

Hints of Discord on Land Reform in China

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Photos via Getty Images

Farmers in Wuhan, China, would be among those affected by changes in land policy proposed by President Hu Jintao.

BEIJING — Chinese leaders have yet to announce details of a rural reform policy they said they adopted on Sunday, contributing to speculation that Communist Party officials are in disagreement on major aspects of the policy.

Scholars and analysts inside and outside of China are discussing this week why the leaders have remained silent on the issue. When the Communist Party's annual four-day planning session began last Thursday, officials in attendance began reviewing a draft of a sweeping land reform policy that President Hu Jintao was believed to have been backing.

Scholars and government advisers said the proposed policy centered on two major changes: allowing peasants to engage in the unrestricted trade, purchase and sale of land-use contracts, and extending those contracts to 70 years from 30 years. Senior leaders,

including Mr. Hu, intended to push the policy changes through at the session, scholars and advisers said.

But the communiqué issued on Sunday did not mention that particular land reform policy. Instead, the party said broadly that it was adopting a rural reform policy that would double the per capita disposable income of farmers by the year 2020. Xinhua, the state news agency, said the government planned to “set up a ‘strict and normative’ land management system.”

On Monday, the lead editorial in China Daily, the main state-run English-language newspaper, said details of the rural reform policy would be announced within days. That has not happened.

Some scholars say Mr. Hu, who is also the general secretary of the Communist Party, may have met with strong opposition to his proposal during the session and is still fighting to get that particular policy approved.

This week, analysts and government advisers have been raising various issues regarding land reform. Xu Xiaoqing, the deputy chief of the department of agriculture in the central government’s State Council Development and Research Center, said in The Beijing News that “the land issue is very complicated and the land policy for China won’t be a one-size-fits-all.”

He added that “the policy should fit the specific situation in a certain place.”

Communiqués issued by the government are often vague, and some say Mr. Hu’s proposal, or at least part of it, could have been approved as part of the rural reform policy that was adopted. The government may be waiting until the policy is given pro forma approval by the National People’s Congress in March.

Keliang Zhu, the head of the China research division for the Rural Development Institute, a Seattle-based group that advocates for land reform for the poor, said by e-mail that the Communist Party was expected to issue another document spelling out the details of the new policies.

“So stay tuned,” he said.

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