

**Roundtable on “Prospects for Democracy in Hong Kong: Assessing China’s
International Commitments”
Congressional-Executive Commission on China
Wednesday, July 14, 2010**

Remarks for the record

Political reform in China and Hong Kong

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July 2010

1. The significance of these reforms

Three questions can help us assess the importance of these Hong Kong constitutional reforms:

How often does China implement policies promoting democracy?

How often do Chinese officials change policy after officials including the vice president in charge of the portfolio announce rejection of any changes?

How often does the Chinese government change policy after negotiations with those it deems “hostile forces” and “subversive elements”?

The answers are:

Seldom

Almost never

Never, before now

Never before has the central government negotiated with the Democratic Party of Hong Kong. That party is led by Albert Ho, a member of the group that organizes the annual commemorations of the Tiananmen Massacre and which demands an accounting of the same from the Communist Party of China. He and other party members like Emily Lau have long been banned from even traveling in mainland China. But now, Beijing officials have met with them as equals across the negotiating table.

We can conclude, on the basis something has happened that is totally unprecedented, that with the recent constitutional reforms in Hong Kong something significant is up in China.

The question is what is up, how will it affect the Hong Kong-China relationship, and how significant is it to China and to the rest of the world?

First in establishing the significance and meaning of these reforms, the Central government has promised that direct elections for the Chief Executive may take place in 2017. They may take place for all Legislative Council seats in 2020. The reforms just passed make the fulfillment of at least the timeframe for these direct elections more likely. Of course, the details of precisely how nominations for Chief Executive will be done remain unclear. We also do not know how all members of Legco will be directly elected, but the fact is that China's richest city will take democratic steps forward in 2012 and will likely continue onward.

Second in significance and meaning, these steps move beyond those stipulated in the Basic Law. The Basic Law was the national implementation of an international agreement, the Sino-British Declaration of 1984. So this reform vote represents the first step beyond the bounds agreed in an international process. It is a purely local and national step forward in permitting greater democracy. It was not driven by international pressures or configured according to international binding agreements. It shows China today is willing to take unprecedented political steps and willing to compromise with some social and political forces outside communist political control.

Third, the reforms for 2012 in Hong Kong also build on a district representation framework which was adopted by Mainland cities starting in 2008. A number of the leading urban centers in China began to organize and hold district elections in that year, though in terms of contested, open elections these have far to go. These district elections and the powers given district councilors bear some similarity to Hong Kong's District Council system, just as Hong Kong's village elections in the New Territories, begun in 1926 and reformed in the 1950s, seem to have influenced China's rural village elections, begun in 1982 and reformed in 1998. The reforms of 2012 in Hong Kong in turn appear to have been influenced by Mainland concepts of mixing indirect and direct election systems, with controlled forms of nomination followed by direct election contests. We do not yet know how fully open the nomination processes for the added Hong Kong District Council seats to Legco will be, but in any case, the reforms represent a significant compromise of the highly constrained electorates of the existing Functional Constituency system and perhaps represent a way forward in either dramatically widening the electorates for all these seats or toward their replacement with other forms of election. The possibility of a fully directly elected legislature by 2020 cannot be simply dismissed out of hand anymore.

Fourth and most important for the significance of these reforms, district seats are directly elected with open nomination. Having a system of nomination by such directly elected members is a more open nomination system for candidates than presently exists in mainland China. Such a system of open nomination and direct election, followed by nomination by such electees for candidates to higher bodies, which are then voted on by all voters, would be a serious move forward in political reform of the Chinese system. As a Special Administrative Region Hong Kong technically comes above the provinces in the Chinese structure of government; these reforms may not have direct implications for

provincial congresses. Nevertheless, odds are high Hong Kong's election of a Chief Executive involving direct vote of residents after some more limited form of nomination committee is a model that at least some factions of the Central Government are willing to try at higher levels. This model potentially removes the barrier to greater democracy on the mainland posed by the present cadres-only nomination system. The reforms for 2012 and the promise of direct elections in 2017 for Chief Executive plus the district elections in urban areas of China in 2008 indicate that the long stifled demand for political reform is being given substance and a timeframe for advancement in at least one part of China. It is hard to imagine this step being an isolated and one-off move. It is more likely an indicator that resistance to political reform has weakened.

2. Effects of the reform on Hong Kong-Mainland relations

In terms of the effect of the reform compromise on Hong Kong attitudes toward the Central Government, it is quite clear that the lack of progress in changing Hong Kong's increasingly inadequately representative and accountable governance system was having a strong negative effect. In November 2009, according to Hong Kong Transition Project surveys, about two-thirds expressed satisfaction with the PRC government's general handling of Hong Kong affairs. By May 2010 satisfaction had dropped to 57 percent. By mid June two weeks before the vote on reform, it had fallen to barely a third satisfied. (See the report titled "To the Brink: rising danger of disruption in Hong Kong?" released 18 June and available at <http://www.hktp.org>) Forty-nine percent expressed dissatisfaction when asked directly: Are you currently satisfied or dissatisfied with the performance of the Chinese government in handling Hong Kong's constitutional reform?" Only 43 percent were satisfied. Among students, three in four were dissatisfied on this issue with barely one in ten satisfied. This represented a significant danger because students had become increasingly restive since January 2010. This was also an extremely dramatic shift in attitude toward the central government from the Olympic summer of 2008 by all, especially students.

In June, 74 percent of respondents agreed with the statement: "Beijing must amend the reform proposal to make it more democratic" while just 11 percent disagreed. The focus had clearly shifted from the local government to Beijing by June. Only two amendments to the reform package would create clear majority support for a reform package that every survey but the government's indicated fell short of majority support. These two amendments involved abolishing corporate voting in the FCs (something Beijing had indicated it opposed) and Beijing's promise to abolish the FCs altogether.

Beijing officials also were assigned the highest degree of blame if the reform package failed. Nearly three in ten assigned Beijing officials a "great deal" of blame. Majorities blamed Beijing officials and the Beijing approved Chief Executive for the failure. No other party or group came close to a majority assigning it blame for failure, ranging from some blame to a great deal of blame -- not even the League of Social Democrats or the Civic Party, the two groups leading the most vociferous opposition to the proposed reforms. Beijing and the local government faced a crisis of governance, with 15 percent of the population and even

higher percentages of students and those under age 30 supporting strong actions in protest, such as blockading government offices and hunger strikes. Subsequent cooling of tensions and pressures on the local and national governments should reinforce belief among central government officials that one effective way to handle restive urban populations is to begin a process of political reforms. The success of reforms in Hong Kong will surely encourage reformers on the mainland. It may also stimulate conservatives to new levels of resistance, but clearly this vote in Hong Kong was a win for the reformers. It may also have some impact on the national party elections in 2012. Reformers favoring political change could gain after long conservative dominance. Conservatives certainly lost in Hong Kong.

3. Global significance of the reforms

In terms of global significance, as with economic reforms, China insists it will choose its own timing and forge its own path of political reform. The economic collapses of the US and other Anglo-American and European influenced economic model-states in 2008-09 have considerably raised confidence among Chinese cadres in their own economic model. They have also gained confidence in their process of incremental, experimental reform characterized as “crossing the river by feeling the stones” beneath one’s feet. It is hard to argue that the Chinese process of economic reform has been a failure. It is also hard to argue that Russia’s attempt to put political reform prior to economic reform is better than China’s practice of reforming economics first, though we have yet to see the complete results of China’s approach in terms of political development. Certainly there is room for improvement in democratic models and processes of democratization. The perceived sclerosis of the European models, stagnation of the Japanese model, incompetence of the Indian model, and the violence and increasing polarization of American democracy since 1963 as well as collapses of many post-colonial forms of democracy have convinced the Chinese that not only can they forge their own way forward -- they must.

Hong Kong is a unique opportunity for the Chinese to build step by step on economic success and on quasi-western, but indigenously influenced and developed political forms toward their own practice of democracy. Outsiders should approve and support Chinese leaders “feeling the stones” toward political reform and their own form of democracy rather than flinging stones at them because they are going, in their opinion, either too slowly or in a direction toward a model outsiders disapprove of or misunderstand.

For those who got forecasts of China’s economic development badly incorrect, or who forecast the collapse or breakup of China back in the 1990s, or who said economic development would never and could never result in political change, the best policy might be to simply watch this space. Our current economic woes in the West give us ample grounds to be a bit more humble in our foreign advice-giving. While we can and should share our experiences with democratic forms of governance with Chinese officials and public, we must admit that no democracy has perfectly and permanently solved all its problems of representation and accountability, nor have we solved the issues of regulation or control of corruption and influence by the powerful. Liberal democracy—rule of, by and

for the majority of the people with effective safeguards for the rights of minorities— appears to be a permanent goal, not a permanent accomplishment. China and Hong Kong should of course be encouraged to reform and improve their systems. It would do us well to admit that we face the same challenge. Such an atmosphere of mutual exchange of perspectives and experience with developing and reforming governance models and methods would likely be more effective than many of the means employed hitherto to encourage China to move forward with democratic reforms in Hong Kong and on the mainland.