

Statement of

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Roundtable on What “Democracy” Means in China After 30 Years of Reform

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Old and new assessments

On April 1, 2009, the New China News Agency filed a wire story featuring a conversation among three prominent Chinese scholars on the current status of village elections in China. According to these scholars, a fair evaluation of the 20-year-old practice can be summarized by the following:

- 1) China’s rural residents have acquired a much keener sense of democracy, rule of law and individual rights;
- 2) The electoral procedures have become more standardized. The best indicator of this is the wide use of secret ballot booths on election day;
- 3) These elections have become more competitive and open;
- 4) Voter participation has become more rational;
- 5) The election outcome is largely positive with those elected being technically capable, market savvy and qualified to lead villagers to a more prosperous life;
- 6) The decision-making and daily administration of village affairs have become more democratic with the creation of villager representative assemblies and adoption of village charters;
- 7) The relationship between rural residents and the Party/state has significantly improved as a result of these elections.

About seven years ago, on July 8, 2002, I spoke at the Roundtable organized by CECC on village elections in China and offered the following assessment on the status of village elections:

- 1) Elections have provided a safety valve for hundreds of millions of Chinese peasants who are angry and confused as their lives are often subject to constant exploitation and pressure;
- 2) They have introduced legal election procedures into a culture that has never entertained open and free elections;
- 3) They have cultivated a new system of values, a much-needed sense of political ownership and rights awareness among the Chinese peasants that do not have any leverage in bargaining with the heavy-handed government.

In addition to the above, I also tentatively described three potential effects of village elections: 1) direct village elections are a right accorded to the least educated and most conservative group of Chinese society and other groups might demand the same right; 2) free and open choice was made possible by free nomination and secret balloting and the same set of procedures might be used by the personnel apparatus at higher levels of the Chinese government in promotion; and 3) village elections offered a neat blueprint for the vast and populous Chinese nation to slowly move up the electoral ladder and fulfill what Deng Xiaoping once pledged: China would have free, direct national elections in 50 years.

If one compares the assessments of village elections by the scholars and mine that were separated by seven years, there is no significant difference. In other words, there is not much more to add in terms of defining the status of village elections in China. While I outlined the potential impact of village elections on China's overall political landscape seven years ago, Chinese scholars have refrained from touching on this subject in 2009. Looking back, how do I assess what I said then?

In the early 2000s, many citizens in Beijing, Shenzhen and other cities demanded their full right to vote and to get elected. The demand came in outbursts and was termed by many as the election storm but it did not go very far. Neither was it warmly received by the government. We may attribute this to a few factors:

1) The growing middle class in China seems to enjoy the way of life they have achieved through economic reforms. They may be concerned that any new changes will either cause a backlash or trigger a challenge to the status quo. When Jackie Chan mentioned that the Chinese people need to be "controlled" (guanqilai) at the recent Bo'ao Forum, he was warmly applauded by the audience, which was comprised of members of China's business and political elite.

2) Direct elections were increasingly linked by the Chinese power apparatus and academic elite to an evil conspiracy orchestrated by the West, headed by the United States. These elites charged that elections are not a tool China needs to combat corruption and enhance good governance; rather, elections are a wedge used by Western nations envious of China's growth to stop China from becoming a strong and harmonious power.

3) Without changes in the existing laws and regulations, any attempt to elevate direct elections to other levels of government can easily be deemed illegal or unconstitutional.

The real impact of village elections lies in the area of wide application of their procedures either directly or indirectly at high levels of the government. It should be emphasized that village election procedures are usually not adopted wholesale because doing so would violate existing laws. Rather, it is the idea of a more open nomination process, a more competitive way of selecting preliminary candidates, and a more transparent means of choosing the right person among multiple candidates that has been used at the township, county and even higher levels of the government and the Party.

These new and innovative experiments in selecting government and Party officials are bold and popular but there are also inherent problems. First, they are isolated and there have been no efforts to turn such successful pilots into a policy that would be widely adopted. Second, they are designed to expand choice, but all the new procedures adopted have to fall within the constraints of existing laws. As a result, the procedures are complex, elaborate and even cumbersome, making it very difficult and costly to implement. Lastly, many officials have to take political risks to introduce these measures and the fear of offending higher level officials runs deep.

When it comes to the final scenario of China becoming a democracy, vibrant village elections are still seen as a first step. This was the vision of Peng Zhen, chairman of the Standing Committee of the NPC under whose watch the Organic Law of the Villager Committees was adopted on a provisional basis in 1987. This is the vision of Wen Jiabao, who has repeatedly told foreign visitors that grassroots elections in China will eventually move up to the higher echelons of the government. This was also the hope of many people both inside and outside China. Many felt the hope had become reality when Suining City officials organized the direct election of the magistrate in Buyun Township on the last day of 1998. The hope was somewhat dashed when Buyun did not become China's political Xiaogang and the fear of a Color Revolution sweeping through China since 2005 has swept away what seemed to be the logical next step for a planned democracy to eventually take shape in China.

The declining relevance of China's village elections

At the May 2002 roundtable, I said that village committee elections became so popular that they caused negative reactions from groups who saw these elections as a threat to the status quo. "There is a systematic and almost conspiratorial effort to label village elections as a source of evil that is

- 1) undermining the Party's leadership in rural areas, affecting rural stability,
- 2) turning the rural economy upside down, and
- 3) helping clan and other old forms of power to control and grow in the countryside."

These charges against village elections have only increased in intensity and scale in recent years with more reports of cases of violence associated with elections, vote buying and four types of people seizing control of village elections. The four types of people are "the rich", "the strong", "the evil" and "the patriarch (clan leader)" respectively ["富人"、"强人"、"恶人"和"头人(宗族)"]. Many scholars argue that village elections are very violent and very corrupt, indicating that as a trial of adopting Western-style democracy, they are a complete fiasco and are not suitable to the Chinese situation at all.

These accusations are irrational and despicable attacks on the capability and readiness of the Chinese farmers who are keen in participating in these elections. They are indicative of a strong political elite within the Party/state apparatus and their academic supporters that are bent on preventing the introduction of meaningful political reform through defining direct elections as something totally alien to Chinese culture, severely damaging

to all developing countries, and utterly impossible to implement in a country with such a large and unruly population.

Regardless of how misleading these criticisms are, village elections are indeed becoming less relevant to the lives of Chinese farmers. There are several underlying causes. First, the young, educated and informed farmers are working in the cities. They are unable to run for village committee seats and to personally participate in these elections. Second, with the abolition of rural taxes and fees in recent years, a highly charged election has disappeared. The authority of the village committee is also being eroded as a result. Its relationship with the township government has become less substantial. Third, the Chinese government has opened the door for land reform, allowing farmers to enter into joint ventures, **using their land rights as shares**. It seems a new kind of election is emerging in areas that are moving fast on land reform, namely the election of board members of the joint venture. Fourth, there is a shift at the top level of the Chinese government from institutionalizing village self-government to finding ways to increase farmers' income. This shift is even more urgent when the economy enters into a downturn and when farmers' lack of access to education, healthcare and unemployment benefits not only decreases domestic consumption but creates fertile soil for social unrest and mass incidents.

There is a consensus at the top not to introduce direct elections at higher levels of the government. A large number of scholars have declared that direct elections are a unique Western intellectual idea that cannot be transferred to China. The Party is not even yielding its personnel selection power at the village level to direct election methods. Efforts at directly selecting township magistrates have been strictly forbidden since 2001. Within this political context, village elections will continue in years to come. Last year, 18 provinces held direct village elections, involving 400 million rural voters. However, these elections are limited to villages alone. Their impact on rural governance is limited. They will not and cannot be a driving force for China's political reform.

Will there be electoral democracy with Chinese characteristics?

Chinese leaders have openly declared that a multi-party system is not good, that a system of checks and balances are contrary to the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party, and that Western style democracy does not fit China's unique circumstances. Chinese scholars are divided. Those on the left either say China has already enshrined a unique system of democracy that was able to deliver a brilliant response to a disastrous earthquake and host an unprecedentedly successful Olympic Games or that the blind faith in using elections to combat corruption and improve governance is a dangerous superstition. Scholars leaning toward the right are likely to argue that it is counterproductive to denounce Western-style democracy. The focus should be on making China's democracy a working and executable model. Many suggest that political reform won't take place unless there is judicial independence, transparency and measurable governance in China. Others advocate freedom of the press and freedom of speech as the prerequisite for eventual democratization. These scholars tend to neglect the importance of elections.

A small group of scholars, notably Cai Dingjian of the China University of Political Science and Law and Jia Xijin of Tsinghua University, believe that choice and accountability are not possible without free and fair elections. Jia Xijin recently wrote that China does not have to introduce direct elections of government leaders but should cut the number of people's deputies at all levels and make their elections direct and competitive. According to her recommendation, China's National People's Congress (NPC) should reduce its number of "Congressmen" and "Congresswomen" from the current 2,987 to about 750, with a minimum of two coming from each of China's 334 cities. Election of NPC deputies must be direct. Elected NPC deputies must be professional and paid representatives with staff support. They will subsequently take their job seriously and do a good job in electing state leaders, supreme court justices and top law enforcers, approving budgets, supervising expenditures and endorsing national level policies.

Jia Xijin's proposal is bold and feasible but it is probably just a vision at this time. To get the Party to give up airtight control at the national level immediately with no conditions is unthinkable if you look at how difficult it is for the Party to give popularly elected village committees total control over their own affairs. For a political entity that has always held power, to be held accountable by another entity popularly elected requires a learning process. The Party has to learn how to subject itself to the wishes and whims of the people's representatives. It is not going to be an easy adjustment. Furthermore, it will take time for the Party-state leaders, scholars and China's middle class to believe that having people's representatives as masters of the Party will not lead to chaos and instability. This process can proceed without changing any laws and creating new institutions. This requires the process of making direct elections of people's representatives at the township/town and county/district levels as competitive and transparent as village elections.

Every five years, all eligible voters in China, possibly numbering 900 million, are supposed to directly elect representatives for people's congresses at the town/township and county/district levels. These elected people's representatives will then elect government leaders, approve budgets and endorse policy at their respective levels and also elect people's representatives to higher levels. Unless these elections are free of manipulation and these elected deputies have real power, capable people will not run for these positions and voters are not going to be interested in voting in these elections.

It takes vision, courage and time to make these elections meaningful. Making these elections open does not mean introducing Western style democracy. These are elections in which the Communist Party can field its candidates without blocking other organizations from society at large from having their candidates compete. Those elected will elect government leaders. They are not members of the mob; they are well informed, well-placed and well-connected. In order to ensure that the Party cannot interfere with these elections and that those who choose to interfere will be punished, existing laws need to be amended, new laws drafted and new institutions created.

If China's leaders are unwilling or cannot incorporate the procedures of village elections to direct elections of local people's representatives and accept this gradual and indirect electoral democracy, we will have to consider that China might be able to defy universally recognized developmental models and create a new political system that will sustain economic growth, check government abuse, reduce corruption and inefficiency, protect people's pursuit of happiness, and create a harmonious state that loves all, hates none and poses no threat to the outside world. This would be a daring new system, and an emerging substitute to the Washington Consensus.