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Thick air in Beijing – Air pollution as a political issue

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Air pollution in the big cities in China, especially the capital, Beijing, is a very visible problem. A news report by Reuters illustrated the pollution problem vividly as, “a cocktail of smokestack emissions, vehicle exhaust, dust and aerosols, have at times blanketed Beijing in a pungent, beige shroud for days over the past months.” The exposure to high levels of pollution led to an outcry from angry and frustrated Chinese on the internet, many of them airing their grievances on the social media sites such as the popular Chinese blog site, Weibo. Many of them were complaining that government officials were failing to level with them about the air quality, not being transparent about the levels of pollution. Protesting Chinese also believed that the government was not doing enough to improve the state of the environment. Environmental protection increasingly becomes a (high-level) political issue.

Air pollution in the capital had become so bad that flights had to be cancelled. In early March this year, over 250 arrival and departing flights were cancelled due to the heavy smog in the air as visibility did not exceed 200 metres. Announcements at the airport however made no mention of pollution said media reports. Airport authorities attributed the cancellations and flight delays to the weather conditions, saying that it was the heavy fog that led to flights being cancelled. Besides the health concerns, pollution has reached levels that negatively impact on the economy, as research reports stated, including a high profile report by the World Bank.

Pollution has been a huge problem in China for many years. With the rapid development and industrialisation of the country and urban areas, much of this led to consequences of heightened air pollution levels. In 2008, Beijing was temporarily scrubbed clean for the Summer Olympics. However at present, some years after hosting the Olympics, pollution levels have grown worse and the government has continued to keep silent about the true levels of pollution. According to protesters, media reports and an increasing environmental NGO sector, there has been a lack of transparency regarding environmental information on the part of the Chinese government and this has led to a lack of environmental protection in the country. The different sectors as well as companies that exert the most environmental and health risks in China continue to operate, causing more harm to the Chinese people and the natural environment. Economic growth and environmental standards are apparently regarded as competing goals – and growth comes first in China since the 1980s.

In early March this year, it was reported that the Beijing local authorities planned to monitor fine particle pollution of PM 2.5 (pollutant) on 30 main roads. Authorities promised to disclose the results regularly in 2012. This came after it was decided tough monitoring rules would be established in the major polluting cities. Chinese authorities have set tougher rules to combat air pollution by ordering all major cities to monitor tiny particles that do serious damage to health. The Chinese media have reported that this change has come about due to online campaigners as well as the disclosure of levels of pollution by the US embassy in Beijing. The Americans have

taken their own measurements based on US standards and have made them known daily on social media outlets. Under pressure from associations and the population, the city of Beijing, has agreed to be more transparent.

Transparency of information on the environment as well as openness about pollution levels is clearly necessary in China. It has been recognised however that two thirds of cities in China are beyond the limits of air pollution. This should be a hefty eye-opener for the Chinese authorities as it could lead to further complications and consequences, on both the economic and the political level. The authorities have to begin to take serious action, not only with improving the situation and lowering pollution levels but also being open and transparent about the reality of the situation as well as the health risks in the country. As Hong Kong City University researcher LI Wanxin points out, “granting and enforcing public right to environmental information will help build the social infrastructure necessary for green growth,” thus noting that environmental information transparency could lead to more Chinese being aware of the need for environmental protection and would thus work towards building a ‘greener’ environment and China.

The openness is coming with risks for authorities, clearly. It has been noted that the pollution problem is a long-term challenge for the authorities and it will take years to address the problem as well as remedy it. Polluting sectors and factories need to be shut down if they are not adhering to environmental standards – and we can expect workers to protest against job losses. Yet, stricter rules and control of how much pollutants can go into the air needs to be sorted. Silence on issues as clearly visible as air pollution in cities is even riskier – and it seems that at least parts of the Chinese leadership begin to understand the challenge. 



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