

Political Reform

DEMOCRACY WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS?

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Background

“CHINA SHOULD TAKE ITS OWN PATH IN ENHANCING DEMOCRACY... WE SHOULD CONTINUE THE REFORM IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM BY EXPANDING DEMOCRACY AND IMPROVING THE LEGAL SYSTEM. THIS WILL ENABLE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TO BETTER APPRECIATE AND ACCEPT THE PATH OF DEVELOPMENT TAKEN BY THE CHINESE PEOPLE.”

—WEN JIABAO, FEBRUARY 26, 2007

- In response to socioeconomic challenges, the Party now concedes the need for a measure of political reform to accompany economic reform. Various steps are being taken at the state, party, and grass-roots levels in pursuit of “democracy with Chinese characteristics.”
 - These steps are, however, purely instrumental and aimed not at political reform per se but at keeping the Party firmly in control and maintaining its ruling status.
 - After pursuing decentralization in the 1980s, concerns including the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, as well as local protectionism, corruption, and increasing unrest, provided the impetus for recentralization in the 1990s. Tax reforms adopted in 1994 helped improve Beijing’s fiscal position vis-à-vis the provincial governments. Further efforts to reform China’s bloated bureaucracy and improve administration of the government were announced in March 2008.
 - Promoting “inner-Party democracy” and accountability through the institutionalization of Party procedures has been implemented. Efforts to make procedures more transparent include media reporting on previously closed-door Party meetings.
- Experiments in grass-roots reform are taking place across the country:
 - Elections occur in almost 1 million villages, affecting about 80 percent of the population in the countryside. More competitive elections have been elevated to some township governments, and in June 2008 the coastal city of Shenzhen proposed competitive mayoral elections.
 - Experiments with direct elections for “urban community resident committees” are being held in some places, and other experiments are under way, including a system of “democratic consultation,” in which citizens can freely express concerns on important issues during open meetings with local officials.

Current Situation

- The Party continues to have success in co-opting China’s emerging “middle class.” The Party recognizes the need to open the political system enough to retain legitimacy and support, but not so much that it loses power.
- Rejecting postcommunist “shock therapy” of radical political reform, China borrows selectively from other systems in creating a so-called participatory democracy—combining authoritarian Party leadership, a modest expansion of popular participation, and governance through the rule of law—while eschewing universal suffrage, true parliamentary bodies, checks and balances, and contested multiparty elections.
- In an effort to increase participation and supervision “by the masses,” in July 2008 the Party announced changes to the tenure system that would allow delegates to the National Party Congress to participate in meetings throughout their five-year tenure—rather than just meeting for the Congress once every five years to vote. They will also be allowed to attend meetings of the local Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection, the party’s top anticorruption agency.

Implications

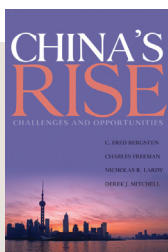
- As China moves toward a more open political system, it is unlikely to follow a Western-style path, at least in the near term. Research suggests that at present, there is not widespread public support for Western liberal democracy.
- Over the near to medium term, the United States should be prepared to deal with a China led by the Chinese Communist Party. As such, calls for a more open, just, and democratic China must be an indispensable part of the United States' China policy, but they should be informed by realistic expectations.

THE “FIFTH GENERATION” – CHINA’S LEADERS IN 2012?

- Xi Jinping (54) – Sixth-ranked member of the Politburo Standing Committee; vice president of China; president of the Central Party School; top-ranking member of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee; head of Beijing’s preparations for the Olympics. Xi is following Hu Jintao’s meteoric rise to the top and, as the son of a former vice premier, is the most successful of China’s “princelings.” Education: LL.D.
- Li Keqiang (52) – Seventh-ranked member of the Politburo Standing Committee; executive vice premier of China. Li has been tasked with streamlining the country’s bureaucracy, a difficult job that puts him at odds with entrenched interests. He was formerly tipped as Hu’s heir but is now expected to succeed Wen Jiabao as the next premier. Education: Ph.D. in economics.

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- **July 2008:** Candidates for posts of county and district chiefs in Guangdong, Chongqing, and other areas are now required to participate in televised debates. In Guiyang, Guizhou province, 82 candidates were publicly nominated for 4 positions. “Responsible figures” in the government, Party, and local industries selected 20 candidates who appeared at a public conference, broadcast via TV and the Internet, and were graded for their performance. The candidates gave speeches, debated, and answered questions posed by the public. The 8 candidates (2 per district) with the highest grades were selected to go on. The grading was broken down this way: “democratic nomination” (20%), “research report” (20%), “public speech and debate” (20%), “public opinion” (30%), “estimated leadership capability” (10%). The final selection between the 2 candidates per district was made by the local People’s Congress.
- **May 2008:** It was speculated that Shenzhen, Guangdong province, would follow the model of China’s gradual economic reform and be the first province to establish “special political zones,” experimenting with both inner-party and grass-roots democracy, including direct election of deputies to the District People’s Congresses, a permanent representative system for District Party Congresses, and mayoral elections.
- **May 2008:** China took a major step toward improving government transparency by implementing “freedom of information” regulations that ostensibly give citizens the right to access “nonexempt” government information and compel officials to disclose it—though what information is subject to “exemption” remains at the government’s discretion.
- **November 2007:** The Chinese central government released a white paper on the country’s political system, explaining its concept of multiparty cooperation and consultation with China’s eight “democratic” parties, albeit with the CCP firmly at the helm. China’s first non-Communist Party government ministers to be appointed since reform began took office in 2007.



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:
 CHAPTER 3: “DEMOCRACY WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS? POLITICAL REFORM AND THE FUTURE OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY” IN *CHINA’S RISE: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES* BY C. FRED BERGSTEN, CHARLES FREEMAN, NICHOLAS LARDY, DEREK J. MITCHELL & SEE CHAPTER 3: “CHINA’S DOMESTIC TRANSFORMATION: DEMOCRATIZATION OR DISORDER?” IN *CHINA: THE BALANCE SHEET: WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS TO KNOW NOW ABOUT THE EMERGING SUPERPOWER* BY C. FRED BERGSTEN, BATES GILL, NICHOLAS LARDY, DEREK J. MITCHELL