Intra-Party Democracy in China:
Should We Take It Seriously?

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The dominant theme of the recent Chinese Communist Party Central
Committee meeting was "intra-Party democracy." China's top leaders
characterized intra-Party democracy as the "lifeblood" of the Party and the
principal determinant of whether the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will
be able to maintain its position of primacy in the future. Directives
adopted at the meeting specify that the Party should more strictly and
vigorously govern itself, noting that "this matter is more urgent than at any
time in PRC history." It is evident that those who favor more political
reforms, especially more competitive elections within the political
establishment, now control the platform and agenda of the CCP. This
article argues that intra-Party democracy not only reflects the need for
institutionalizing the new rules and norms of elite politics in the People's
Republic of China (PRC), but might also provide for an incremental and
manageable experiment of Chinese-style democracy. The success or
failure of this experiment will have profound implications for China's
future, and this development should not be too hastily written off as
irrelevant by the outside world.*

"To expect that the Chinese Communist Party can pursue democratic reforms and clean
up corruption is akin to asking a doctor to perform surgery on his or her own body."[1] This
piercing observation, popular among domestic and foreign critics of the Chinese regime,
highlights the inherent limitations of a one-party political system's ability to solve such
internal problems as corruption. To a great extent, this viewpoint also reflects the deep-
rooted cynicism of China-watchers in the West regarding the Chinese leadership's
proposed "intra-Party democracy" (*dangnei minzhu*). With a few notable exceptions,
Western scholars generally consider the concept to be little more than expedient Chinese
political rhetoric and are therefore hesitant to ascribe to it any measure of significance.[2]
In the minds of most Western scholars, multi-party competition is a bedrock feature of
democracy and the Chinese leadership shows no sign of moving in that direction. These
critics are right to point out that CCP leaders are striving to bolster rather than to
undermine one-party rule, but to assume from this that intra-Party democracy is simply a
hollow rhetorical formulation risks overlooking dynamic and potentially far-reaching
changes within the CCP. Most importantly, the system has undergone a transition from a
monolithic Party apparatus led by a single strong leader (Mao and then Deng) to a diverse
system of collective leadership in which rival factions compete for power, influence, and
policy sway.

In recent years, both the Chinese authorities and the state-run media have

frequently used the term "intra-Party democracy" to describe the concept of institutionalized checks and balances within the CCP. Most recently, in September 2009, the Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party called for promoting democracy within the Party and intensifying the anti-corruption drive within the leadership. According to the directives adopted at the meeting, many problems internal to the Party are exacerbated by new domestic and international circumstances and "are severely weakening the Party's creativity, unity and effectiveness in dealing with these problems."[3] Therefore, careful management of the Party "has never been so arduous and urgent."[4] The directives particularly stress the importance of intra-Party democracy, describing it as the "lifeblood of the Party" (*dang de shengming*).[5]

The Chinese leadership's official position on the importance of intra-Party democracy could not be any stronger. The concept's newfound preeminence raises a number of crucial questions regarding China's political development: What are the main factors that drove the CCP leadership to elevate intra-Party democracy to such a prominent level? Are there competing factions of Chinese leaders and public intellectuals with differing views on the concept? What exactly does intra-Party democracy entail? Could new dynamics of factional competition change the nature of Chinese elite politics and eventually trigger a more fundamental transformation of the Chinese political system? Most broadly, should the outside world take this Chinese notion of intra-Party democracy seriously? In order to understand the immediate impetus and potential implications of intra-Party democracy we must closely examine the Chinese debates over the concept and consider the obstacles standing in the way of its implementation.

Critical Views of Intra-Party Democracy

China's move to collective leadership in the post-Deng era—alongside related changes in Chinese elite politics—does not mean the country is becoming democratic. As is well known, the Chinese government has a poor record on human rights, religious freedom, and ethnic minority civil rights. Political participation through institutional means remains very limited. The Hu Jintao administration, in particular, is known for its vigilant media censorship and refusal to move toward an independent judiciary. But critics of recent changes in Chinese leadership politics sometimes paint with too broad a brush. They are correct in denouncing the CCP's monopoly of power, but they often fail to recognize that a strong and credible alternative orbit of power is unlikely to emerge in the near future. The CCP is the world's largest ruling party, consisting of 3.7 million grassroots branches and 76 million members, and it continues to grow. In the absence of any organized opposition one can hardly expect the PRC to suddenly develop a multi-party system. Under these circumstances, a form of intra-Party democracy characterized by factional competition and linked to distinct interest groups in Chinese society may well be a more realistic way to promote democracy in the country.

Some Western analysts find it difficult, conceptually or ideologically, to accept

the legitimacy of this Chinese democratic experiment because its primary votary is the Chinese Communist Party. Perhaps in a similar vein, it also took many years for the field of China studies in the West to acknowledge that the CCP has been a driving force in the country's reform-era transition to a capitalistic market economy. Susan Shirk, a political scientist at the University of California, San Diego, and former assistant deputy secretary of state, once leveled a penetrating critique of the field: "Cynicism, like dogmatism, can be an excuse for intellectual laziness."[6] China is undergoing an unprecedented economic and social transformation, both in scope and character. Only an open-minded exploration of the possible political scenarios of this unfolding drama will serve the interests of those who study China and have a stake in getting the assessment right.

As a matter of fact, the path to democracy varies from nation to nation, and it depends largely on the country's historical and sociopolitical circumstances. Chinese leaders and public intellectuals have every right to argue that the PRC's version of democracy will, and should, have its own distinct (or even unique) features. After all, British democracy, Australian democracy, Indian democracy, and American democracy all differ from one another in important respects. Moreover, some of today's fairly vibrant democracies, such as Japan and Mexico, first experienced a lengthy period of one-party rule with dynamic factional checks and balances within the ruling party.[7]

Over the last century China's quest for democracy was filled with pitfalls and tragedies. It is understandable that Chinese elites and the public alike are now inclined to pursue political reforms in a way that is incremental over time and manageable in scale. Chinese scholars have also noted, correctly, that it took a long time for Western democracies to become mature and sustainable, and to realize a most basic principle of democracy: "one person, one vote." According to Chen Hongtai, a professor at the Institute of Political Science of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), American democracy took about 180 years to achieve universal suffrage without discrimination based on race, gender, property, or age.[8] British democracy took even longer, approximately 240 years, to eliminate similar discrimination. In making these comparisons Chinese scholars do not necessarily mean to argue that Chinese democracy will take as long to realize, but only suggest that in a fundamental sense, democracy is a process rather than an event.

It is also understandable that if the Chinese leaders or people believe democracy will lead to chaos, or even the dissolution of the country, they have no immediate incentive to embrace it.[9] Indeed, for most Chinese people old enough to remember the events of the 1989 Tiananmen movement, the 20th anniversary of its suppression was more a reminder of endemic political chaos and prolonged national setbacks than an inspiration for future democratic movements. A key lesson derived from the tragedy was that this sort of mass movement, calling for democracy in the abstract without basic institutional support, is almost certainly doomed to failure.[10] As long as China's political, economic, and cultural elites perceive democracy to be something that will undermine rather than enhance their interests, there will be no strong consensus for such a political future in China. Therefore, the greatest intellectual challenge for liberal-minded Chinese leaders and scholars is to make democracy conceptually and procedurally safe for

China.[11] For many of them, intra-Party democracy is the best path to China's political transformation.

Intra-Party Democracy: Chinese Conceptualizations and Debates

Chinese leaders and public intellectuals have widely varying views of what democracy is and what kind of institutional changes China should pursue. On one hand, Wu Bangguo, chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the second highest ranking of the Politburo Standing Committee's nine members, stated at the NPC meeting in March 2009 that "Western models of democracy, which emphasize multi-party competition for power, the separation of three branches of government, and bicameralism, is not suitable for China."[12] He pronounced bluntly that the current Chinese political system is democratic and that the CCP will never forfeit one-party rule. Accordingly, Wu Bangguo and other like-minded Chinese leaders are not enthusiastic about intra-Party democracy. Jia Qinglin, chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and another member of the Politburo Standing Committee, published an article early this year in which he called for building "a strong line of defense against Western ideological influence and the adoption of Western-style political systems."[13] He also argued that the Chinese people already enjoy democracy under the existing political system. Wu's and Jia's reference to democracy is indeed what Andrew Nathan, a professor of political science at Columbia University, calls the use of the "label of democracy for practices that are anything but."[14]

In recent years, some conservative public intellectuals in China have been particularly critical of what they call "the blind adoption of Western models of democracy." Li Lin, director of the Institute of Law at CASS, wrote in May 2009 that hostile foreign forces, joining with China's hostile domestic elements, intend to use the myth of Western democracies to "contain, Westernize, and split China."[15] Pan Wei, a Berkeley-educated political science professor at Peking University, favors legalistic political reforms over democratic elections and is more interested in a Singaporean-style rule of law than Western-style democracy. He bluntly criticizes what he calls "democracy worship and election obsession" among his Chinese colleagues. He believes that in a country such as China that has not instituted the rule of law, it would be a disaster to move toward democratic elections. In his words, "the CCP will split if the Party adopts elections; and the PRC will disintegrate if the country adopts elections."[16] Fang Ning, deputy director of the Institute of Political Science at CASS, does not regard Western democracy as the object of false consciousness or hypocrisy, but he does believe that the essence of Western democracy—restraints on state power and protection of private interests—is not applicable to developing countries like China.[17]

In sharp contrast to conservative leaders and scholars, Premier Wen Jiabao has been a consistent advocate of the universal value of democracy. He defines democracy in largely the same way many in the West would. "When we talk about democracy," Premier Wen said to a delegation from the Brookings Institution in Beijing in 2006, "we usually refer to the three most important components: elections, judicial independence,

and supervision based on checks and balances."[18] Premier Wen did not argue that China should experiment with multi-party democratic competition, nor did he believe that the country should move toward an American-style system based on a tripartite division between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Rather, he argued that institutional checks and balances, constitutionalism, freedom of the media, civil liberties, and political choice expressed through elections are not proprietary elements of Western democracies, but are the essential and universal components of any democracy.

Premier Wen's emphasis on the universal value of democracy reflects new thinking in the liberal wing of the Chinese political establishment. His views likely represent a minority of the Chinese leadership at present, but, like many other ideas in China during the past three decades, what begins as a minority view may come to be accepted by the majority. Several rising stars of the upcoming generation of leaders, the so-called fifth generation, are also enthusiastic about intra-Party democracy. Li Yuanchao, director of the powerful CCP Organization Department and a Politburo member, and Wang Yang, Guangdong Party secretary and also a Politburo member, are prime examples. When he was Party secretary in Nanjing and Jiangsu in 2001 through 2007, Li Yuanchao routinely implemented intra-Party elections of top local leaders, experiments that took place much earlier than in other cities and provinces.[19] In 2005, Li criticized the mentality of leaders who were "obsessed with stability" (*taiping guan*) and who refused to try new political experiments.[20] He argued that this seemingly cautious mentality is actually quite dangerous, because in seeking to avoid changes in the short term, officials might lose the opportunity to forestall more serious future crises. According to Li, Chinese leaders are not lacking in wisdom or ideas, but need more courage and "guts" to pursue bolder democratic reforms.[21] Similarly, ever since he became Guangdong Party secretary at the end of 2007, Wang Yang has boldly proclaimed that Guangdong should lead a new wave of "thought emancipation" in order to attain a "new phase in China's overall development" with an emphasis on political reforms and the election of local leaders.[22]

China's liberal-minded public intellectuals have actively engaged in political and scholarly discourse on the desirability and feasibility of democracy in China, often with the objective of refining the conceptual framework of Chinese democracy. Yu Keping, deputy director of the Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Central Committee of the CCP and a professor at Peking University, is one of the most important Chinese thinkers supporting an incremental transition to democracy. In "Democracy Is a Good Thing," his now famous article, Yu Keping not only made the Chinese public aware of the issue of democracy in present-day China, but has also highlighted its universal value (*minzhu de pushijiazhi*).[23] When Yu states that "democracy is a good thing," he means that it is good for all of human society, not just for the Americans or the Chinese. In his discussion of cultural and political developments in the era of globalization, Yu observes, "globalization not only makes people realize that they share a common fate but also helps them identify with such basic values as freedom, equality, justice, security, welfare, and dignity. Pursuit of such basic values is both the core principle, and the ultimate goal, of cultural globalization."[24]

In arguing that intra-Party democracy is the best path for China's political development, Yu Keping has put forth three interrelated concepts. First, there is the "price of democracy" (*minzhu de daijia*), which is sometimes so high as to be unacceptable. Reducing "political and administrative costs" in China's democratic pursuits, therefore, should be the central concern. Second, Yu believes that "incremental democracy" (*jianjin minzhu*) is the optimal strategy for Chinese political reforms because gradual changes are compatible with China's historical experiences. He also explains that democracy requires sufficient political, economic, social, and legal capital, and that improvement by the CCP in all of these areas will not only quantitatively increase democratic feasibility, but will also result in an eventual qualitative "breakthrough" (*tupo*). Third, at a time when social tensions and political unrest are on the rise, Yu believes that the Chinese authorities should negotiate with social forces and constantly adjust state policies to meet the needs of the general public and maintain "dynamic stability" (*dongtai wending*). Yu believes that the best way to prevent social unrest or revolution is to promote good governance on the part of the CCP leadership rather than to rely on strict control.[25]

It should be noted that for liberal scholars like Yu, intra-Party democracy is only the means, not the end, of fulfilling China's democratic aspirations. In a recent interview with the Chinese media, Yu argued that it would be a grave mistake to assume that China only needs intra-Party democracy, instead of a truer people's democracy (*renmin minzhu)* or social democracy (*shehui minzhu*), both of which would include grassroots and general democratic elections.[26] For Yu, intra-Party democracy and people's democracy are complementary. The former is top-down or inside-out and the latter is bottom-up, but ideally they can meet in the middle. In a strategic sense, liberal Chinese thinkers like Yu place great importance on intra-Party democracy with the objective that it will pave the way for Chinese democracy in a broader sense. Yu believes that China's quest for democracy will and should have a qualitative "breakthrough" of some sort.

Several other prominent advisors to the Chinese leadership share Yu's views on the relationship between intra-Party democracy and broader democracy. Wang Changjiang, professor and chairman of the Department of Party Building at the Central Party School (CPS), recently argued that promotion of intra-Party democracy need not be at the expense of social democracy. He cited major recent crises, such as the ethnic tensions in Tibet and Xinjiang and social unrest in Guizhou and Jilin, to highlight the urgency of developing democracy in China. In Wang's words, "social democracy should not wait."[27] In contrast to Fang Ning and other conservative scholars willing to subordinate individual or group interests to state interests, Wang believes that a new "rights protection" consciousness and greater political participation of social groups are the driving forces for Chinese democracy, and that the CCP leadership must keep abreast of these changes. Wang's colleague, Li Liangdong, professor and chairman of the Department of Politics and Law at the CPS, also wrote in the official magazine *Outlook*, "just as China has learned a great deal from the valuable experience of capitalist market economies in the West, China should also benefit from the fruitful elements of Western democracies."[28]

Yu Keping, Wang Changjiang, and Li Liandong all work in China's prominent think tanks and are known to have close ties with senior leaders of the CCP. They appear to represent the more liberal wing of thinking in the Chinese political establishment. And while they are among the most articulate public intellectuals in the country calling for intra-Party democracy, they all believe that it should be a means to arriving at general democracy, rather than an end in itself. With a great deal of official support, several of these prominent scholars recently used their positions of influence to advocate, in media interviews and writings, that the Fourth Plenary Session take up bolder political reforms.

Major Components of Intra-Party Democracy: Rhetoric or Reality?

While there was no breakthrough decision at the Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee to enhance the Chinese public's confidence in the prospect of intra-Party democracy, the session did produce a wide-ranging plan for improvements to CCP governing. The directives explicitly called for political reforms in five major areas: 1) more competitive inner-Party elections to choose CCP officials; 2) a more consensus-based decision-making process called "decision by votes" (*piaojuezhi*); 3) more-restrictive rules to regulate the tenure, transfer, and regional allocation of high-ranking leaders; 4) a multi-dimensional supervision system to restrain official corruption and other forms of power abuses; and 5) a new emphasis on the transparency of Party affairs.

In each of these areas one might presume that the reform measures proposed are largely political rhetoric and will remain subject to manipulation on the part of CCP authorities. At the same time, however, one can reasonably argue that these measures have great potential. Now more explicitly articulated than ever before, they may become enormously important in determining the behavior of CCP elites, the shifting contours of leadership politics in the coming years, and the transformation of the policy-making process.

1. Multi-Candidate Inner-Party Elections
The core component of intra-Party democracy, as acknowledged by the top CCP leaders and their advisors in Chinese think tanks, lies in the expansion of inner-Party elections. The new directives specify that the Party should "improve inner-Party electoral methods, regulate electoral procedures and voting formats, cultivate new ways to introduce candidates, and gradually expand the scope of direct elections."[29] In fact, since the 13th National Congress of the CCP in 1982, the Chinese authorities have adopted a method of multi-candidate election known as a "more candidates than seats election" (*cha'e xuanju*), for the election of the Central Committee. For example, if the top leaders plan to have a 300-member Central Committee, they may place 310 names on the ballot. The 10 candidates who receive the fewest votes in a secret ballot will be eliminated.

CCP leaders have often implied that there would be an ever-increasing number of candidates in future elections to the Central Committee. The 2002 Party congress had 5.1 percent more candidates than available full-membership seats and 5.7 percent more

candidates for alternate-membership seats.[30] In the 2007 Party congress, the delegates voted to elect 204 full members from the total number of 221 candidates (8.3 percent more) on the ballot. As for alternate members, the delegates voted to elect 167 alternates from the total number of 183 candidates (9.6 percent more) on the ballot.[31] It has been widely noted that the eliminated individuals in these elections were usually leaders who came from the privileged families of high-ranking officials, known in China as princelings (*taizidang*). In the 1997 Party congress, for example, several princelings, including Chen Yuan, Wang Jun, and Bo Xilai, were among the 5 percent of candidates defeated despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that all of their fathers had served as vice-premiers.[32] This also explains why leaders with princeling backgrounds are usually less enthusiastic about the intra-Party democracy than their non-princeling colleagues.[33]

It is unclear whether a similar method will be applied to the selection of the Politburo, the next organization up in the Party's power hierarchy, in the near future. In recent years, the official Chinese media have devoted extensive coverage to multi-candidate elections for other important positions in provincial and municipal levels of leadership. Jiangsu Province, particularly its capital city, Nanjing, was an experimental area for multi-candidate elections in 2002–2007 under the leadership of then Jiangsu Party secretary Li Yuanchao. Several heads of counties or urban districts in Nanjing were elected through such a method. In September 2009, on the eve of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee, a total of 363 Party committees of neighborhood communities in the city had direct elections for local Party leaders. According to the state-run media this large-scale experiment in direct elections "was unprecedented in the PRC's history."[34] Li Yuanchao, now director of the CCP Organization Department, was apparently the principal supporter of this endeavor.

Under the current leadership of Wang Yang, Guangdong Province has also experimented with multi-candidate direct elections. In May 2008, authorities in the Guangdong city of Shenzhen posted a draft of the "Guidelines for Government Reforms in Shenzhen for the Short-Term Future" on the municipal government website.[35] The guidelines specified that delegates to the district or municipal people's congresses in Shenzhen would elect heads of districts and bureaus by way of multi-candidate elections. As part of the process, all candidates were invited to submit statements of purpose and take part in public debates. Four heads of municipal bureaus were elected in this way, each chosen from a group of two or three candidates. According to the Party authorities in Guangdong, the next step is to apply this method to the election of the mayor and vice-mayor of Shenzhen, a city of 10 million people.[36] These inner-Party and general elections with multiple candidates are important steps designed to gradually make China's Party-state system more open, competitive, and representative, without relinquishing the CCP's "leading role" or weakening its "governing capacity."

2. Decision by Votes
As a corollary to the idea that CCP leaders should be chosen more competitively through voting, major decisions of the Party should also be determined by a Party committee vote at any given level of leadership. The new directives emphasize the principle of collective leadership in the decision-making process, specifying that all the major decisions

regarding socioeconomic policies, large construction projects, major financial expenditures, and important personnel appointments should be made via a "decision by votes" during a meeting of the Party committee (*quanwei hui*) or executive committee (*changwei hui*) rather than at the whim of the Party secretary. This measure seeks to preclude an excessive accumulation of power by the Party secretary—in Chinese, the "No. 1 leader" (*diyi bashou*) or "Party boss." As part of these regulations, two-thirds of a committee's members should be present at the meeting and a candidate for appointment must receive at least two-thirds of the votes in order to be confirmed.[37]

The new directives also stipulate that to enhance scientific and democratic decision-making in China, the CCP leadership should constantly seek consultation from research institutions, think tanks, other political parties, and social and public hearings. Major decisions should be made on the basis of broad consensus rather than a single paramount leader's conviction or haste. In March 2009, for example, members of the executive committee of the provincial Party committee of Zhejiang Province voted on the appointments of 56 municipal- and bureau-level leaders by secret ballot.[38] This "one member, one vote" practice, as described in the Chinese media, grants members of the executive committee power equal to the Party secretary.[39] The plenary session's new directives called for all levels of the Party's leadership to gradually implement this new mechanism of "decision by votes."

3. Institutional Regulations and Informal Norms
The new directives also reaffirm the importance of the institutional development in cadre management (*ganbu guanli jizhi*), including both formal regulations and informal norms to curtail various forms of favoritism and lingering instances of lifetime tenure. To a great extent, these institutional developments have already been in use, and they include:
- *Term limits*. With few exceptions, a five-year term limit has been established for top posts in the Party and government. In addition, an individual leader cannot hold the same position for more than two terms.
- *Age limits for retirement*. Based on CCP regulations and norms, leaders above a certain level of seniority cannot exceed a set age limit. For example, all the members who were born before 1940 retired from the Central Committee at the Party Congress in 2007. This represents a dramatic change from the past, when, even during the Deng era, China's political system was said to be a "gerontocracy," i.e., "rule by the elderly."
- *Regional representation in the full membership seats of the Central Committee*. A strong political norm since the 1997 Central Committee has been that each province-level administration has two full membership seats (usually occupied by the provincial Party secretary and governor) on the Central Committee.[40] Although provincial chiefs may be promoted later to the central government or transferred to other provinces, this distributional norm was strictly applied at the time the Central Committee was elected.
- *"Law of avoidance" in selection of top local leaders*. Party secretaries, secretaries of local discipline commissions, and police chiefs at provincial or municipal levels of leadership are often non-native outsiders who were transferred from the central administration or another province.

These institutional rules and norms not only generate a sense of increased consistency and fairness in the selection of leaders, but also make the circulation of the Chinese political elite through positions of authority very fast. Because of the fluidity of membership in these crucial CCP leadership bodies, no individual, faction, institution, or region is able to dominate the power structure. These developments have reinforced norms of checks and balances in the Chinese leadership and have a strong impact on elite behavior.

4. A Comprehensive Supervision System
Top CCP leaders apparently understand that widespread official corruption has severely damaged the reputation of the Party and undermined the legitimacy of its rule. The directives focus on corruption-ridden areas such as major infrastructure projects, real estate, land management, resources, state asset management, finance, stocks and securities, and the legal sector. To establish a comprehensive supervision system to curtail corruption and other abuses of power by CCP officials is therefore a top priority. According to the directives, this comprehensive supervision system will include the following four components:

- *An ombudsperson mechanism.* The Central Committee of the CCP and higher levels of the Party organization should regularly send inspection teams to monitor ongoing anti-corruption work at lower levels of the Party.
- *Property declaration mechanism.* High-ranking CCP leaders will be required to report the income, property, investments, and business activities of their spouses and children, including those that live and work overseas.
- *Public anti-corruption reporting mechanism.* Telephone hotlines and Internet reporting websites will be established to enable the public to report officials' wrongdoings.
- *Institutional separation mechanism.* The CCP is not interested in pursuing Western-style tripartite division of government. Instead, they propose institutional separation of the Party into three divisions, namely, decision-making, policy implementation, and supervision.

It should be noted that all of these mechanisms are supervised by the Party organization rather than by the legal system. The declaration of property, for example, will be made neither to the public nor to a law-enforcement agency, but only to the Party's discipline-inspection commissions at a given level of leadership.

5. Transparency of Party Affairs
The directives claim that by definition, intra-Party democracy aims to enhance the rights of ordinary members of the CCP, including the right to access information, participate in decision-making, take part in elections, and supervise the Party. Greater transparency of Party affairs (*dangwu gongkai*) is an essential component of this development. Specifically, this enhanced commitment to transparency includes the establishment of the spokesperson system for higher levels of CCP committees; an annual work report by the executive committees of the CCP; evaluations of senior officials in a given level of leadership by grassroots Party organizations; and democratic consultation meetings

(*minzhu kentanhui*) between high-ranking officials and ordinary Party members.

Perhaps the most important proposed change on this front will be the establishment of the tenure system of delegates for the Party congress. The Party congress at various levels of leadership convenes once every five years. Delegates of these Party congresses only participate in this first meeting and play no further role once they complete their selection of Party committee members. The CCP is now conducting experiments in several cities and counties to see whether they should give a five-year tenure (*changren zhi*) to delegates of the Party congresses so that they can continue to exert a role during their terms.

Despite these wide-ranging measures adopted by the CCP leadership to make intra-Party democracy more than mere political rhetoric, there are significant obstacles that stand in the way. Seats in the most powerful bodies of the Party-state are still decided by a very small number of top leaders, through deal-making, not open competition. The absence of a free press and an independent judiciary seriously undermines both the credibility and effectiveness of supervision. It is also highly problematic to tell the Chinese public, even if only implicitly, that only Party members and elites are entitled to practice "democracy." In a way, intra-Party democracy is not in line with the people-centered rhetoric articulated by such top leaders as Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. This being said, it would be wrong for China analysts to conclude that intra-Party democracy is unimportant. After all, transforming the Chinese Communist Party and the PRC's political system is not a choice; it is a broadly recognized necessity. For this reason the Fourth Plenary Session insisted that intra-Party democracy is a matter of life and death for the CCP.

Intra-Party Partisanship: Not a Choice, but a Reality

The communiqué of the directives of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee stated unambiguously that the CCP must transform its way of governance in order to keep abreast of the daunting new challenges, to "meet the new demands due to the new circumstances in the world (*shiqing*), the new condition in the country (*guoqing*), and the new reality in the Party (*dangqing*)."[41] The document does not elaborate on these new developments, but they are easy to imagine.

On the international stage, one-party rule is now the exception, not the rule. Only a very small number of countries, including North Korea and Cuba, belong to this small club. Conscious of its role as an emerging global power, China does not want to be grouped with these backward and isolated communist states. The trends are clear—even the Vietnamese Communist Party recently selected its top leaders through competitive elections. Countries like Iran purport to hold multi-party presidential elections, even if their most recent was a sham. Routine democratic elections in India and Indonesia, two of the world's most populous countries, undermine the argument that direct elections in China would be infeasible because of its size and population. The success of political democracy on the other side of the Taiwan Strait may also influence the mainland in the

years to come, especially at the time when cross-Strait relations are warming. China's rise to prominence in the 21st century will depend on its strength in various domains, including political resilience and openness. Military and economic might are undoubtedly important, but a country that is not viewed by its own citizens to be politically legitimate cannot claim to be a rising world power.

Domestically, despite rapid economic growth during the past three decades, China has been beset by a growing economic gap between urban and rural areas, coastal and inland regions, and the new economy and traditional economic sectors. Within a generation, China has transformed from one of the world's most equitable countries in terms of income distribution to one of the least. Certain major socioeconomic groups, including farmers, migrants, the urban unemployed, and elderly often find themselves increasingly marginalized and have become the "losers" of reform. At the same time, the supposed "winners," such as entrepreneurs and members of the middle class, may also feel insecure. The country faces myriad other challenges, including shortages of natural resources, environmental degradation, the side effects of large-scale urbanization, the prospect of an aging society, inadequate health care and social welfare, tensions between the central and local governments, and ethnic conflicts.

China's political system has become increasingly unable to deal with these complicated, sometimes contradictory, problems, and as a result political tensions are on the rise. A survey of 80,000 people conducted by the Organization Department of the CCP in 2008 and released on the eve of the Fourth Plenary Session indicated that one-third of the Chinese populace was not satisfied with the way CCP officials were selected. The survey also showed that one-third was unsatisfied with the performance of the CCP's leadership.[42] For the CCP elite the writing is on the wall: they must reform the political system so that it is able to function more effectively in an ever-changing socioeconomic and political environment. Intra-Party democracy seems to be particularly appealing to top leaders, including Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, and such rising stars in the fifth generation as Li Yuanchao and Wang Yang. They seem to increasingly realize a change is more a necessity than a choice.

Collective leadership inherently involves more factional competition and coalition-building. In the absence of strongman politics, factional compromise has become more common, as have negotiations, deal-making, and elections. The CCP's institutional changes discussed earlier do not reduce factional tensions; quite the contrary, they make factional politics all the more dynamic. There is a kind of inner-Party partisanship in the CCP, a competition between two informal coalitions: the populists and the elitists (princelings). The former is currently led by Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, and the fifth-generation leaders Li Keqiang and Li Yuanchao; while the latter is led by Wu Bangguo, Jia Qinglin, and the fifth-generation leaders Xi Jinping and Wang Qishan.[43] If these competing factions, associated with different sociopolitical and geographical constituencies, continue to balance each other within the CCP leadership, then greater institutionalization of intra-Party democracy may not be so far off.

These new dynamics within the CCP have profound implications for the outside

world, and especially for the United States. China watchers will commit a grave error if they continue to consider the CCP leadership a monolithic group, let tired ideological biases distort their perceptions of the PRC, or assume that Chinese factional politics has remained a zero-sum game. Instead, analysts and policy-makers should pay greater attention to the many nuanced dynamics and constraints in Chinese elite politics. In the long run, U.S. foreign policy toward China will be far more effective if it is formulated and delivered in a way that is sensitive to the latter's rapidly evolving domestic circumstances and in particular to the changing nature of political competition within the Party-state.

Notes:

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[1] He Qinglian, a Chinese dissident intellectual and the author of the well-known book *The Pitfalls of Modernization*, made a similar point in a television interview on Voice of America.

[2] Exceptions include Lowell Dittmer and Guoli Liu, eds., *China's Deep Reform: Domestic Politics in Transition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); and John L. Thornton, "Long Time Coming: The Prospects for Democracy in China." *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 1 (January/February 2008): 2–22.

[3] See *People's Daily Online*, September 19, 2009: http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90785/6761990.html.

[4] Ibid.

[5] For the communiqué on the directives of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, see http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64094/10080626.html.

[6] Susan L. Shirk, *Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), p. x.

[7] For more discussion of the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) rule in Japan and the decades-long dominance of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexican politics, see Gerald L. Curtis, *The Japanese Way of Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Dale Story, *The Mexican Ruling Party: Stability and Authority* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1986).

[8] Chen Hongtai, "*Zhongguo minzhu zhengzhi jianshe yijing xingcheng le jiben gongshi*" [The Chinese Political Discourse for Democracy has Reached a Basic Consensus], *Renmin luntan* [People's Forum], No. 2 (2009).

[9] For a more detailed discussion of this argument, see Cheng Li, "Introduction: Making Democracy Safe for China" in Yu Keping, *Democracy Is a Good Thing: Essays on Politics, Society and Culture in Contemporary China* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2009), pp. xvii-xxxi.

[10] Hu Angang, *Dierci zhuanxing: Guojia zhidu jianshe* [The Second Transition: State Institutional Development], (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2003).

[11] Li, "Introduction: Making Democracy Safe for China."

[12] *People's Daily*, March 10, 2009, p. 1.

[13] *Qiushi* [Seeking the Truth], No. 2., January 16, 2009.

[14] Andrew Nathan, "Review of Yu Keping's *Democracy Is a Good Thing: Essays on Politics, Society, and Culture in Contemporary China*," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2009): 182.

[15] See http://myy.cass.cn/file/2009053133817.html, May 31, 2009.

[16] The quote is from www.chinesenewsnet.com, April 25, 2006. For more discussion of Pan Wei's criticism of democracy worship and election obsession, see "Toward a Consultative Rule of Law Regime in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 12, no. 34 (February 2003), pp. 3–43; also *Debating Political Reform in China: Rule of Law vs. Democratization*, ed. Suisheng Zhao, (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2006).

[17] *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* [China's Youth Daily], March 28, 2008, p. 4.

[18] This discussion of Wen's meeting with the Brookings Institution delegation is based on John L. Thornton, foreword to *China's Changing Political Landscape: Prospects for Democracy*, ed. Cheng Li (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2008), p. viii.

[19] For more discussion of Li's effort to promote intra-Party democracy in Jiangsu, see Cheng Li, "China's Two Li's: Frontrunners in the Race to Succeed Hu Jintao," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 22 (Fall 2007): 1–22.

[20] See http://www.xinhuanet.com, August 11, 2005.

[21] Li, "China's Two Li's," p. 19.

[22] Wang Jianming, "*Zhonggong faqi disanci sixiang jiefang yundong*" [China Launches the Third Movement of Ideological Emancipation], http://www.chinesenewsnet.com, January 14, 2008. Also see Cheng Li, "Hu's Southern Expedition: Changing Leadership in Guangdong," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 24 (Spring 2008): 1–13.

[23] For the English version of Yu Keping's works, see Yu, *Democracy Is a Good Thing*.

[24] Ibid., p. 125.

[25] For more discussion, see Li, "Introduction: Making Democracy Safe for China," pp. xxvii–xxx; and Yu, *Democracy Is a Good Thing*, pp. 3–5.

[26] Yu Keping, "*Xuyao liqing youguan minzhu de jige guanxi*" [The Necessity to Clarify Several Conceptual Factors Concerning Democracy], *Beijing ribao* [Beijing Daily], March 16, 2009. Also see http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/49150/49152/8965735.html.

[27] Wang Changjiang, "*Zhuoli tuijin dang zhizheng de gaige chuangxin*" [Promoting Reforms and Innovation in the Party], *Jiefang ribao* [Liberation Daily], September 28, 2009.

[28] Li Liangdong, "*Zhongguo minzhu de fazhan fangwei*" [The Direction of Chinese Democratic Development], *Liaowang* [Outlook], August 18, 2009. Also see http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2009-08/18/content_11901203.htm.

[29] For the directives of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, see http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64094/10080626.html.

[30] See http://news.eastday.com/c/shiqida/u1a3177599.html.

[31] See http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/21/content_6918611_4.htm.

[32] For more discussion of the negative effects of multi-candidate elections on princelings, see Cheng Li, "From Selection to Election? Experiments in the Recruitment of Chinese Political Elites," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 26 (Fall 2008).

[33] For more discussion of this phenomenon, see Li, "From Selection to Election?" and Cheng Li, "China's Most Powerful 'Princelings': How Many Will Enter the New Politburo?" *China Brief*, Volume 7, Issue 19 (October, 2007): 2–5.

[34] *Fazhi ribao* [Legal Daily], September 18, 2009, p. 1. Also see http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/10080366.html.

[35] Shu Taifeng, "*Shenzhen Zhenggai toushi wenlu*" [Experiments of Political Reforms in Shenzhen], *Liaowang dongfang zhoukan* (Oriental Outlook Weekly), http://news.sohu.com/20080707/n257998881.shtml.

[36] See http://www.mzyfz.com/news/times/a/20090608/145624.shtml.

[37] See http://www.bjdj.gov.cn/Article/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=7876.

[38] *Zhejiang ribao* [Zhejiang Daily], March 26, 2009, p. 1.

[39] See http://www.jndj.gov.cn/article/19/767.Html.

[40] The exception being the minority regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, whose representation is not constrained by these norms.

[41] See http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64094/10080626.html.

[42] See http://news.southcn.com/z/2009-09/19/content_5831172.htm.

[43] For more detailed discussion of the populists versus elitists, see Cheng Li, "Chinas' Team of Rivals" and Cheng Li, "China's Political Trajectory: Internal Contradictions and Intra-Party Democracy," in Eva Paus, Jon Western, and Penelope Prime, eds. *The Global Giant: Is China Changing the Rules of the Game?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 51–71.