

Nobel Peace Laureate Liu Xiaobo and the Future of Political Reform in China

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Introduction

Within China, there is widespread agreement on the need for political reform. There is no agreement, however, on precisely what a "politically-reformed" China should look like, much less a road-map for how to get there.

While discussions of political reform have been ongoing in one form or another since the Chinese Communist Party assumed power in 1949, the debate has assumed new life over the past few months. A series of commentaries by Premier Wen Jiabao raising the issue more directly than previously, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to political dissident and activist Liu Xiaobo, and calls for bolder political action by retired party elders and intellectuals have all placed the reform issue front and center in Chinese political discourse. Such discussion is given added weight by the fact that it is occurring against a backdrop of a far more vibrant print and web-based media and an engaged civil society. China's rise and obligations as a global power also mean that foreign policy experts are now entering into the country's domestic policy debate. They realize that China's global image and impact—on the environment, health, and security—rests in large part on Chinese domestic politics and practices.

Political Modernization

In most official contexts—leaders' speeches and officially-sanctioned editorials—political restructuring or reform means making the system more efficient and representative, while at the same time preserving the authority of

the Communist Party. The communiqué of the fifth plenum of the 17th Party Congress in mid-October 2010, which sets the tone for the work of the party over the next five years, stated, "Great impetus will be given to economic restructuring while vigorous yet steady efforts should be made to promote political restructuring." A series of *People's Daily* editorials published in October articulated the central party leadership's interest in a reasonably constrained version of political reform. The editorials argued that in the process of political restructuring, it is "imperative to adhere to party leadership, to the socialist system and to socialism with Chinese characteristics,"¹ and that the aim of political reform is to "enhance the vitality of the Party and the country and to mobilize people's enthusiasm."²

In practical terms, Beijing has launched several notable initiatives to develop a system of official accountability and advance transparency within the political system. There have been anti-corruption campaigns; regulations to promote public access to information in areas such as the environment and to govern "the convening of party congresses, selection for and retirement from official posts, and fixed-term limits";³ and experiments in budgetary reform. Beijing has also permitted a few non-Communist Party members to hold key positions within the government, including Wan Gang, the Minister of Science and Technology, and Chen Zhu, the Minister of Health.

With social unrest on the rise, the Party is also searching for ways to be more responsive to the interests of the Chinese people, without transforming the system. One effort is an online bulletin board, "Direct Line to Zhongnanhai," where the Chinese people can leave messages for the top leaders, and both President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have participated in active web-based dialogues with the Chinese people. Local officials may appear on radio shows and some delegates to the National People's Congress (NPC) and District Congresses have also established times to meet with their constituents to listen to their concerns, although there has been discussion within the NPC that these meetings are problematic because officials may develop individual constituencies and popular followings.

Revolutionary Reform

While a significant segment of China's political elite works to "modernize" the political system, others seek to revolutionize it. Political activist and Nobel Peace prize winner Liu Xiaobo represents the boldest of those who call for such revolutionary reform with his online human rights manifesto, Charter 08, and his calls for universal values, direct elections, and multi-party democracy.

Fundamental political reform is viewed as a necessity by many Chinese intellectuals and media elite. After Liu's award, a group of 100 journalists, scholars, writers and ordinary citizens signed a public letter calling on the Party to realize the goals of democracy and constitutional government espoused by Liu. Just prior to Liu's award, a group of retired Party elders submitted a letter to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress calling for freedom of speech and press, and the abolition of censorship. This group included many former senior media officials, such as the former director of *People's Daily*, editor-in-chief of *China Daily*, deputy director of Xinhua News Agency, and even the former head of the News Office of the Central Propaganda Department.

Such reformers clearly view Premier Wen Jiabao as their patron within the Chinese leadership. Premier Wen, in a set of speeches over the past year, as well as a much heralded interview with CNN, has argued that freedom of speech is "indispensable for any country," and that "continuous progress and the people's wishes for and needs for democracy and freedom are inevitable." He further has noted that the Party has to evolve—one that served as a

¹ "Vigorous, steady efforts urged to advance political structural reform," *People's Daily Online* (October 27, 2010).

² Qingyuan Zheng, "Political orientation crucial," *People's Daily Online* (October 29, 2010).

³ C. Fred Bergsten et al. *China's Rise: Challenges and Opportunities*. Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics and Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008: p.62. Web. Accessed 1 November 2010.

revolutionary Party should not look the same as a governing party. Wen's concluding remarks in the CNN interview further suggest that he was pushing for change outside generally-accepted party principles: "I will not fall in spite of a strong wind and harsh rain, and I will not yield till the last day of my life."

These highly public calls for revolutionary reform are not taking place in isolation. There is also a vibrant discourse in the print and online media that supports such high profile efforts. Journalists, scholars and web activists all maintain a constant stream of advocacy for more fundamental political reform. They lodge their calls for such reform as essential to the achievement of key Communist Party priorities.

One popular argument for revolutionary political reform, for example, is that it is necessary for continued economic growth. An editorial "The Only Answer is Political Reform," published by the board of the *Economic Observer* in late October 2010, makes precisely this point: "Without reforming the political system, we cannot guarantee the benefits that economic reform brings, nor will we be able to continue to push ahead with reforms to the economic system and social reform will also fail... In fact, whether it's breaking the deadlock on economic reform or making a breakthrough on social reform, both rely on pushing ahead with political reform."

Political reform advocates also often suggest that stability—one of the Party's top priorities—can only be ensured by more fundamental reform. Hu Shuli, the outspoken editor of *Caixin* and *Century Weekly*, for example, argues that political reform has stagnated because of "fears that a misstep would lead to social unrest." She goes on to note, however, that "Overblown worries that delay what's needed only exacerbate the very tensions threatening to destabilize society." Similarly, Liang Wendao, a host on Phoenix Satellite TV, wrote an editorial detailing a number of social challenges, such as "carcinogenic tea oil being sold in supermarkets, rumors of deadly tick bites and the resistance to forced demolitions" and argued that all of these are counterproductive to the official goal of "maintaining stability." His conclusion is that "If these subjects are open for discussion and criticism, the darkest truth from these three events may finally arise: the stability that the authorities were trying to maintain is precisely a kind of instability."⁴

The role of political reform in improving China's foreign policy and image is also becoming a popular theme. Wang Jisi, head of Peking University's International Relations Department, for example, has stated that the only way to overcome the unfortunate oscillation within Chinese political thinking and commentary between claiming superiority and inferiority or victimization is by more exposure to the outside world, better education within China and improving "our own society and rule of law." An editorial in *Century Weekly*, entitled "At Last, A Magic Moment for Political Reform," echoes this theme, noting that social problems, such as forced evictions, have strained relations between the government and people, causing people to lose faith in their country and damaging China's image abroad.

A Virtual Political System

The growing role of the Internet in Chinese political life poses a significant challenge to the Party's efforts to constrain political reform. While the Internet is a valuable tool for the Party, both in learning what the Chinese people are thinking and in promoting transparency within the political system, it raises serious concerns as well. Central Party School official Gao Xinmin raised several issues in an off-the-record speech that was later made public on the web: "Against a backdrop of a diversity of social values, new media have already become collection and distribution centers for thought, culture and information, and tools for the amplification of public opinion in society. They are a direct challenge to the Party's thought leadership and to traditional methods of channeling public opinion. Traditional

⁴ Wendao Liang, "The Etymology of Social Stability," *Caixin online* (October 18, 2010). Accessed at <http://english.caing.com/2010-10-18/1001>.

thought and education originates at the upper levels, with the representatives of organizations, but in the Internet age, anyone can voice their views and influence others. Many factual instances of mass incidents are pushed by waves of public opinion online, and in many cases careless remarks from leaders precipitate a backlash of public opinion."

The Internet is, in fact, evolving into a virtual political system in China:⁵ the Chinese people inform themselves, organize, and protest online. As the blogger Qiu Xuebin writes, "When the interests of the people go unanswered long term, the people light up in fury like sparks on brushwood. The internet is an exhaust pipe, already spewing much public indignation. But if the people's realistic means of making claims are hindered, in the end we slip out of the make-believe world that is the internet and hit the streets." In July 2010, bloggers provided firsthand accounts of a large-scale pollution disaster in Jilin Province, contradicting official reports. Thousands of people ignored government officials, angrily accusing them of a cover-up, and rushed to buy bottled water. Chinese are also "voting" online. In one instance, a journalist sought by the police on trumped-up charges of slander took his case to the Internet. Of the 33,000 people polled, 86% said they believed he was innocent. The *Economic Observer* then launched a broadside against the police, condemning their attempt to threaten a "media professional." The authorities subsequently dropped the charges against the journalist.

Activists have also used the Internet to launch successful campaigns—some involving physical protests—to prevent the construction of dams and pollution factories and to oppose the removal of Cantonese on television programs airing in Guangdong. Most striking perhaps, has been the emergence of iconic cultural figures who use the Internet for political purposes. The renowned artist Ai Weiwei, for example, has pursued justice for families whose children died in the Sichuan earthquake, even documenting his encounters with recalcitrant officials on YouTube. The racecar driver and novelist-turned-blogger, Han Han, routinely calls for greater media and cultural freedom. Since its launch in 2006, his blog has received more than 410 million hits.

The social network site Twitter, despite being blocked in China, has become a particularly politicized Internet venue. According to the popular netizen Michael Anti, Twitter is the most important political organizing force in China today. He notes that more than 1.4 million yuan was raised for the beleaguered NGO Gongmeng (Open Constitution Initiative) via Twitter. And he points to the uncensored discussion held between the Dalai lama and Chinese citizens in May 2010 as an example of the political influence that Twitter can exert. According to Anti, the people who participated stopped referring to the Dalai Lama as Dalai and now call him by the more respectful Dalai Lama. Anti reports that there are over 100,000 active Chinese Twitter users, and he anticipates that there will be 500,000 or more within the next two to three years.

Anti's claim of the importance of Twitter as a political force is supported by others. A poll of 1,000 Chinese Twitter users found that of the top twenty reasons why people access the site, almost a third of them are political: "to know the truth and open the horizon"; "no censor here"; "this is the taste of freedom that I enjoy"; "it allows me to keep my independent citizen conscious"; "feel that as a party member I should learn more about this world"; "it is an inevitable choice for a journalism student". Moreover, according to the media critic Hu Yong, as Beijing has moved to strengthen its censorship efforts, Twitter has become more political in its orientation. He sees Twitter as particularly important because it brings together opinion leaders from around the world to sit at a virtual table. There, public intellectuals, rights advocates, veterans of civil rights movements and exiled dissidents can all converse simultaneously.⁶

⁵ The following discussion is taken from Elizabeth C. Economy, "The Game Changer: Coping With China's Foreign Policy Revolution," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2010), p. 145.

⁶ Yong Hu, "The Revolt of China's Twittering Classes," Project Syndicate (October 14, 2010). Accessed at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/hu2/English>.

Looking Around the Bend

Implicit, and often explicit, in the debate over the nature of China's future political reform is the role of the outside world. A recurrent theme is a willingness to learn from the West but a rejection of a Western model. Qin Xiao, the former Chairman of China Merchant Bank Group, speaks the need for such a balance: "An historic theme in modern China is the search for a unique model and way to modernize. A major part of this theme revolves around a 'dispute between the west and China and a debate of the ancient and modern.'... It misreads and misinterprets universal values and modern society. It is a kind of narrow-minded nationalism that rejects universal civilization... Adhering to universal values, while creating Chinese style approaches, is truly the objective for our time."⁷ And the *Global Times* notes, "China has to continue its political reforms in the future, including drawing beneficial experiences from Western democratic politics, however, China will never be a sub-civilization, and it will only follow its roadmap in a gradual manner."

This cautious blending of political modernization and revolutionary reform will most likely find a home in China's system of experiments. Much in the way that China began its economic reform process with special economic zones, it may well be initiating similar special zones for political reform.

In Shenzhen, where Premier Wen delivered one of his recent speeches on political reform, there is a novel political experiment underway. Supported by both Wen and Guangdong Party Secretary Wang Yang, Shenzhen's political reform is at the outer edge of the political modernization approach. The stated goal is strictly in line with the Party's constrained vision of political reform: to build a socialist democracy and a rule-of-law system, to develop a clean, efficient and service-oriented government, and to construct a complete market system, a socialist advanced culture, and a harmonious society.⁸

At the same time, the approach has some potentially revolutionary reform elements: gradually expanding direct elections, introducing more candidates than there are positions for heads of districts, and considering allowing candidates to compete for positions of standing members of district or municipal Party committees by organizing campaigns within certain boundaries.⁹ Already, Shenzhen has "cut one-third of its departments, transferred or retired hundreds of officials, and forced officials to give up parallel positions on outside associations and charities." Shenzhen's greatest innovation, however, has been to allow civic organizations to register without a government agency oversight, to seek private funding outside China, to hire foreigners, and to sell their services to the city in areas such as the mental health of migrant laborers.¹⁰

The Shenzhen experiment and the others that will follow may provide at least part of the much needed roadmap for China's political future. Even as the Party attempts to keep up with the demand for change generated by the Chinese people, as the *Global Times* points out, the life of "an ordinary Chinese" has been transformed over the past thirty years: the way of accessing information, freedom of speech, the right to decide his own life and protect

⁷ Xiao Qin, "In China, A Rising Tide for Universal Values," *Caixin online* transcript (October 25, 2010) from a speech presented by Qin at the Seminar on Enlightenment and China's Social Transition on July 4, 2010.

⁸ Zhiyue Bo, "Guangdong Under Wang Yang: 'Mind Liberation' and Development," East-Asia Institute Background Brief No. 405 (September 12, 2008), p.10-11.

⁹ Zhiyue Bo, "Guangdong Under Wang Yang: 'Mind Liberation' and Development," p10-11.

¹⁰ Jeremy Page, "China Tests New Political Model in Shenzhen," *Wall Street Journal* (October 18, 2010). Accessed at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304250404575558103303251616.html>.

individual property are "drastically different from 30 years ago."¹¹ Whether led by the party, the people, or both, it is clear that political change of an equal magnitude is well underway.

The Role of the United States and International Community

The role of the international community in encouraging and bolstering those who seek to transform China is limited but not inconsequential. As those within China push for their country to respect and adhere to the ideals of universal values, there are several avenues through which the outside world can engage with China's process of political change:

- International recognition for those who work within China to promote these values, such as the decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, sends an important signal that the outside world supports their efforts and sends a message to Beijing that the country is not living up to the best of its own ideals.
- The international community should establish the linkage between China's governance failures domestically on issues such as environmental protection, public health, and product safety and its impact abroad reinforces to the Chinese leadership why China's political practices at home matter to the rest of the world.
- The United States should continue its traditional efforts to raise the cases of individual Chinese human rights activists who have been imprisoned and to work with Chinese partners to advance political reform through the legal system or through efforts to promote transparency. At the same time, it is important to remove the human rights issue from a uniquely bilateral focus and work with other democratic countries in and outside Asia to raise issues of political reform with Chinese officials.
- To the extent that the United States and others can advance the cause of political reform in other non-democratic states in Asia, such as Vietnam, this may also serve as an important source of pressure on Chinese elites.

¹¹ "China has to pursue gradual political reform," *Global Times* (October 15, 2010). Accessed at <http://opinion.globaltimes.cn/editorial/2010-10/582245.html>.