

Long Time Coming The Prospects for Democracy in China

By John L. Thornton

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Summary: Is China democratizing? The country's leaders do not think of democracy as people in the West generally do, but they are increasingly backing local elections, judicial independence, and oversight of Chinese Communist Party officials. How far China's liberalization will ultimately go and what Chinese politics will look like when it stops are open questions.

JOHN L. THORNTON is a Professor at Tsinghua University's School of Economics and Management and its School of Public Policy and Management, in Beijing, and Director of the university's Global Leadership Program. He is also Chair of the Board of the Brookings Institution.

China's leaders have held out the promise of some form of democracy to the people of China for nearly a century. After China's last dynasty, the Qing, collapsed in 1911, Sun Yat-sen suggested a three-year period of temporary military rule, followed by a six-year phase of "political tutelage," to guide the country's transition into a full constitutional republic. In 1940, Mao Zedong offered followers something he called "new democracy," in which leadership by the Communist Party would ensure the "democratic dictatorship" of the revolutionary groups over class enemies. And Deng Xiaoping, leading the country out of the anarchy of the Cultural Revolution, declared that democracy was a "major condition for emancipating the mind."

When they used the term "democracy," Sun, Mao, and Deng each had something quite different in mind. Sun's definition -- which envisioned a constitutional government with universal suffrage, free elections, and separation of powers -- came closest to a definition recognizable in the West. Through their deeds, Mao and Deng showed that despite their words, such concepts held little importance for them. Still, the three agreed that democracy was not an end in itself but rather a mechanism for achieving China's real purpose of becoming a country that could no longer be bullied by outside powers.

Democracy ultimately foundered under all three leaders. When Sun died, in 1925, warlordism and disunity still engulfed many parts of China. In his time, Mao showed less interest in democracy than in class struggle, mass movements, continuous revolution, and keeping his opponents off balance. And Deng demonstrated on a number of occasions -- most dramatically in suppressing the Tiananmen protests of 1989 -- that he would not let popular democratic movements overtake party rule or upset his plan for national development.

Today, of course, China is not a democracy. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a monopoly on political power, and the country lacks freedom of speech, an independent judiciary, and other fundamental attributes of a pluralistic liberal system. Many inside and outside China remain skeptical about the prospects for political reform. Yet much is happening -- in the government, in the CCP, in the economy, and in society at large -- that could change how Chinese think about democracy and shape China's political future.

Both in public and in private, China's leaders are once again talking about democracy, this time with

increasing frequency and detail. (This article is based on conversations held over the past 14 months with a broad range of Chinese, including members of the CCP's Central Committee -- the group of China's top 370 leaders -- senior government officials, scholars, judges, lawyers, journalists, and leaders of nongovernmental organizations.) President Hu Jintao has called democracy "the common pursuit of mankind." During his 2006 visit to the United States, Hu went out of his way to broach the subject at each stop. And Premier Wen Jiabao, in his address to the 2007 National People's Congress, devoted to democracy and the rule of law more than twice the attention he had in any previous such speech. "Developing democracy and improving the legal system," Wen declared, "are basic requirements of the socialist system."

As with earlier leaders, what the present generation has in mind differs from the definition used in the West. Top officials stress that the CCP's leadership must be preserved. Although they see a role for elections, particularly at the local level, they assert that a "deliberative" form of politics that allows individual citizens and groups to add their views to the decision-making process is more appropriate for China than open, multiparty competition for national power. They often mention meritocracy, including the use of examinations to test candidates' competence for office, reflecting an age-old Chinese belief that the government should be made up of the country's most talented. Chinese leaders do not welcome the latitude of freedom of speech, press, or assembly taken for granted in the West. They say they support the orderly expansion of these rights but focus more on the group and social harmony -- what they consider the common good.

Below the top tier of leaders (who usually speak from a common script), Chinese officials differ on whether "guided democracy" is where China's current political evolution will end or is a way station en route to a more standard liberal democratic model. East Asia provides examples of several possibilities: the decades-long domination of politics by the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan, the prosperity with limited press freedom of Singapore, and the freewheeling multiparty system of South Korea. China might follow one of these paths, some speculate, or blaze its own.

In a meeting in late 2006 with a delegation from the Brookings Institution (of which I was a member), Premier Wen was asked what he and other Chinese leaders meant by the word "democracy," what form democracy was likely to take in China, and over what time frame. "When we talk about democracy," Wen replied, "we usually refer to three key components: elections, judicial independence, and supervision based on checks and balances." Regarding the first, he could foresee direct and indirect elections expanding gradually from villages to towns, counties, and even provinces. He did not mention developments beyond this, however. As for China's judicial system, which is riddled with corruption, Wen stressed the need for reform to assure the judiciary's "dignity, justice, and independence." And he explained that "supervision" -- a Chinese term for ensuring effective oversight -- was necessary to restrain abuses of official power. He called for checks and balances within the CCP and for greater official accountability to the public. The media and China's nearly 200 million Internet users should also participate "as appropriate" in the supervision of the government's work, he observed. Wen's bottom line: "We have to move toward democracy. We have many problems, but we know the direction in which we are going."

FREE TO CHOOSE

Given the gap between the democratic aspirations professed by leaders such as Hu and Wen and the skepticism that their words elicit in the West, a better understanding is needed of where exactly the process of democratization stands in China today. Chinese citizens do not have the right to choose their national

leaders, but for more than a decade, peasants across the country have held ballots to elect village chiefs. What is happening in the vast space between the farm and Zhongnanhai, the CCP's leadership compound in Beijing? Some answers can be gleaned by examining the three pillars of Wen's definition: elections, judicial independence, and supervision.

The Chinese constitution calls for a combination of direct and indirect polls to choose government leaders. In practice, competitive popular elections occur widely only in the country's 700,000 villages. With over 700 million farmers living in these villages, this is not an insignificant phenomenon, but the details tell a complex and at times contradictory story.

The original impulse behind village elections, which began in the early 1980s, was to promote competent local leaders who would grow the rural economy and implement national priorities such as the one-child policy. With the abandonment of collectivization at the end of the Cultural Revolution, a power vacuum emerged in the countryside. By most accounts, at first elections enjoyed the central government's active support and were generally conducted fairly. But in the early 1990s, authorities were reportedly taken aback by figures showing that only 40 percent of elected village chiefs were CCP members. Beijing eventually instructed local officials to ensure that the "leading role" of the Communist Party was maintained. Today, the majority of village chiefs are again party members, although the size of that majority can vary widely by region. Over 90 percent of the village heads in the provinces of Guangdong, Hubei, and Shandong belong to the party, but the figure drops to 60-70 percent in Fujian and Zhejiang. And even these figures overstate the actual percentage of village chiefs who were elected as party members: when nonparty candidates are elected, the CCP nearly always recruits them so as to ensure that it remains in charge while giving farmers the leaders they want.

Village elections have serious problems, including nepotism, vote buying, and the selection of incompetent or corrupt leaders. Proponents nonetheless maintain that the polls serve as a grass-roots training ground for democratic habits. In fact, the most fervent opponents of village elections in China tend to be the township officials whose own jobs would be in danger if the central government decided to expand direct voting to the next level up.

Some of the more intriguing electoral experiments in China over the past decade have in fact taken place in townships. Burdened with administering the numerous social programs and benefits on which many citizens depend, township governments are often the focus of antigovernment sentiment and social unrest. Effective leadership there is thus critical to preserving social stability, a top priority for Chinese leaders. A few competitive township polls took place as early as 1995-96; the boldest experiment occurred in 1998 in Buyun, in a remote corner of Sichuan. The local Buyun government conducted a competitive, direct election in which some 6,000 eligible adults cast votes. The process received wide media coverage inside China and was criticized in the official press for violating the constitution, which grants the local People's Congress authority to choose the township leader. But to the surprise of many, the central government neither approved the Buyun results nor nullified them, and the elected mayor, Tan Xiaoqiu, remained in office. In 2001, the CCP Central Committee reaffirmed that directly electing a township head was unconstitutional. Buyun responded by tweaking its election process to bring it in line with the letter of the law but not its spirit: in the next election, citizens elected a candidate for township head, who was then recommended by the local party committee and elected unopposed by the People's Congress.

Perhaps in part due to Buyun's legal troubles, most townships that have experimented with elections have chosen the less radical model called the "open recommendation and selection" system, under which any

adult resident can run for township head, a council of community leaders then narrows the candidate pool to two finalists, and the local People's Congress makes the final selection. This is not a direct ballot but a way of introducing a measure of competition and transparency in the selection of local leaders. By 2001-2, there was some form of competitive ballot in almost 2,000 township elections, five percent of the national total.

The significance of township elections should not be overstated. Townships are at the lowest administrative rung in the Chinese government structure, and even election supporters acknowledge that the process is still in its infancy. Nonetheless, when conducted successfully, such electoral experiments can give township leaders a degree of popular legitimacy. They introduce competition among cadres and, to a lesser extent, between party and nonparty members where absolutely none existed before. The expectation is that competition, even if controlled, will raise the quality of governance. Some Chinese scholars also find it notable that some township heads are conducting themselves with greater confidence because they know they enjoy a popular mandate and are therefore more willing to challenge the local party secretaries. This can create headaches for the CCP, one central government researcher noted, but it may also be the first seed of a culture of checks and balances.

Authorities in Beijing, for their part, are closely watching the experiments. In an echo of the dynamic that initiated market reforms in the 1980s, the center now encourages governance experimentation at the local level, albeit within boundaries. A senior official at the Central Party School told me, for instance, that in the prosperous province of Jiangsu, a pilot program would soon have all of the townships conducting competitive polls. As different localities try different things, he said, the Central Party School will study the results.

Electoral experiments at the county level -- one administrative rung up from a township -- have also attracted attention. Since 2000, 11 counties in Hubei and Jiangsu have conducted "open recommendation and selection" polls for the position of county deputy chief. This represents less than half a percent of the counties and county-level cities nationwide, but any reform of leadership selection in counties, which have an average population of about 450,000 each, would be significant news.

Limited experimentation has also occurred in urban areas. In 2003, 12 private citizens stood as independent candidates for district People's Congresses in the city of Shenzhen, with two of them winning seats. A handful of independent candidates have also run for the People's Congress of the Haidian district in Beijing, home to China's top universities. Almost all independent candidates for people's congresses fail in their bids, yet the number of such candidates is exploding: from fewer than 100 nationwide in 2003 to more than 40,000 in 2006-7, according to Li Fan, a former government official who is now a leading election-reform advocate. Li predicts that the number of independent candidates will reach the hundreds of thousands in 2011-12 and thinks popular demand for political participation will continue to grow as Chinese society diversifies and opens up.

In recent years, China's leaders have also made an effort to expand competitive selection within the CCP. Some experts believe that the development of "intraparty democracy" is even more significant for China's long-term political reform than the experiments in local governance. They consider a CCP that accepts open debate, internal leadership elections, and decision-making by ballot to be a prerequisite for democracy in the country as a whole. President Hu and Premier Wen routinely call for more discussion, consultation, and group decision-making within the CCP. Intraparty democracy was a centerpiece of Hu's keynote address to the CCP's 17th Party Congress last fall. Not long after the meeting, Li Yuanchao, the

newly appointed head of the Party Organization Department, published a 7,000-character essay in the People's Daily elaborating on Hu's call for further reform in the party. The fact that Hu himself does not wield the personal authority of Mao, Deng, or his predecessor, Jiang Zemin, and relies on consensus within the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee, is itself noted as progress in unwinding the overcentralization of power at the national level.

One of the ways the CCP has begun to introduce intraparty democracy is by putting forward multiple candidates for positions. Fifteen percent of the nominees for the 17th Party Congress were rejected in party ballots. In the 2006-7 national election cycle, the official media reported, 296 townships in 16 provinces chose local party leaders through direct voting by party members as part of a pilot project. In a handful of localities, one government scholar told me, county party secretaries were also being elected through a direct vote.

If intraparty democracy takes hold, some scholars predict a trend in which like-minded cadres will coalesce to form more distinct interest groups within the CCP. A senior official of the Central Party School told our Brookings delegation that "interest groups" were no longer taboo within the party, although organized "factions" were not permitted. Still, some analysts predict that the CCP may one day resemble Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, within which formal, organized factions compete for senior political slots and advocate different policy positions.

In a major speech at the Central Party School in June last year, Hu exhorted the CCP's top leadership to "perfect the intraparty democratic system and bring into full play the party's creative vigor." Then, seemingly in a demonstration of the very intraparty democracy Hu was advocating, a nonbinding straw poll was conducted among the several hundred senior leaders present to gauge their preferences for candidates to the next Politburo and its Standing Committee -- in other words, for who should rule China over the next five years.

Some Chinese analysts believe that Hu, in his remarks at the Central Party School, may have been foreshadowing a new policy approach. "Emancipating the mind, an essential requirement of the party's ideological line and a magic weapon of ours in dealing with all kind[s] of new situation[s] and problems lying on the road ahead of us and in our continuous efforts to create a new phase in our cause, must be upheld firmly," Hu told his audience. In asking his colleagues to unshackle themselves from rigid thinking, he was understood to be encouraging them to be more pragmatic in their thinking as China evolves politically. More specifically, Hu was thought to be both indicating to orthodox party thinkers that Mao's was not the only way to define "democracy" and signaling to more reform-minded members of the Central Committee that simply copying Western models was not necessarily the answer either.

THE RULE OF LAW

Of Wen's three pillars of democracy -- elections, judicial independence, and supervision -- judicial independence is in some ways the most striking. The question of whether the CCP serves the law or vice versa has always made judicial independence a delicate subject in China.

The Chinese judicial system has made great strides over the past three decades, but it still has far to go. In 1980, when the judicial system was just starting to rebuild itself after the devastation of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese courts nationwide accepted a total of 800,000 cases. By 2006, that number had jumped tenfold, reflecting the transformation of the place of law in society. China has passed over 250 new

laws in the past 30 years and is in the midst of creating an entire national code from nothing.

Until the mid-1980s, the majority of Chinese judges and prosecutors were former military personnel with little formal education of any sort, let alone legal training. Judicial independence was not the goal of such a system; if anything, it was something to be guarded against. Unsurprisingly, given that the purpose of the courts was to carry out the party line, judges and prosecutors were highly ideological. But starting in the mid-1980s, university graduates were assigned by the state to become judges and prosecutors. By the late 1990s, a master's degree in law was considered an unwritten prerequisite to becoming a senior judge.

Paralleling the rise in the quality of judges and prosecutors has been the change in the status of China's lawyers. Before the late 1980s, all lawyers were employees of the state; private practice did not exist. The first "cooperative law firms" appeared in 1988-89, and today China has 118,000 licensed lawyers practicing in 12,000 firms. (To compare, the United States has more than eight times as many lawyers for a population one-fourth the size of China's.) The growth of private practice has propelled the further professionalization of the system as a whole, partly because lawyers need to win cases (or at least lighter sentences) for their clients in order to prosper. Prosecutors still win over 90 percent of their cases, but as the quality of lawyers has improved and arguments have grown more intricate, prosecutors -- and judges -- have had to improve their own competence. Party bosses still interfere in the judicial process, and the central government still decides politically sensitive cases, but most observers agree that with disputes becoming more complex, the frequency and degree of such interference are declining.

China has adopted a number of major statutes intended to protect citizens from government wrongdoing. The Public Servants Law of 2005 sets a high standard for conduct by officials. The State Compensation Law of 1994 is meant to make amends for government failures. Perhaps most significant, the Administrative Litigation Law, adopted in 1989, enables citizens to sue the state; some 13,000 suits were filed in the law's first year. Today, more than 150,000 cases are filed annually against the government, and several successful ones have been hailed in the media.

Still, Chinese officials acknowledge that the judicial process remains rife with problems. One of the most serious obstacles to impartial verdicts is the web of personal relationships known as *guanxi* -- bonds forged over years by the exchange of favors and assistance -- on which so many decisions in China are based. These ties can have an especially constraining effect on prosecutorial and court decisions. Judges in China routinely talk to the parties in a case privately, creating situations in which *guanxi* and corruption can readily contaminate the process. Some experts have suggested raising judges' salaries and taking other steps to create a judicial elite distinct from other government officials in order to address this endemic weakness.

China's main challenge is no longer the lack of a comprehensive legal code but the chasm between what is on the books and its implementation, especially at the local level and in politically sensitive cases. Rights guaranteed by the landmark Criminal Procedure Law of 1996, such as timely access to counsel and exculpatory evidence, are often denied or simply ignored. A small but growing group of private lawyers -- sometimes referred to as "rights defenders" -- take on sensitive cases and unjust prosecutions, in part to highlight instances in which the judicial system itself violates the law. Although they rarely win and are sometimes themselves harassed or even jailed, these activist lawyers believe that insistently pointing out the discrepancy between the official goal of a fair judicial system and the reality on the ground can over time narrow the gap.

Another major obstacle is the sway that local officials continue to hold over the courts. Local CCP committees are integrally involved in the appointment of judges and prosecutors, and local governments have discretion over salaries and budgets throughout the judicial system. The situation shares some similarities with the Chinese banking system a decade ago, when the influence of local officials over bank branches resulted in a vast pool of so-called policy loans. The explosion in nonperforming debt eventually forced Beijing to spend \$60 billion from central government coffers to bail out the banks, after which then Premier Zhu Rongji pushed through a reorganization that transferred final authority over personnel and loan decisions to the banks' headquarters. Banking reform may offer a promising model for the restructuring that the judicial system needs.

According to the 1999 amendment to the constitution, China is now officially a "country governed according to law." But the CCP, not the government, holds ultimate power. An increasing number of scholars argue that what the country needs, therefore, is a party and party members who unambiguously understand that they are not above the law. One proponent of this view, Professor Zhuo Zeyuan, of the Central Party School, last year gave a two-hour talk on his ideas to all 24 members of the Politburo. A Central Party School leader told me later that the proper relationship between the ruling party and the constitution was unambiguous: the CCP should be governed by the law. As with so many things in China today, the rub is the gap between theory and practice.

The CCP firmly maintains the levers that control the courts and manipulates them when necessary. In addition, it operates a separate, parallel system for dealing with errant party members that includes the use of detention and interrogation and in some cases is more draconian than the regular legal system. Recently, there have been signs that the party may be starting to see the need for more due process in its practices. Professor Jerome Cohen, of New York University Law School, one of the West's foremost experts on the Chinese legal system, has noted that local party organizations in at least 20 provinces have established a disciplinary system for CCP members that includes guarantees such as a notice of alleged wrongdoing, the opportunity to defend oneself against charges (including the right to call supporting witnesses), a statement of reasons for a final decision, and an opportunity to appeal. Some of these rights have long been in the CCP charter but were never implemented seriously.

Chinese leaders appear to realize that the China of 2008 is far too complex to be ruled entirely by fiat from Beijing and has to be governed by laws through a competent legal system enjoying the public's confidence. Lack of faith in the courts is one reason people take to the streets, and official figures show that tens of thousands of public protests occur in China each year. It is not surprising then that leaders such as Premier Wen want the party and the state to stop interfering in routine judicial matters. But the leadership still insists on controlling sensitive cases and the judicial system at the macro level. The question is whether the CCP can succeed in building a fair and independent judicial system while maintaining control at the very top.

OVERSIGHT

The Chinese system does not lack for institutions meant to keep officials honest. The oldest of these is the traditional petition system, dating to the imperial era, which allows people to take their grievances directly to higher authorities. Each ministry in Beijing has an office that handles such complaints. But the petition is seen as a last resort, and few cases are satisfactorily resolved: the process is opaque and depends on the goodwill of the anonymous officials evaluating the appeals.

Another oversight institution, the CCP's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, staffed by eight deputies and 120 senior members and headed by a Politburo Standing Committee member, is charged with fighting corruption and other misconduct by party members. Its counterparts on the government side are the Ministry of Supervision and the Anti-Corruption Bureau of the Supreme People's Procuratorate, responsible for prosecuting errant government officials. One of the functions of the official Xinhua News Agency, finally, is to gather information on corruption nationwide and produce internal reports for the central leadership.

Yet despite these multiple mechanisms, the problem of official corruption remains serious, and leaders routinely cite moral turpitude as one of the party's main challenges. As the economy has surged for more than two decades, so have opportunities for graft. High-profile cases such as that of Zheng Xiaoyu, the former head of the State Food and Drug Administration executed this past July for taking bribes from pharmaceutical companies, feed the perception of endemic rot. According to the CCP, over 97,000 officials were disciplined in 2006, of whom 80 percent were guilty of dereliction of duty, taking bribes, or violating financial regulations. "The formal [supervision] system on the whole has failed," one government researcher told me. At lower levels, a basic structural flaw in the supervision system mirrors that of the courts: the heads of the discipline inspection commissions are appointed by local leaders, who predictably tend to select relatives, friends, protégés, or colleagues. It was only in 2006 that a rule was implemented requiring that commission heads at the provincial level be appointed by the central government.

President Hu and Premier Wen face a basic dilemma. They know that rooting out corruption, which makes citizens cynical about one-party rule, must be their top governance priority. But they must act while maintaining the loyalty of local officials, through whom the CCP governs the country. To augment the formal mechanisms of supervision, the government is increasingly turning to alternative channels. In Beijing, some districts are using public opinion polling to gauge satisfaction with individual government offices, and Beijing's Urban Planning Commission has retained a consulting firm to help it take better account of public opinion in assessing redevelopment projects.

Another promising trend is the rapid commercialization of the Chinese press. The government still exercises extensive control over the media through government ownership of outlets and censorship. The redlines that journalists cannot cross still exist. But changes are taking place. As independent Chinese publications seek readers and advertisers, they pursue stories that people want to read; like their counterparts in the West, they have discovered that investigative journalism sells. In one widely discussed case, a veteran reporter for the China Economic Times wrote an in-depth account in 2002 of the Beijing taxi-licensing system. Due to alleged collusion between company owners and the government supervisory body, drivers were being forced to work shockingly long hours for low wages. The newspaper sold out almost immediately. The Central Propaganda Bureau responded by banning other publications from reporting on the story. The city's Transportation Bureau ordered drivers not to read the article. Some of the taxi drivers quoted in the article received death threats, and the author had to be protected by bodyguards for three months. The public uproar mounted, however, as the news spread to the Internet. Eight days after the story was printed, then Vice Premier Wen Jiabao issued an official statement supporting the taxi drivers and directing that a report on the situation be prepared for then Premier Zhu Rongji.

One experiment that has caught the attention of many Chinese is the government's decision to allow foreign journalists to travel and report freely throughout China (with the exception of Tibet) from January 2007 through the 2008 Beijing Olympics. "It's clearly a test," a Chinese newspaper editor said, "to see how

the foreign press uses its new freedom. Unless something goes terribly wrong, it's hard to see how the government can reimpose the old system when the Olympics are over." Not surprisingly, there have been numerous teething problems: in July, several foreign journalists covering an antigovernment demonstration held by an international human rights group were detained for several hours. Still, foreign correspondents in Beijing report that, in general, restrictions on their movements and activities have been relaxed noticeably since the new policy was announced.

In the past several years, the Internet and cell phones have started to challenge traditional media by becoming channels for the expression of citizen outrage, at times forcing the government to take action. One celebrated instance was the "nail house" incident in the sprawling metropolis of Chongqing, in central China. For three years, a middle-class couple stubbornly refused to sell their house to property developers who, with the municipal government's permission, planned to raze the entire area and turn it into a commercial district. The neighbors had long ago moved away. The developer tried to intimidate the couple by digging a three-story canyon around their lone house, but the tactic backfired spectacularly. Photos of their home's precarious situation were posted on the Internet, sparking outrage among Chinese across the country. Within weeks, tens of thousands of messages had been posted lambasting the Chongqing government for letting such a thing happen. Reporters camped out at the site; even official newspapers took up the couple's cause. In the end, the couple settled for a new house and over \$110,000 in compensation. The widely read daily Beijing News ran a commentary that would have been inconceivable in a Chinese newspaper a decade ago: "This is an inspiration for the Chinese public in the emerging age of civil rights. . . . Media coverage of this event has been rational and constructive. This is encouraging for the future of citizens defending their rights according to the law."

In another example of the marriage of new technology and citizen action, last May angry residents in the southern coastal city of Xiamen launched a campaign to force the city government to stop the construction of a large chemical plant on the outskirts of the city. Their weapon was the cell phone. In a matter of days, hundreds of thousands of text messages opposing the plant were forwarded, spreading like a virus throughout the country. Xiamen authorities, who had ignored popular opposition to the plant before, suddenly announced that construction would be suspended until an environmental impact study could be completed. Dissatisfied with this half measure, citizens again used message networking to organize a march of some 7,000 people to demand a permanent halt to the construction. Although local party newspapers blasted the protest as illegal, it was allowed to proceed without incident, marking one of the largest peaceful demonstrations in China in recent years.

DEMOCRACY IN CHINA

Recent progress in elections, judicial independence, and oversight is part of the transformation of Chinese society and the expansion of personal freedoms that have accompanied three decades of breakneck economic reform and development. The government remains intrusive in many areas but much less so than before.

In the past 20 years, several hundred million Chinese have migrated from the countryside to the cities -- the largest wave of rapid urbanization in history. Until a decade ago, the government enforced stringent controls on internal migration. Today, officials cite the additional 300 million farmers expected to move to cities over the next two decades as a positive force that will help alleviate China's urban-rural income gap. The state once assigned jobs and housing to every urban resident. Now, urban Chinese enjoy overseas travel to study, work, or play. Ten years ago, a Chinese citizen needed to get permission from his

supervisor, his work unit's party secretary, and the local police just to apply for a passport, a process that could take six months, assuming the passport was approved at all. The entire procedure takes less than a week today, and approval is nearly as automatic as it is in the United States. Less than two decades ago, all foreigners in Beijing were forced to live in designated locations, such as hotels or compounds guarded by military police. Today, foreigners and Chinese live side by side. When Chinese are asked about the democratization of their society, they are as likely to mention these sorts of changes as they are elections or judicial reform. They may be confusing the concept of liberty with that of democracy, but it would be a mistake to dismiss the expansion of their personal freedom as insignificant.

A senior Communist Party official I know marveled privately that ten years ago it would have been unimaginable for someone in his position to even be having an open discussion about democracy with an American. Now, the debate in China is no longer about whether to have democracy, he said, but about when and how. One thing the party should do immediately, he felt, was reform the National People's Congress so that it does not become a "retirement home" for former officials; the National People's Congress should be populated by competent professionals and eventually become a true legislative body. The government should also implement direct elections up to the provincial level, he argued, not Western-style multiparty elections but at least a contest involving a real choice of candidates.

The chair of one of China's largest corporations, who is also an alternate member of the CCP Central Committee, told me that better corporate governance in companies listed on overseas stock exchanges (and thus held to international norms), such as his, was another example of the expansion of "democratic habits" in China. Although corporate governance in China remains a work in progress, this chair said, the general trend among state-owned enterprises, especially those listed abroad, is toward greater transparency, stronger and more independent boards of directors, and management by mutually agreed rules. Over time, working in such an environment is likely to inculcate more democratic patterns of thinking in China's business elite, as well as in senior government officials who sit on the boards of state-owned enterprises.

Over the last century, no one has thought more about the promise of democracy in their country or been more dismayed by its elusiveness than the Chinese themselves. Again and again, they have witnessed a native democratic impulse surge and crash or be crushed prematurely. The empress dowager Cixi quashed the 1898 "hundred days of reform" initiated by advisers to the emperor Guangxu. The optimism that surrounded Sun's inauguration as provisional president of the Chinese Republic on January 1, 1912, was soon extinguished by the military ruler Yuan Shikai, who tried to crown himself as the first emperor of a new dynasty in 1915. Progressives within both the Nationalist and the Communist Parties espoused democratic forms of government in the 1930s before the onslaught of wars with Japan and then with each other. The establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 augured an era of self-determination, prosperity, and democracy. But that hope was crushed under the foot of Mao's relentless political campaigns, culminating in the Cultural Revolution. Before the tragedy of Tiananmen in 1989, the 1980s were a period of intense political ferment, when democracy was debated inside the government, think tanks, universities, and intellectual salons.

Compared to in those periods, the way in which China's leaders talk about democracy today may seem cautious. Critics argue that this reflects the government's lack of real commitment to political reform. Optimists believe that gradualism will make the current liberalization last longer than the euphoric, but ultimately failed, experiences of the past. One of China's elder statesman -- who has known personally all of the country's top leaders since Mao -- insisted to me that democracy has always been the "common

aspiration" of the Chinese people. They are determined to get it right, he argued, but they require patience from the West. "Please let the Chinese experiment," he said. "Let us explore."

Where that exploration will lead is an open question. There is a range of views among Chinese about how long will be required for democracy to take root, but there is also some agreement. One official put it this way: "No one predicts five years. Some think ten to 15. Some say 30 to 35. And no one says 60." Others predict that the process will take at least two more generational changes in the CCP's leadership -- a scenario that would place its advent around the year 2022.

In 2004, a survey was conducted among nearly 700 local officials who had attended a provincial training program. More than 60 percent of the officials polled said that they were dissatisfied with the state of democracy in the country then, and 63 percent said that political reform in China was too slow. On the other hand, 59 percent of them said that economic development should take precedence over democracy. And tellingly, 67 percent of the cadres supported popular elections for village leaders and 41 percent supported elections for county heads, compared with only 13 percent for elections for provincial governors and just 9 percent for elections for China's president.

Some Chinese like to point out that it took the United States almost two centuries to achieve universal suffrage. In the first several American presidential elections, most states restricted voting to white male landowners -- no more than ten percent of the adult U.S. population at the time. Women had to wait until the twentieth century, and blacks in effect until the 1960s. "This is one issue," a Beijing newspaper editor joked, "about which we Chinese may be less patient than you Americans."

Last spring, an article provocatively titled "Democracy Is a Good Thing" caused a small sensation in China. Published in a journal closely linked to the CCP, the article was authored by Yu Keping, the head of a think tank that reports directly to the CCP Central Committee. Although hardly blind to democracy's drawbacks (it "affords opportunities for certain sweet-talking political fraudsters to mislead the people"), Yu was forthright and specific in his approval of it: "Among all the political systems that have been invented and implemented, democracy is the one with the least number of flaws. That is to say, relatively speaking, democracy is the best political system for humankind."

Yu did not predict an easy road to democracy in China. "Under conditions of democratic rule," he observed, "officials must be elected by the citizens and they must gain the endorsement and support of the majority of the people; their powers will be curtailed by the citizens, they cannot do whatever they want, they have to sit down across from the people and negotiate. Just these two points alone already make many people dislike it. Therefore, democratic politics will not operate on its own; it requires the people themselves and the government officials who represent the interests of the people to promote and implement [it]."

Clearly, some people at the center of the Chinese system are thinking actively about these fundamental questions. The issue is whether and how these ideas will be translated into practice. China must now complete the transition begun in recent years, from a system that relies on the authority and judgment of one or a few dominating figures to a government run by commonly accepted and binding rules. The institutionalization of power is shared by all countries that have successfully made the transition to democracy. China's ongoing experiments with local elections, reform of the judicial system, and the strengthening of oversight are all part of the shift to a more rule-based system. So are the ways in which Chinese society continues to open and diversify, incrementally creating a civil society.

Institutionalization may progress the most over the next few years in an area that could be decisive in determining China's political evolution: leadership succession. How a country manages the transfer of power at the very top sends an unmistakable signal to all levels below. On this point, China has already come some way. To be chosen as Mao's successor was the most perilous position one could be put in. Deng had his own problems anointing a durable successor; he remained the most powerful man in China for nearly a decade after relinquishing all his official posts in 1989. It was his successor, Jiang, who saw the first peaceful transfer of power in modern Chinese history, when he gave up his positions to Hu. Jiang has remained a power behind the scenes, but no one would suggest that he holds the influence that Deng did.

One senior leader told me that the issue of succession can no longer be managed effectively in the ad hoc manner of the past. Both China and the world have changed too much; the process of selecting the country's leaders needs to be institutionalized. The problem, he explained, was that an acceptable new process has yet to be put in place, and until one is, it would be impractical to jettison the old system. China finds itself in an ambiguous transition at the moment. For his part, this leader believed that progress might be seen by the time of the Third Plenum of the 17th Party Congress, in 2009. Some party members have even suggested that Hu's heir as general secretary of the CCP could be chosen through a vote of the entire Central Committee when Hu retires in 2012. The method by which Hu's successor is selected will be an unmistakable indicator of the political future China's current generation of leaders envisions -- signaling whether they believe, as Sun did a century ago, that democracy can best deliver the prosperity, independence, and liberty for which the Chinese people have struggled and sacrificed for so many years.

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