Two Decades of Local Democratic Experiment in China: Developments and Changing Assessments

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In the late 1980s, China began to allow direct elections at the village level. In the 1990s, the direct elections were extended from the non-governmental villagers’ autonomous organization to the township government, the lowest rung of the administrative hierarchy. However, the new experiments were categorically forbidden in 2006. Less competitive versions of the public nomination and selection process were resumed in Guiyang City for the district and deputy municipal leaders in 2008. These shifts reveal the varied attitudes toward local democratic experiment. This paper reviews the various forms of these experiments and analyzes various assessments.

Introduction

Prior to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2007, a heated debate was underway among officials and scholars about the general orientation of the “Reform and Opening to the Outside World” (gaige kaifang 改革开放) that would reach its thirtieth anniversary in late 2008. Some argued that the expanding private sector and shrinking public sector were eroding the socialist state and that the state should reign in the reform process by re-imposing political and economic control. Their adversaries called for yet more extensive political reform, arguing that the gap between the rich and poor, between the coastal areas in the east and the hinterland, and between the demands for greater resources and the deteriorating environment, can only be alleviated by further reform. According to this school of thought, market-oriented reform can go no farther without political openness and recognition of private ownership. The debate became particularly intense when the National People’s Congress (Quanguo Renmin Daibiaodahui 全国人民代表大会) examined a draft of the Law on Property Rights (Wuquanfa 物权法)\(^1\), which included clauses that called for the protection of private property. The central leadership put an end to this debate a year or so before the Party Congress (Dangdaihui 党代会). In February 2007, Premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝), in a rare political
move in recent Chinese politics, published an article in *The People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao 人民日报*). The article repeated the official line and reiterated the Party’s stand of twenty years earlier: its priority would remain economic development, based on the two pillars of keeping a tight lid on political reform while furthering the “Reform and Opening to the Outside World” (Wen 2007). Addressing the conference marking the thirtieth anniversary of the initiation of the “Reform and Opening to the Outside World” on December 18, 2008, Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) vowed “never to take the old road of the closed nor go astray by altering the banner” (Hu 2008), basically iterating what Mr. Wen had expressed earlier. What do these messages say about the fate of political reform?

According to Wu Jinglian, China’s economic reform has been incremental in nature since the early 1980s. This is to say that the economic aspects of the traditional planning mechanism have been retained while the market mechanism has been applied to developing the private sector and Chinese-foreign joint ventures (*zhongwai hezi qiye 中外合资企业*). These ventures are largely credited with China’s rapid growth but also blamed for a number of unfortunate consequences. These involve the collusion between political authorities and business interests, the imposition of burdensome regulations that affect consumers and businesses, and the imposition of fees that function as bribes (Zhang 2008). Is the incremental approach workable for the political reform?

Since the late 1980s, China has introduced direct elections at the village level. There are two opinions about the impact of grassroots political reform centered on direct elections. Some scholars believe direct election will help maintain one-party rule while others hold that it will lead to more general political reform or even to political revolution. Has the Chinese leadership’s assessment of the villagers’ committee elections (*Cunweihui Xuanju 村委会选举*) changed? If so, for what reason?

Chinese leaders have advocated either the bottom-up or the top-down approach to electoral reform, or some combination of the two. When direct village elections were introduced in the 1980s, the veteran Party leader Peng Zhen envisaged a bottom-up development that would eventually result in direct elections at the county and even provincial level (Peng 1990, 25). After two decades of experiment, does this remain a possibility? What kind of decision is the leadership now mulling?

This paper will try to answer these questions by reviewing developments over the past two decades.

A Review of Local Democratic Experiments in the Past Two Decades
Since the introduction of the Villagers’ Committee elections nationwide in 1987, China has seen various local initiatives that experiment with residents’ political participation and selection of local officials. Deliberative democracy, for example, has been applied to the budget formulation and approval process of some town governments. Wenling City, Zhejiang Province, undertook this kind of initiative in 2001, bringing together local residents and officials to discuss local affairs, especially government budget formulation and implementation, as well as major public works and services (Jia 2009). Many county and city governments have solicited annual public assessment of the performance of government departments and officials. In Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, the public annually assesses municipal government departments, with the leaders of the two lowest rated bureaus losing their positions (China News Service 2002).

Village elections, meanwhile, have their urban counterpart in the election of neighborhood committees (juweihui xuanju 居委会选举). In 1998, Sifang District, Qingdao Municipality, Shandong Province, organized the direct elections of neighborhood committees (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2007). In the following year, twenty-six cities throughout the country followed suit in accordance with a directive from the Ministry of Civil Affairs (Minzhengbu 民政部). In cities such as Shanghai and Nanjing, residents showed little enthusiasm for participating. In the following two or three years, little progress was made in the attempt to render the quality of urban community elections comparable to rural elections. The ice was broken after two towns in Nanning Municipality, Guangxi Autonomous Region, successfully organized direct elections for all eight neighborhood committees under its jurisdiction in July 2001. By 2002, such elections had spread from large cities to medium-sized and smaller cities, and shifted from sporadic experiments to the collective actions of an urban district or a city.

Direct elections of the village autonomous organization have led to the election of the village Party branch (dangzhibu 党支部) with the inauguration of the two-ballot system in Hequ County, Shanxi Province. The new electoral method allows ordinary villagers to cast votes in opinion polls of the candidates. Party members then elect the Party Branch from the list created by the popular vote (Dong 2007).

Further, direct elections have been upgraded from the non-governmental villagers’ autonomous organization to the township or town government (xiangzhengfu 乡镇政府), the lowest in the hierarchy of administrative structure. Sichuan Province took the lead in such experiments. At the end of 1998, the Nancheng Township of Qingshen County and Buyun Township of the Central District of Suining City organized direct elections of government leaders almost at the same time (Xin 2005; Yang 2008).
Various forms of indirect elections have been used to select Party and government leaders up to the prefectural level. In 1999, Dapeng Town in Shenzhen Municipality organized three rounds of polls involving three groups of local elites to select the head of government. This kind of more restrictive solicitation of popular opinion was soon widened by Zuoli Town in Shanxi Province, where all eligible voters cast votes of confidence, preceding the vote of the deputies of the Town People's Congress (Xiangzhen Rendadaibiao 乡镇人大代表) (Du 2002). The so-called “two ballot system”\(^2\) marks the limit to openness in elections at the lowest level of government, as the central government deemed “unconstitutional” the earlier Buyun Township election, in which the popular vote was binding (Zha 1999). The “public nomination and public selection” (gongtui gongxuan 公推公选) method was used to select both party secretary (dangwei shuji 党委书记) and government leader in Yangji Town, Hubei Province in 2002 (Long, Zhang, and Zhou 2003). The various forms of experiments can be summed up this way:

1. Direct election by all voters (Buyun Township, Suining City, Sichuan Province).

2. “Three-ballot system” (Dapeng Town, Shenzhen Municipality, Guangdong Province). Voters nominate candidates; elites select final candidates for the People’s Congress (PC); PC deputies elect the leader.

3. “Two-ballot system” (Zuoli Town, Linyi County, Shanxi Province), which is also used for the selection of the Party secretary and PC chairman. Voters cast vote of confidence; the Party committee nominates candidates; the Party congress or People’s Congress elects leaders.

4. “Public nomination, public selection” (Nanbu County and Suining City, Sichuan Province). The top six in written exams attend oral exams administered by 100-odd elites. The Party congress or People’s Congress elects leaders.

5. The PC deputies (dangdaibiao 党代表), rather than the county Party committee (dangweihui 党委会), directly nominate candidates (Mianyang City, Sichuan Province).

6. “Two nominations plus election” (Yangji Town, Jingshan County, Hubei Province). This method is similar to the method used by Dapeng Town, but the second nomination is made by the Villagers’ Representative Assembly.

There have also been experimental competitive elections to select deputies to the People’s Congresses at the township and county levels. Although
the law required deputies at these levels to be directly elected as early as 1982, the elections were for the most part organized perfunctorily with little or no real competition (E E 2007). Experiments in this vein were conducted in the last three years or so against the background of discouraging formal directives or circulars from middle level authorities but with the support of individual officials at higher levels.

As shown above, local democratic experiments represented by village self-government (cunmin zishi 村民自治) reached a high point at the turn of the century. In this respect, the following two points are particularly noteworthy:

Firstly, the Organizational Guidelines of the Villagers’ Committee (Cunweihui Zuzhifa 村委会组织法) was revised and enacted by the National People’s Congress in 1998 as a formal law after eleven years as a “law for trial implementation.” The new law incorporated the experience of the nationwide experiments of the previous decade by endorsing the so-called “sea election” (haixuan 海选), which was used for the first time in Lishu County, Jilin Province. This law enlarged the scope of elections and protected the voters’ free expression of their will by providing for private booths in which to fill out ballots (Xinhua Daily Telegraph, 2009).

Secondly, all provinces, municipalities directly administered by the central government (zhixiashi 直辖市), and autonomous regions have held direct village elections after the adoption of the new law. Prior to 2001, Guangdong and Yunnan Provinces delegated township government to the villages. The new officials served in what became known as village administrative affairs offices (cungongsuo 村公所). These offices were staffed by the appointees of the township government and therefore no direct elections were required. The nature of the law for trial implementation meant provinces could decide not to organize the Villagers’ Committee elections.

All of these experiments share a common characteristic: they are promoted or guided by the government. Under the government organization, the local residents or cadres go to the polls and thereby receive democratic training. On this basis, village and urban community residents’ self-government as launched in the early 1990s has been termed “mobilized democracy” (dongyuanshi minzhu 动员式民主). Meanwhile, the CCP’s main political mobilization methods as evolved since 1920s have been sustained, such as political propaganda and agitation, organizational control, leadership domination and mass mobilization. More specifically, “Mobilized Democracy” has the following features: (1) the party-state adopts the traditional mobilization method to encourage local residents to stand for or take part in the elections; (2) in the process of mobilization, the party-state is the initiator while the local residents passively participate; (3) the mobilized democratic practice is based on the policies of the party-state rather than on a comprehensive body of law; (4) the party-state makes and ex-
plains the policies as well as conducts mobilization; and (5) the mobilized democracy is confined to the grassroots, extending not even to the lowest level of government.

This kind of mobilized democracy meaningfully initiates democratization but also has limitations that eventually lead to difficulties or stagnation. Since 1998, the new law has created tensions between the Villagers’ Committee and village Party Branch and between the village and the township government. These tensions impede the further development of the village self-government. Attempts to smooth these relationships involve guaranteeing the Party’s leadership and the control of the government. The specific response to the tension between the Villagers’ Committee and village Party Branch has entailed the “two ballot system” as adopted by Linyi County, Shanxi Province; this involves one official concurrently serving as the chairman of the villagers’ committee and as the secretary of the village Party branch. The response to the tension between the village and the township government was to make the township government administration more transparent. However, most township governments find numerous ways to limit this openness. In theory, village self-government means that villagers run their own affairs. The villagers’ committee should be elected by and serve the villagers, but in reality the village self-government is promoted by the township government. The committee looks up to the township government and carries out tasks assigned by the government instead of executing the wishes of the villagers. In many provinces, committee members are paid by the township government. Frequent and widespread disputes over village elections and over township interference in village self-government point to the institutional deficiencies of mobilized democracy.

Against this background, the sixteenth Party National Congress (Zhonggong Shiliuda 中共十六大) adopted in 2002 the approach of “using intra-party democracy” (dangnei minzhu 党内民主) to promote the people’s democracy (renmin minzhu 人民民主) (Hu 2007). The innovations of intra-party democracy address the competitive elections of deputies to the town and county Party congresses, make sessions of the Party congresses annual instead of once every five years, and assign important decisions, especially concerning personnel appointments, to the full Party Committee (Dangwei Quanti Huιyi 党委全体会议) instead of its Standing Committee (Dangwei Changwei Huιyi 党委常委会). Its value and implications for China’s democratic development will be discussed later.

In 2006 direct town elections were categorically forbidden. In 2008 public nomination and public selection was resumed in Guiyang City for the district and deputy municipal leaders (Han 2008). The difference between the direct election and the public nomination and public selection is
that the former is open to all eligible voters while the latter is limited to the participation of local elites.

Of all these types of experiments, direct village and township elections are most significant as new steps in democratization because they present real choices to voters and because candidates can present their own platforms or promises to voters.

**Varied Attitudes about Democratic Experiments**

The first few Villagers’ Committees were set up by the farmers in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region around 1980. They soon won the recognition of the party-state as they filled the management vacuum in the rural areas after the collapse of the commune system. There was a consensus among the central leadership on institutionalization of the village self-government. Its role in re-organizing farmers was immediately appreciated, and the official status of the Villagers’ Committee was enshrined in the Constitution in 1982. The consensus was equally a function of pragmatism and ideology. The effectiveness of village self-government is comparable to the traditional village government (cungongsuo 村公所) in organizing the rural society, while the administrative and fiscal costs are lower. Ideologically, village self-government is a continuation of the CCP’s emphasis on the masses in that it is an innovation of farmers, which should be respected by the Party. Furthermore, the institutionalization and functioning of the new grassroots organization embodies the mass orientation, while village self-government institutionalizes this orientation. The measures were instrumentally deepened the farmers’ identification with the party-state by partially empowering them. Such consensus explains how the village self-government overcame initial obstacles and became the officially endorsed form of organization at the grassroots level in the rural areas.

Two assessments of village self-government have persisted. Its proponents favor it in the hope that it will empower rural residents and initiate democracy in China with the prospect of extending it to the county and even provincial level. They are encouraged by more recent developments such as the implementation of direct township elections. Its opponents have no faith in the proper exercise of democratic rights by the rural residents because in their eyes farmers lack democratic ideas and skills, and they maintain that village elections are likely to be dominated by clans or controlled by money politics. The Party apparatus are reluctant to give up control of the party-state over villages, envisaging that direct elections will result in Villagers’ Committees composed of non-Party members. The local government departments, especially at the township level, fear loss of control over villages as their role shifts from “leadership” to “guidance.” They perceive an inevitable conflict between the right of self-government and the
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For these reasons, the central leaders led by then-NPC Chairman (Quanguo Renda Weiyuanzhang 全国人大委员长) Peng Zhen and the Ministry of Civil Affairs (the implementing agency) had to make a tactical retreat. The impact of the proposed Organizational Guidelines of Villagers’ Committees was lessened by turning it into a law for trial implementation. It will be first implemented in some areas on an experimental basis. At the initial stage of institutionalizing village self-government, the priority is to obtain the support of the local branch of the Party and local government as these bodies are reluctant to let villagers run their own affairs. At this stage, reasonably enough, the quality of elections is a secondary consideration; without implementation, issues of quality are strictly irrelevant.

Following experiments that began in 1988, the Ministry of Civil Affairs identified the direct election as the key to the institutionalization of village self-government. The focus was placed on designing relatively free and fair electoral procedures to allow “capable persons” to serve on the Villagers’ Committees. They were expected to help consolidate the grassroots organizations, maintain the local social order, and promote local economic development. For this reason, the Ministry formed a united front with local government. The village self-government partially improved the relations between the party-state and farmers and alleviated conflicts between officials and villagers. This fact resulted in the temporary partnership between the Ministry and Party departments.

However, with the forceful promotion of direct elections of Villagers’ Committees, questions about their value arose. As the Party Branches remain the “leadership core” in the villages, no matter how competitive the elections are and how competent and accountable the elected cadres are, the democratic value of such experiments is limited. The two-ballot system that opened the Party Branches to the poll of ordinary villagers has improved the quality of village democracy to some extent. Up to this point, it seems that village self-government was still viewed positively by the central leadership. It is notable that in 1998 Former President Jiang Zemin praised it as “the third invention” of Chinese farmers, following the introduction of the household contract responsibility system (jiating lianchan chengbao ze-renzhi 家庭联产承包责任制) and the development of rural enterprises (Renmin Ribao 1998).

Toward the end of 1998, Suining County, Sichuan Province, made the breakthrough of extending direct elections to the township level. The immediate official reaction of the central leaders was negative. Despite this, however, less competitive elections than those of Buyun Township were organized in several provinces. Later experiments emphasized use of the
“opinion poll” to select the candidates for secretary of the township Party committees. Ordinary villagers or residents cannot elect the Party secretaries (they must be elected by the Party members), but the most popular candidates are put on the ballot at the official or formal Party election with voting restricted to Party members.

Following the decision of the NPC in October 2004 to extend the term of office of the town (township) government from three years to five, elections of the deputies to the People's Congresses at the county and township levels were scheduled to be held between July 2006 and December 2007 (NPC 2006). This would have provided opportunities for the reformers to make further experiments. However, to the disappointment of some reformers, Mr. Sheng Huaren, vice-chairman of NPC Standing Committee, reiterated in August 2006 that direct elections of township government leaders were illegal and warned that evil foreigners were using the tool of human rights and democracy against China (Sheng 2006). As noted previously, no further experiments were carried out until 2008.

The current setback or stagnation has something to do with the institutional limitations of mobilized democracy. These built-in limitations can be summed up by the following points: (1) the contradiction between the varied goals of mobilized democracy; (2) the conflict between its goal and means; (3) the conflict between the internal power structures of the party-state; and (4) the conflict between policies and laws.

The party-state aims at giving the local residents some political freedom in the management of local affairs while keeping final control of the grassroots autonomous organizations. In this context, the Villagers' Committee and the Neighborhood Committee carry the dual characteristics of administrative and autonomous organizations. On the one hand, the committee members are the agents of the local government, responsible for fulfilling the tasks of the state. On the other hand, they are the leaders of the local community, responsible for handling local affairs and conveying the demands and opinions of residents to the government. Their dual roles originate from the different and sometimes conflicting sources of power. The government and local residents have different expectations of them. When the interests of the local government and residents align, all goes well but when they contradict, the committee members will be blamed by either the government or residents. The centralization tradition means that the state extends its reach to the grassroots, resulting in the serious interference in the local residents' autonomy. In the rural areas, the township government often meddles in village affairs. It often removes the elected committee members from office although it is against the law. If it is clever, it can effectively control the Villagers' Committee via the village Party branch.

The purpose of the party-state's endorsement of mobilized democracy is to adjust the mode of local management. Once putting into motion, how-
ever, the new governance model operates on its own rules, which are often unacceptable to the local government. For example, the government devoted much effort to improving electoral rules and procedures at the early stage of direct elections when villagers doubted that they would be allowed to hold free and fair elections. Later, with the improved regulations, villagers often use the elections to resist the interference of the local government.

Under the principle of “Party controlled cadres” (dangguanganbu 党管干部), the local Party organization departments used to appoint the village leaders. With the competitive elections producing more non-Party members in the Villagers’ Committees, the Party organization departments become more concerned. In turn they exerted pressure on the government department responsible for village self-government.

The central and middle-level government and the township government sometimes clash over the implementation of grassroots autonomy. According to the Organizational Guidelines of the Villagers’ Committee, the township government can only guide the work of the village autonomous organization instead of exercising leadership, but in fact, the township government cannot get the job done without the effective support of the village cadres (cunganbu 村干部). Its heavy-handedness tends to strain its relations with the Villagers’ Committee. The wronged village cadres often win the sympathy of the central and middle-level government. After the emergence of the political alliance between the local government, local elites (including village cadres), and the local economic corporations, a new triangular power pattern has emerged in recent years between the central government, local government, and farmers. The local government tends to use a variety of means to protect local interests and expects the central government’s support. Normally the central government ignores the improper behavior of the local government as long as it can maintain stability. Hence the farmers’ interests are often sacrificed.

The CCP depends on policy (zhengce 政策) to exercise its leadership. This was not a problem in the early stages of mobilized democracy, but its stable development cannot do without law. In reality, the development of democracy must contradict the interests of the local Party departments. Hence, there must be law and the law must be obeyed. If the rule of law is to be respected, the policy has sometimes to give way. Mobilized democracy has triggered several debates. According to the Organizational Guidelines of the Villagers’ Committee, some people argue, the committee is the highest authority in the village as it is elected by all eligible voters, and the Party Branch, which is not authorized by the villagers, should follow its leadership. This view has of course many opponents. The verdict of the CCP center is that the Party must lead the Villagers’ Committee. In the current policy environment, the relevant existing laws sometimes meet resistance and not all prospective laws required by democratic development are likely
to be enacted. As sound law will undermine attempts to control elections, it is understandable that electoral law is largely a vacuum.

The Rationale for the Ban on Direct Township Elections

The direct village and township elections have had many political implications. While they have directly impacted the lowest level of government, they also have had long-term and strategic influence on China’s meso- and macro-politics. Nobody can predict the political outcome of the direct elections, either theoretically or practically. This results in the differing opinions among central leaders and the wavering development of the grassroots democracy.

More specifically, direct village elections raise the following questions with important implications for local governance: (1) whether they will strengthen or weaken the status of the village Party branches; (2) whether village elections will produce cadres more inclined to listen to the opinions of villagers and safeguard their interests; (3) whether village elections will reduce the political control of the township government over the village institutions; and (4) whether the village elections will make state policies more difficult to implement in the countryside.

Viewed from the macro-political perspective, the fundamental question is whether village elections will enhance the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party or not. The related question is whether the implementation of the direct elections in villages will start a bottom-up chain reaction that will impact the higher levels of government as the veteran leader Peng Zhen envisaged.

From the very beginning, grassroots democracy has been considered compatible with strong control by the party-state, and elections have been designed to increase mass support for the Party. With this understanding, it can be hoped that elections will continue to proliferate and serve as a mechanism of general Chinese democratization. However, the 2000 Taiwan election saw the long-term ruling Kuomintang lose power. The series of “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe and Central Asia resulted in the coming to power of pro-Western governments. It was against this background that Chinese leaders heightened vigilance against the so-called peaceful evolution strategy (hepingyanbiao和平演变) of the West. In a related move, the Chinese government tightened control over NGOs. Then came the NPC decision on forbidding further experiments in direct township elections with the understanding that direct elections may threaten rather than enhance the Party’s rule, as was believed up to then. If such an analysis holds water, the decision is still in line with the Party’s overriding concern to strengthen its own governing capability.
It is worthwhile here to review the background and original goal of the party-state’s adoption of mobilized democracy. In 1978 when the reform and opening to the outside world drive was initiated, the Chinese leadership abandoned collectivism in the economic sphere and replaced it with a policy that permits both economic growth and economic inequality. Meanwhile, in the political sphere, the Chinese leadership resorted to a strategy in which administration took the place of politics in order to satisfy the demands for political participation, as well as to meet the demands of the political, economic and intellectual elites for regime stability. This meant that political reform was shunned, and administrative reform was packaged as political reform. For example, while lower ranking cadres or scholars had no opportunity to run for political office, they could take part in public elections for middle-ranking government positions organized by the Party Organization Department. This traditional model of political participation is still operative.

Some central leaders want to continue the political socialization of the masses through a kind of institutionalized mass movement, using grassroots autonomy as a platform for the local residents’ political participation. Although this policy is compromised by the economic development model advocated by local authorities, by the economic deprivation of the farmers as a function of the modernization process, and by the non-democratic nature of the culture, the interaction between central and local leaders produced a consensus on “electing capable persons.” Hence mobilized democracy gained the chance for implementation.

Mobilized democracy was launched by the party-state and therefore could be applied nationwide, but the central authorities bring to the experiment in democracy an innate ideological conservatism, which explains the constant attempts to reign in democratic momentum when it exceeds the bounds that authorities envisage. By contrast, local governments have shown varied attitudes. Their opposition at the early stage and their later support are consistent with their perceived interests. They care less about ideology. When facing local problems, they are willing to push mobilized democracy if they consider it likely to be effective. Both the central authorities’ initial plan and the local government’s embrace of it represent a kind of adjustment in governing mode in light of the economic and social changes. From the perspective of the party-state, mobilized democracy is a form of grassroots autonomy and therefore represents an adjustment of the relationship between the state and society.

Both village self-government and urban community self-government represent the effort of the party-state to transform grassroots organizations from administrative bodies to autonomous bodies as part of its larger effort to adjust the governing mode of the society. The two kinds of self-government suggest an institutional arrangement based on the state’s dele-
gation of power to the society rather than an institutional arrangement based on the transfer of rights from local residents to autonomous organizations. Under this arrangement, the government concedes to society only very limited autonomy, namely, the residents’ limited right of participation in the control of grassroots autonomous organizations. The local autonomous organizations largely accept the implementation of the party-state’s policies as their primary mission while enjoy limited authority in handling communal affairs. In allowing elections and conceding the right to participate in the management of local affairs, the party-state hopes to produce “capable persons” who will obey higher authorities.

Under China’s unified party-government political system, the central authorities have emphasized the consolidation of local Party organizations and their leadership role in implementing mobilized democracy. In fact, both village self-government and urban community self-government are promoted as a supplement to the local Party organizations. In the elections of grassroots autonomous organizations, the party-state has always made it a priority to ensure that Party members are elected. In short, the mobilized democracy leaves little room for development.

While considering what the party-state refuses to sanction, it is also necessary to note what the party-state has advocated and implemented. Intra-party democracy and the “people first” policy (yiren weiben 以人为本) should be discussed in this light. The CCP declares intra-party democracy vital to its survival, and it has been an important topic among scholars since it was officially put forward at the CCP’s Sixteenth National Congress in 2002. The Fourth Plenum of the CCP Seventeenth Central Committee (Shiqijiesizhongquanhui 十七届四中全会) reaffirmed the basic program of “expanding intra-Party democracy to develop people’s democracy” in September 2009 (Xinhua 2009).

The importance attached to the intra-party democracy is in fact a response to the ever louder call for democracy in Chinese society. Democratic reform has created pressure from outside of the system, including demands for the reform of the Party. If the Party sticks to authoritarian rule, the Party may be torn internally by dissension and shunned by the public. Facing societal pressure, the Party must place political reform on its agenda. The practical challenge is to undertake reform without endangering its own status. Compared to ceding power to the society or allowing the democratization of society, intra-party democracy is relatively safe, as delegating authority to lower-level Party organizations and allowing Party members to enjoy greater freedom and participation do not threaten the Party’s ultimate control. Hence, the Party’s support for intra-party democracy makes sense. But it is a passive choice.

In general, most scholars within the establishment view the relationship between intra-party democracy and the democracy of the country posi-
tively. Wang Guixiu, for example, argues that intra-party democracy affects other sectors, entails little risk, and involves substantive change, and that it therefore makes sense to support intra-party democracy as the vanguard of political reform (Wang Guixiu 2003). Xu Yaotong argues that, considering the lack of democracy in both the Party and society, developing the intra-party democracy as a first step toward a democratic society is feasible (Xu 2006). The scholars disagree on the way to implement intra-party democracy. Some support a top-down approach, while others prefer a bottom-up approach.

Local experiments with intra-party democracy have yielded some positive developments, including, as noted previously, the annual session of the local Party congress, direct election of the Party Secretary, and check between the Party departments. In general, they have not surpassed similar experiments involving the township government and village organizations. The experiments, though conducted with many limitations, have at the same time produced new problems. Distortions in the implementation process, as reflected in the leaders’ domination rather than the participation of the ordinary Party members or local residents, render intra-party democracy symbolic. Such experiments will not give much hope to the public, nor can they be an effective means of augmenting the legitimacy of the Party’s rule or improving local governance. The crux of the issue is the reluctance of power-holders to share power. The situation raises doubts about strategy itself. Many look to intra-party democracy to facilitate the people’s democracy, but the fact is that democratic experiments starting with the direct election of the Villagers’ Committees preceded the new concept. Before intra-party democracy can play a role in fomenting societal democracy, it must catch up with the latter in scope and quality. As yet, there is no sign of such developments. Therefore a question is valid: Could it be a tactic to restrain the momentum toward direct election of the township government leaders?

The difficulty in promoting both local and intra-party democracy may have prompted the Chinese leaders to consider another option. It may not be cynical to analyze the people-first policy in this light. In his government report delivered to the NPC annual session in March 2007, Premier Wen Jiabao put forward specific programs for improving the people’s livelihood such as provision of health care and social security packages to all eligible citizens, efforts to ensure that all students admitted to colleges and universities are able to attend through scholarship programs and waiver of tuition fees for all students admitted to the schools of education run by the Ministry of Education (Jiaoyubu 教育部) (Xinhua News Agency 2007). These can be regarded as new, concrete measures for implementing the Building New Countryside Program in keeping with the concepts of scientific development and promotion of a harmonious society advanced by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen. They are an indication of a shift in the focus of
government from a single-minded pursuit of GDP to provision of public goods and services.

The positive publicity surrounding these people-first policies contrasts with the controversy surrounding the experiment on direct elections. Does this mean a re-thinking of the emphasis on local governance and a new understanding of the route for China’s political development?

The Party now seems to prefer people-first policies geared toward maintaining robust economic growth. In addition to expanding democracy, improving the legal system, and continuously pushing forward political structural reform, as Premier Wen recently stressed, the government is currently focused on spurring economic development, safeguarding the rights and interests of citizens, combating corruption, improving the trust-worthiness and competency of government, and promoting social harmony (Wen 2007). In order to improve the provision of public goods and services, efforts are underway to strengthen the central power. A notable recent trend is a revival of vertical control. Of course, to the Party all means are acceptable as long as they tighten and prolong its grip on power, no matter whether its legitimacy is based on popular active support as expressed in regular elections or passive consent as a function of the Party’s ability to deliver benefits.

Conclusion: A Strategic Choice Pending Within the Central Leadership

The experiments to date have proved that China should and can introduce direct elections to lower levels of government, first at the township level. A political decision should be made by the top leadership rather than by individual central leaders. The leadership, however, should not endorse further experiments on the models created in the past two decades. One reason, as the prominent local reformer Luo Chongmin has concluded, is that any bottom-up reforms are too costly and therefore a bad option. Luo is esteemed nationwide for spearheading comprehensive reforms in many fields. When he was the Party Secretary of Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan Province, Mr. Luo made the largest scale experiments in direct township elections (planned for the whole prefecture and actually organized in a county), merger of the rural and urban residence registration systems, and conversions of hospital and media institutions into limited liability companies. He comments that all such reforms should start at the top (Pan 2009).

Another reason why the leadership should not endorse further experiment on recent models is that the various forms of public nomination and public selection are too procedurally complicated. The variety and frequency of elections are a strain on both human and material resources, and may lead to premature apathy among ordinary voters. Areas most active in promoting local democracy hold numerous separate elections, including elec-
tions of (1) Villagers’ Committees; (2) Village Party Branches; (3) Township Government Leaders; (4) Township Party Secretaries and Party Committee Members; and (5) Deputies to the County and Township People’s Congresses. If conducted according to the electoral rules and procedures, each election may require more than one round of voting, as primaries are normally required. The over-politicization of life may become a burden on citizens and may not be conducive to fostering a sound electoral and political culture.

I participated in an experiment to combine some categories of elections under a project entitled “Support Township Competitive Elections” in Ya’an Municipality, Sichuan Province, from 2004 to 2006 (Thørgensen, Elklit, and Dong 2008). Four townships organized direct elections of Party and government leaders as well as deputies to the township People’s Congress on the same day in April 2006. The experiment was successful in combining the different elections and improving competitiveness, but it could not avoid complicated procedures under the applicable Party rules and local electoral laws and regulations.

The attempt to denigrate the universal values of democracy means there are politically powerful forces against the democratization of the Chinese politics, but as the Hu-Wen leadership recently reiterated, the move towards the rule of law and democracy is endorsed by the Party’s political platforms. Therefore the general direction is likely to be maintained. Facing such vocal opposition, local reformers may be more cautious as they contemplate further experimentation. This creates a challenge before the central leadership; there is a race between the pace of corruption and reform, which brings about another race between reform and revolution (Zhou 2009; He 2008). The more realistic option, it seems, is to implement democratic reform that will make local officials accountable to the public but that will not immediately weaken the central control.

The incremental approach to political reform, meanwhile, seems inadvisable. As demonstrated by attempts to increase competition in township elections, retaining the existing cadre-appointment procedures makes broader experiments too complicated and waters down the element of genuine reform. Outside of the economic sphere, it is unthinkable to create a new polity alongside the existing one. There can only be one form of government leadership at any level, so incrementalism can only mean making the selection process more competitive rather than simultaneously maintaining the existing structure while creating a new one alongside it. The downside is cumbersome procedures that test voters’ endurance.

It may be too early to claim that the bottom-up strategy of democratization has been rethought. Even if this proves to be the case, it is actually consistent with China’s basic approach to reform. As established by Deng Xiaoping, this approach focuses on implementing market-oriented eco-
nomic reform while keeping a lid on the political reform. Nevertheless, three decades of dramatic economic growth have been accompanied by increasing gaps between the different regions and different social strata. The resulting social tension has tested the Party’s governing ability. The “people-first” and “harmonious society” (hexieshehui 和谐社会) policies attempt to respond to such social tension. If it has been proven that economic growth will not automatically solve social problems, it needs to be proven that the new people-first policies can be effectively implemented. There is a growing consensus among Chinese officials and scholars that it is high time to introduce substantive and major political reform. The party-state bureaucracy and especially local governments manifest widespread corruption and internal inertia. Placing them under the supervision of the public is necessary more than ever before.

After two decades of competitive elections conducted at the village and township levels, major decisions need to be made to establish electoral categories and simplify procedures. Mere repetition of various previous experiments is not advisable as there are too many categories and methods of elections and their procedures are too complicated. The achievements made to date can only be consolidated with the momentum of sustained development. The consequence of no progress is regression. With the suspension of direct township elections in 2006, the quality of the recently held Villagers’ Committee elections has deteriorated. Contrary to the practice of the recent past, the Chinese media lately has said little on the subject of village elections. If they are permitted again, even as a mere showcase, competitive election will not serve a purpose without more room to manoeuvre and experiment.

One idea is to amalgamate the election of township Party and government leaders simultaneously with that of the People’s Congress deputies. Requirements for office might also be relaxed. Candidates might merely be required to be older than eighteen, literate, and Party members (for Party positions). Primary elections should be open to more or all voters. At least two kinds of “ticket system” might be used: (1) The Party secretary and government head form a ticket; or (2) The government head selects the deputy leaders. Candidates should be permitted to conduct campaigns with the support of volunteers. Campaign guidelines (use of funds, use of media) should be specified in the campaign regulations. The assembly of Party members and People’s Congress must respect the will of the voters and endorse the result of popular poll.

In short, more meaningful experiments require political decisions at the top. Sporadic piece-meal reforms are unlikely to contribute significantly to the democratization of China.

Notes
The draft Property Law was debated seven times by the NPC Standing Committee from December 2002 to December 2006 and finally passed at the annual plenary session of the NPC on March 16, 2007. Its passage was unprecedented as a draft law normally requires three readings. Also extraordinary was the fact that the draft Property Law was published on July 11, 2005, in an attempt to solicit the opinion of the public. Hundreds of retired senior officials and scholars wrote an open letter against the measure addressed to Party General Secretary Hu and NPC Chairman Wu Bangguo two weeks before the seventh debate by the NPC Standing Committee in December 2006.

In Zuolin Town, the election of the township Party and government leaders employed the “two ballot system.” Ordinary voters cast the first ballot. The second ballot is cast by the Township People’s Congress deputies for the election of the government leader or by the Party members for the election of the Party secretary. In Hequ County, by contrast, the election of the village Party branch secretary employed the “two ballot system.” The villagers took part in the primary elections and the Party members endorsed the result of the primary. In this form of poll, voters are issued a ballot with which to vote for whomever they want to serve on the villagers’ committee. In extreme cases, the poll may result in dozens of names being proposed. In this case, those who receive most votes go on to the second round of voting.

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