

Political Dynamics in Present-day China

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First, I would like to applaud the CECC for hosting this roundtable discussion on political changes in China. The conventional wisdom in the West is that since the 1989 Tiananmen incident China has made progress only in the realm of the economy. Many China watchers believe that despite (or because of) China's economic transformation, the Communist regime has been able to resist genuine political reforms. This belief, however, overlooks several significant social and political dynamics that are building momentum for further political openness. An understanding of these Chinese political dynamics and experiments is critically important for the United States, as such knowledge will help us formulate better policy options. If our vision is narrow, our options will be inadequate.

I would like to briefly discuss three issues: the first one is a question that is frequently asked: Is the Chinese official conception of democracy similar to that of most people in the world, especially those in the West? Second, I want to outline some new and far-reaching socio-political forces that can contribute to democratic development in China. And third, I argue that an evolution is taking place in the Chinese political system, especially regarding leadership politics.

First, is the Chinese official conception of democracy similar to that of most people in the West? The answer is not simple. Let me answer it by making three observations. First, even those who are most optimistic about the potential democratization of China do not expect the country to develop a multi-party system in the near future. Chinese leaders and public intellectuals have every reason to argue that the PRC's version of democracy will, and should, have its own unique features. After all, British democracy, Australian democracy, Japanese democracy, Indian democracy and American democracy all differ from each other in some important ways.

Second, Chinese leaders clearly have widely different views of what democracy is. On one hand, Chairman of the National People's Congress, Wu Bangguo, recently stated that the Chinese political system is democratic and the CCP will never give up one party rule. This kind of reference is what Andrew Nathan calls the use the "label of democracy for practices that are anything but."¹

On the other hand, Premier Wen Jiabao, clearly and consistently advocates for the universal values of democracy. He has defined democracy in largely the same way as many in the West would. "When we talk about democracy," Premier Wen said, "we

usually refer to the three most important components: elections, judicial independence, and supervision based on checks and balances.”²

Premier Wen’s emphasis on universal values of democracy reflects new thinking in the liberal wing of the Chinese political establishment. Premier Wen likely represents a minority view in the Chinese leadership, but like many other ideas in China during the past three decades, what begins as a minority view may gradually and eventually be accepted by the majority.

Now let me move to the second issue: new and far-reaching economic and socio-political forces in present-day China. Let me briefly mention three such forces. First, a distinct socio-economic middle class was virtually non-existent in China 15-20 years ago, but today there are a sizable number of Chinese citizens with private property units, cars, financial assets, and money to spare on travel. A recent report by McKinsey estimates that by 2025 China’s middle class will consist of about 520 million people. This ever-growing and economically empowered group is better equipped to seek political participation than the Chinese citizens of 30 years ago.

The commercialization of the media has also contributed to the increasing availability of information. I grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution. At that time, the whole country only had a couple of TV stations, a few radio stations, and a handful of newspapers. In the mid-1970s, most people in China believed that official media outlets, such as *People’s Daily*, contained only lies. At the time people joked that the only thing published in the newspaper that could be believed was the date it was published! Even the weather forecasts were manipulated so that they would be in line with the political needs of the regime—for example, newspapers would never forecast bad weather on Mao’s birthday or China’s national holidays.

Today, things are quite different. As of 2007, there were over 2,000 newspapers, more than 9,000 magazines, 273 radio stations, and 352 TV stations in the country. Although still subject to a certain level of government interference, they do not all tell the same stories. Even official media outlets have begun to report negative news. Official corruption, lack of government accountability, and industrial and coal-mining accidents have been among the most frequent headlines in the country in recent years.

Another important trend in Chinese politics is the rise of civil society groups and lawyers. There are some 280,000 registered civil society groups in the country today, including some 6,000 foreign NGOs. Two decades ago, such figures would have been unimaginable. The number of registered lawyers and law school students has also increased dramatically. For example, the number of enrolled students at the Law School of Beijing University in 2004 equaled the total number of law students trained at the school for the past 50 years. Many of these lawyers and NGOs are tirelessly pushing for the rule of law and protection of individual rights.

Now, my third and final point: Political dynamics in the Chinese leadership. China is a one-party state, but the leaders of this ruling party are not a monolithic group with the same values, outlooks and policy preferences. I argue that the Chinese leadership today

is structured by the checks and balances between two informal major coalitions or factions. I call it a “One Party, Two Coalitions” formula.

One coalition is called the “elitists” and the other the “populists.” These two camps represent two different socio-economic classes and different geographical regions. Elitists represent the interest of the coastal region (China’s “blue states”), entrepreneurs, the middle class and foreign educated Chinese nationals (known as the “sea turtles”), while the populists often voice the concerns of the inland region (China’s “red states”) and represents the interests of farmers, migrant workers and the urban poor.

The Chinese leaders call this new political dynamics “inner Party democracy.” At present this “One Party, Two Coalitions” practice is neither legitimate nor transparent [although many taxi drivers in Beijing are able to tell you which leader belongs to which faction.] But this inner-Party competition will not remain stagnant. Its dynamic nature will probably inevitably make political lobbying somewhat more transparent, factional politics more institutionalized, and elections more genuine. In the long run, legitimate competition may be expanded so that citizens can seek representatives in the government, contributing to a Chinese style democracy.

In conclusion, let me make it clear that the Chinese political system is still constrained by its one-party monopoly of power, lack of independent judiciary, and media censorship. The Chinese government has a poor record in human rights and religious freedom. Political participation through institutional means remains very limited. Yet, the ongoing political and intellectual discourse about democracy in the country, the existence of a middle class, commercialization of the media, the rise of civil society groups, the development of the legal profession, and checks and balances within the leadership are all important contributing factors for democratic change in any society. In all these aspects, China is making significant progress.

Notes:

¹ Andrew J. Nathan, Book review session, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (May/June 2009): 182.

² For Wen’s detailed remarks and more discussion of the definition of democracy, see Cheng Li, “Introduction: Assessing China’s Political Development” in *China’s Changing Political Landscape: Prospects for Democracy*. Edited by Cheng Li. Washington DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2008, pp. 1-21.