

**CHINESE SOCIETY IN 2016: STABLE BUT
UNDER TIGHTENED CONTROL**

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Executive Summary

1. China enjoyed a relatively “stable” and peaceful 2016. The violent incidents such as terrorist attacks and massive riots were largely absent. This did not mean that social problems had been addressed, but indicated that the authorities had strengthened their capacity to maintain social stability.
2. Labour disputes had been on the decline due possibly to delayed reform plans to cut excessive industrial capacity and lay off excess workers as local governments are nervous about social unrest.
3. The most striking phenomenon in 2016 was the middle class’ rising grievances over the deteriorating environment. The persistent smog in most Chinese cities in end 2016 aroused massive rage and protests in cyberspace.
4. The smog issue is potentially more challenging to the regime than traditional environmental issues as it involves more middle class who are more ready to mobilise people online and to provoke people to question the whole system.
5. Another major event that aroused middle class action in cyberspace was the Lei Yang Incident, which highlighted Chinese citizens’ need for a better legal system. This incident could be the first time that China’s middle class were mobilised via university alumni networks.
6. At the national level, Beijing had strengthened its control of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). All NGOs are required to set up a party branch. Foreign NGOs must register with the police department and operate under police surveillance.
7. Censorship of public opinion on the internet had been strengthened. Web companies were strictly forbidden to conduct news reporting. Besides government-hired internet commentators, the authorities had skilfully guided a group of patriotic young netzines to defend the government online.

8. A social credit system has been under construction. This system aims to score citizens' financial credit and their social and political behaviour. This may be the initial stage of an ambitious project of digital social control.
9. Beijing has sought to deepen its control of society without substantially opening the political system. This strategy has yielded temporary success. However, as society becomes more diverse and citizens more inclined towards self-expression values, this strategy may not work in the long run. Further changes are inevitable.