

**ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON
VILLAGE ELECTIONS IN CHINA**

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**STATEMENT BY
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IRI in China

The International Republican Institute has conducted programs to encourage legislative, legal and electoral reform in China since 1993. Institute delegations have observed more than 50 local elections for rural village committees in China since 1994, and IRI was the first international organization to do so. In 1995, IRI began to sponsor workshops for election officials to discuss the Ministry of Civil Affairs' regulations for conducting elections and new guidelines for training materials, emphasizing the importance of secret ballots, multi-candidate elections and transparent vote tabulation. The Institute has supported these kinds of programs in Fujian, Guangxi, Hainan, Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, Sichuan, Jilin, Liaoning and Yunnan provinces.

In 1997, IRI began working directly in several provinces to train newly elected village committee leaders, and subsequently assisted provincial officials with the drafting of implementing methods and regulations for the 1998 NPC law governing village committee elections. Additionally, IRI has worked to provide information and support training for election monitors in 1996, 2000 and 2002. Since 2000, IRI has held regional networking conferences for provincial officials from several provinces, and in 2001 IRI began training Chinese election officials in effective campaigning techniques.

IRI now also claims the distinction of being the first international organization to observe urban community elections after a staff delegation visited the industrial city of Liuzhou, located in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China in May 2002. Due to the strong commitment of local leaders to the principles of accountability, transparency and the rule of law, urban elections in Guangxi are considered to be among the most advanced and democratic in China.

What are urban elections in China?

Urban community elections have been occurring on an experimental basis in China since 1999. In that year, 12 pilot cities were allowed to hold elections for positions on urban residence committees, the lowest level of state power in Chinese cities. In some cities, a number of residents committees have been combined into what are called "urban community committees" and elections are held for positions in the bodies. The law governing urban elections was first passed in 1989 and was patterned on the experimental village committee law of 1987.

For most of the history of the People's Republic of China, residence committee leaders were appointed by the municipal Party apparatus, and the primary organizing unit in most large Chinese cities was the work unit, or *danwei*, which provided the cradle-to-grave social services known collectively as the "iron rice bowl." Although urban residents committees existed, positions on those committees were primarily held by elderly, often barely literate women, and functions of the committees were limited to menial neighborhood tasks and snooping into urban citizens' private lives.

China's cities have been undergoing massive social and economic change in recent years. With more and more state-owned enterprise failures and increasing unemployment, work units have become less important and less effective in many cities. Simultaneously, the influx of migrant workers into urban areas has dramatically altered the urban landscape. Crime has increased as have street protests and labor unrest. Residents committees as they were formerly conceived and structured no longer meet the needs of China's city dwellers.

What is the Chinese government's interest in allowing urban elections?

In the interest of modernization and social stability (the same rationale first used to permit village elections more than ten years ago), the Chinese government decided to permit elections for urban residents committees on an experimental basis. It is worth noting that in the absence of detailed central government directives on urban elections, local officials have a great deal of autonomy in designing and implementing them, and there is a lot of variety. Myriad types of urban elections are now occurring in approximately 26 urban areas across the country. The hope is that younger, more qualified individuals will run for positions on the committees, and that elections will make these residents committees more accountable to urban citizens.

One example is Shenyang, capital of Liaoning Province in northeastern China's rustbelt, with widespread unemployment and increasing labor unrest and crime as well as corruption among the political elite. The municipal government there was supposed to pay SOE workers a bonus in honor of the 50th anniversary of the Communist revolution, but was unable to do so, prompting large street demonstrations. In response, the mayor of Shenyang made three trips to Beijing in 1999 to petition the Ministry of Civil Affairs to include Shenyang on the list of cities allowed to conduct urban community elections on an experimental basis. Permission was eventually given. In Shenyang's Heping District 363 neighborhood committees were merged into 144 communities and elections for positions on the community committees have been held. Shenyang has a system of indirect democracy, in which candidates (one more than the number of positions on the committee) are selected by an election committee made up of officials from the district government. Not everyone is permitted to vote in community elections; housing complexes within the communities elect representatives, and those representatives elect the members of the community committee. Though it is far from a perfect system of direct democracy, it nonetheless gives residents more of a voice in their local government than they have ever had in the past.

How democratic are China's urban elections?

As is the case with village elections, the degree to which urban elections can be considered democratic varies widely by region. In some cities, elections for community committees are indirect and the process is deeply flawed and far from "one person, one vote." Instead, lists of candidates are prepared by an election committee controlled by the municipal government, and elected representatives from residents committees then vote on those candidates. It's important to keep in mind, however, that even the very limited franchise described above represents a quantum leap forward from previous periods, when residents committee members were chosen exclusively by the municipal government and Party branches.

In other cities, the nomination process is much more open, and elections are direct, using secret ballots and generally following the procedures guided by the Village Committee Organic Law. Urban elections tend to be less democratic and less prevalent in cities where the *danwei* structure is still firmly entrenched. In those cities, it is difficult for citizens to see any direct connection between residents committees and their own interests; the community committee doesn't control any benefits that people value, so they do not value the community committee. Elections tend to be more democratic in rustbelt cities like Shenyang, where many SOEs have gone under and unemployment rates are high. Urban elections also tend to be more developed in medium-sized cities, like Liuzhou (Guangxi Autonomous Region) than in major metropolises, although the reasons for this are not entirely clear.

Village elections and urban elections: What are the implications for democratization in China?

It may be obvious that the ruling party in a one-party state isn't apt to do things that it doesn't believe are in its own interests. For that reason, many have argued that village elections are controlled by the Party and little more than window dressing. But the fact remains that elections have now been held in most Chinese villages, and peasants have found themselves empowered to organize, criticize authorities and in some cases even dismiss corrupt or incompetent leaders. Local elections and the right to freely nominate candidates are becoming increasingly institutionalized, and Chinese villagers are more and more familiar with their rights under the law and are willing to defend those rights by protesting, submitting petitions and going to court. Since their inception, rural elections have often had unintended consequences: As Chinese peasants have become accustomed to choosing their own leaders, they have often become less susceptible to party control and more willing to defend their rights to autonomy and self-governance. It is likely that urban elections will have some of the same effects as they mature and spread. In rural China, the Party's attempts to reassert control by installing Party chiefs as village committee heads and Party branch and township government attempts to interfere and encroach upon village government affairs have been resisted by villagers, although not always successfully.

Beyond just minimizing the importance of village elections in themselves, for years critics have claimed that their implications for larger political change in China were negligible. But now urban communities are holding elections using laws that are based on and almost identical to the Village Committee Organic Law. Direct popular elections with such procedures as open nominations, secret ballots, more candidates than posts, and open vote tallying now exist not only in rural villages, but in urban areas as well, and this is a significant step forward.

Like village committees, urban residents committees are not officially part of the state structure and thus they lack formal coercive power. However, they do provide many services that are important to residents. The social and political surveillance functions of the committees have greatly declined in importance as the state has retreated from micro-managing private life. Functions of the communities now include elderly care, job retraining, day care for children, sanitation, dispute resolution, literacy classes, landscaping and environmental improvements, and public safety and security, and may also include managing local neighborhood enterprises.

Some residents and community committees also lobby the district or municipal government on behalf of residents. For example, in one community the committee lobbied the municipal government to force the police to shut down a noisy karaoke bar in the area; in others, residents committees have compelled property management companies to undertake repairs, or pressured the district or municipal governments for street lighting and pollution abatement. Additionally, the committees offer legal education and services, discussing new laws passed down from higher levels, and also provide advice about citizens' rights under the law and how to file a lawsuit, as well as daily life services such as beauty parlors, home repair and takeout food. Some committees have telephone hotlines so residents can call in and report problems, and some conduct surveys to see how satisfied residents are with the performance of the committee.

Why is IRI interested in Chinese urban elections?

IRI's commitment to supporting both village and urban elections is grounded in the same rationale: These elections provide a democratic training ground and hold local leaders accountable to their constituents. It is also our belief that elected leaders will use their popular mandate to enact policies that will be beneficial to the citizens who elected them.

It is IRI's intent and plan near-term to provide training in the Guangxi Autonomous Region to those responsible for administering urban elections in the province, enabling them to have a comprehensive

understanding of the mechanisms and the rationale of transparent elections. We are also prepared to conduct programs for newly-elected residents committee chairmen, with an eye toward providing them with tools and techniques to perform their duties in a responsive and responsible way.

In our longstanding work with elections in China, IRI has been most deeply impressed with the willingness and eagerness of local and provincial officials to root systems of direct elections. Guangxi was no exception. There, as elsewhere, we have cultivated relationships with officials who are dedicated to reform. We concede that China doesn't have a strong historical tradition of democracy, and a democratic political culture has to be built from scratch. But organizations like IRI can - and will - help with that task.

As the Chinese are trying to institutionalize the rule of law for their own reasons, we see a close relationship between the rule of law and the development of a Chinese public that understands their own rights and responsibilities as citizens of a modern state, including participating in free and fair elections, the significance of self-governance, transparency and accountability and the mechanisms to enforce compliance on the agents of the state. All of these things are crucial building blocks for democracy at higher levels. Democracy may not come to China as quickly as we would like, but when it does, an important part of the pressure for change will come from the grassroots level.