point. Its old model of heavily state-directed growth that lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty and made China an economic powerhouse is sputtering in the face of rising domestic debt and a weak global economy. Meanwhile, the government has to contend with the public’s continued expectations of higher living standards and for less corruption and greater accountability, if not outright democracy.

In Tiananmen Square, adjacent to the congress venue, a woman in her 30s threw pieces of torn paper into the air and shouted “bandits and robbers!” in the early morning before she was taken away by security forces.

On the eve of the congress, four ethnic Tibetans in Sichuan province set themselves on fire in protests against Chinese rule of Tibetan areas, London-based rights group Free Tibet said, adding that the timing of the protests appeared aimed at sending a signal to the Chinese leadership.

Whether the new leaders want to move China in a new direction is not known. Xi and other top candidates for the new leadership have forged their careers as capable administrators in provinces and bureaucracies, not as policy trail-blazers. Should ambitious change be on their agenda, they will have to confront vested interests within their ranks: cosseted state industries and conservative officials grown prosperous and powerful under the current system.

One thing the party appears to be ruling out is a major shift toward a more open, democratic political system, despite appeals in recent months from commentators, retired party members and government think tanks.

“The leading position of the Communist Party in China is a decision made by history and by the people,” congress spokesman Cai Mingzhao told reporters on Wednesday. He pointed to China’s rise as an economic power and said, “It speaks fully to the strong leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the fact that the political system suits China’s national reality.”

The congress itself is unlikely to give Xi and his colleagues a mandate for sweeping reform. They have been engaged with Hu, retired party elders and influential senior politicians and military commanders in divisive bargaining, made worse by a pair of scandals. Politburo member Bo Xilai was purged after an aide disclosed that Bo’s wife had murdered a

British businessman. One of Hu’s top lieutenants was also sidelined after his son died crashing a Ferrari, a sign of corruption.

A likely result of the back-and-

forth is a leadership that balances interest groups, and over the past decade that has been a recipe for plodding, incremental policy.

Cai, the congress spokesman,

ticked off a list of what Hu’s team had accomplished — wider access to state-supported education through the ninth grade, an expanded social safety net and the

start of a nationwide low-cost housing sector.

“The past decade has witnessed the greatest improvement in people’s livelihoods in the his-

tory of China’s development,” Cui said. “We will make guaranteeing and improving the people’s well-being the guide and aim of what we do.”



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