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China's Two Child Policy: Can a Name Change Mean a Game Change?

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On October 29, 2015 the Chinese Communist Party announced a change to its policy of planned reproduction. The "one child policy," as it is known in the West, is changing to a "Two Child Policy." In the weeks since the announcement, various commentaries have vacillated between extolling the "good news" and bemoaning the short-changed labor market, the aging population, and the egregious gender gap that have resulted from the nearly three decades of population control.

While significant, these discussions give only an eagle's eye view of these macro economic and social issues. We would do well, however, to remember that this policy remains much more than an abstract political argument, and the truth of it lies in the real flesh and blood details as experienced by millions of Chinese citizens. Creating real change in society—as would seem the intent in the change of the policy—will take much more than allowing two children per couple instead of one as written in the nations law books.

First of all, we need to be clear that the system of enforcement in China has not changed on the ground. This system includes invasions into private life that Western women and families would find completely unacceptable, such as requiring married women of childbearing age to undergo pregnancy tests every three months, and forcing the use of IUDs. Despite the law on paper having no mandate over type of birth control couples use, the government still imposes oppressive restrictions.

Furthermore, many people in the West are probably not aware that the system, while appearing to "allow" for a first child, also places harsh and over-

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baring guidelines on how that child comes into the world. If a child has not been pre-registered with the authorities, even if it is the first child born to a couple, the couple can be subject to debilitating fines, the woman can be forced to undergo an abortion against her will, and both parents can be sterilized.

Unless we have factual evidence to the contrary, we should not assume that any of these practices will cease of their own accord just because the Party is changing the policy name.

I know this from firsthand experience. In 2005, I began an investigation into a one-child policy campaign that was being carried out in my region of Shandong. At a time when the law in China specifically forbade violent or coercive practices in enforcing population control, I found that officials were regularly breaking into people's homes, destroying and confiscating property, and dragging away pregnant women to undergo abortions against their will. My coworkers and I calculated that in the course of about six months, some 600,000 people underwent forced, unwanted abortions or sterilizations in just my region of Shandong alone.

An unwanted, invasive medical procedure, especially one that results in the death of a wanted child, is a trauma whose effects cannot be calculated—certainly in the West we would hope that anyone in such circumstances would be not only compensated but would have access to and receive medical and psychological care to overcome the physical and mental injury. Unfortunately for people in China, care for victims is not of legal or political concern.

Not only were pregnant women being violently harassed in this way, but whole families were being persecuted. Even neighbors of a so-called suspect were not immune to government violence. If a pregnant woman tried to flee or hide, the authorities would regularly detain anyone close to her—either by family relationship or by proximity—and hold these innocent people in detention centers for days, weeks, and even months. There, under the euphemism of "study groups," these innocent people would undergo torture of a variety of flavors: deprivation of food, beatings, and grossly unsanitary conditions. Sometimes siblings were forced to beat each other.

The resulting rift in close social relationships is disastrous, leaving wounds which last a lifetime, effecting multiple generations across communities.

Unfortunately, the system as it stands today will be extremely difficult to change, as officials ensconced in the system have very little motivation to make a change. Those involved in the one child policy know all too well that failure to keep birth quotas down can mean the potential loss of employment; performing well will lead to more power, promotions, and increased opportunity for undocumented benefits arising from bribes and fines that can be pocketed at will.

It is clear, though, that simply changing the number of "allowed" children will never result in real changes on the ground. Now, the emphasis will be simply on eliminating a third child, as they used to do with the second child, and collecting as many fines as possible along the way.

What needs to happen now is for China's leaders to completely abolish the entire system of population control and establish a stable legal system with an independent judiciary to conduct investigations into the traumas inflicted by the government. Until the party takes such steps, we should be wary of the usual self-aggrandizing rhetoric and watch vigilantly to see what the party does.