C h i n a Briefing

Democracy and China

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Now is a good time to reflect on democracy. In the U.S., Trump has been elected president, and in Europe, the UK has voted to leave the EU. South Korea has also impeached a president for the first time in its 30 years since democratization.

While trends differ across the world, the threats that democracy is facing can be summarized into two types. The first is 'the input threat". When it first emerged, democracy was designed to be a political system capable of representing more people than any other. However, if we look at democracy in its current state, the current level of 'input' is not particularly representative. Voter turnout rates are already low in many democratic states and continue to fall. Winning candidates are often elected by a number of people far smaller than a true majority. The pool of candidates is narrow. It has become something of a cliché to criticize democracies as having become plutocracies, captured by a small minority of wealthy political elites. When this is added to the problem of intergenerational injustice marked by overrepresentation of older generations and underrepresentation of the young or the conflict of global inequality stemming from the overrepresentation of powerful countries on the world stage, the challenges facing democracy appear to be intractable.

The second danger posed to democracy is 'the output threat'. People say that they feel as if the laws and policies created national security, economic growth, political development, and the other goals of state government are more important than whether or not the people are by the political elite and the other 'products' that emerge from the political system are not effective in improving the quality of their lives or solving the problems faced by the political community. In many democracies, political figures suffer from a severe deficiency of the leadership and initiative that resolving these social problems demands. Furthermore, there is an absence of integrity and professionalism among bureaucrats, policy acumen and negotiation skills among politicians, flexibility and cooperation between government departments, and other institutional factors that influence the level of development of a democracy. As a result, many important policy issues are not properly addressed, remain adrift, or are inadequately 'solved'.

In reality, the biggest challenge facing democracy is neither the input nor the output threat. Rather, it is the existing alternative of the Chinese model. Existing representative democracy, no matter how great its deficits or how numerous its criticisms, has remained safe due to the lack of a realistic alternative. The Chinese model presents a strong challenge to the weaknesses of the democratic political system, particularly when it comes to the issue of policy performance.

The challenges that China presents to democracy can be summarized into four main

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points. First, output is more important than input in a political system. Effective policies or outputs of a government that resolve the problems of its citizens, ensure guaranteed fair and equal participation in the political process. Second, the basis for evaluating the quality of 'input' in Chinese democracy is not, as it is in Western democracies, 'representativeness', or in other words, 'how appropriately and adequately each group of people is represented'. Rather, it is 'how competent and exceptional talents within the entire population are discovered through competition or other methods, trained, and helped to ascend to the highest levels of decision-making'. Third, as far as the discovery of competent and exceptional talents, the trump card offered up by the majority of democracies, voting, is not really appropriate. Rather, the Chinese system puts forth the idea that competition within the Party decides the outcome, as a record of service in the local government is a more effective way to measure competence. Lastly, when competent and exceptional people are identified and assigned to administrative and policy duties, this carries over, resulting in high-quality policies that meet the wishes of the citizens.

According to Wang Shaoguang's criticism of the representative system, in contemporary Western democracies, citizens are not able to become true 'owners', and instead can only act as 'owners of choice' when they vote. This is because Western democracy, rather than focusing on the essential meaning of 'the people', commits the error of becoming too obsessed with method and procedure. The true 'people' in democracy are not those who become the representatives of the 'owners of choice' through voting. Rather, democracy is a

system wherein policies desired by the owners of state affairs are realized effectively by capable state officials in order to bring a wide variety of benefits to the people. Claims that the Chinese style of 'meritocracy' or 'meritocratic democracy' is superior to Western representative democracy have begun to receive attention based on the arguments presented above (Bell 2015; Bell and Li 2012; Li 2012; Li 2013).

In China's 'meritocratic democracy', it inevitably becomes important to secure relative autonomy and insulation for government officials from the social pressure and direct influence of the people so that they can produce superior policy results and ongoing stability. Effective management and proper control of the internet are key to halting the emergence and spread of subversive public opinion in order to make this happen. The Chinese government's 'smart' censorship, and the revolution of data communications technology through the construction and development of ChinaNet have been effective in preventing factors that could lead to instability (European Council on Foreign Relations 2013: 150-157).

However, no matter how 'smart' the government's censorship and control is, it is difficult to perfectly halt or restrict the general influence of data communications technology on the people and politics. It is impossible to completely block China's 300 million bloggers from discussing particular issues on ChinaNet or prevent the unpredictable disclosure of the corruption of public officials. In China, the internet and online realm are going through explosive growth, and exchange and communication are becoming more lively as a variety of platforms emerge and changes to fundamental mass media occur. The main

user base and producers of online public opinion are the young generation and city residents, who are developing an individual sense of identity and becoming accustomed to free expression (Hu Yong 2006), with a fierce passion for democratic participation and criticizing injustice (Zhang Ji Jin 2011). Online public opinion and offline mass demonstrations tend to be connected.

Mass demonstrations in China totaled 10,000 in 1993 and 74,000 in 2004. Protests across the entire country reached 180,000 in 2010, twice the number of recorded demonstrations in 2006 (New York Times 2011.08.16). The majority of demonstrations were centered on the illegal or unfair private use of land by the government or development corporations, the abuse of authority by local officials, failure of companies to pay wages, and other such issues. The nature of these protests can be seen as public welfare movements or movements for rights protection rather than political movements. Recently, not only are demonstrations growing more frequent, they are also showing a higher degree of organization (Lee Dong-ryul and Seo Bongkyo 2012).

Under China's meritocratic democracy, the lack of a representative factor in the input dimension is not likely to be seen as a serious problem. Because a conceptual conversion has taken place, in which the hand-picking of state officials by citizens and promotion of political representativeness is not true democracy: rather, 'true democracy' is a polity in which the government designs and implements policies for the people. As a result, the idea that delegative democracy, where the political elite are delegated to design and carry out policies "for the people," is better than representative democracy, where the political representatives are elected "by the people," has long been firmly entrenched.

Here, the supporting basis for the equation 'for the people = democracy' is the ongoing creation of superior policy that is able to satisfy the majority of people. However, historically there has never been a government that was able to produce successful policies in perpetuity. Every policy will fail at some point in some way, no matter whether that failure is large or small or how soon it occurs. It is possible that China's alternative democracy will be able to conceal any negative impacts from its own policy failures either through 'smart' control of public opinion, effectively resolving the issue, or working to prevent online public opinion from erupting into large-scale mass protests. Moreover, an ongoing anti-corruption campaign is needed to substantiate the fairness and impartiality of the administrative and policy processes as well as the application of the law.

However, ensuring perpetually successful policy is no easy task. This is because 'good policy' that is able to respond well to a rapidly changing policy environment can hardly be formulated without a solid foundation of creativity, which the Chinese government has only recently begun to take an interest in. In order to perpetually produce high-quality policy, government officials must become creative beyond imagination, or they must be able to borrow the creativity they lack from private sectors such as the market or civil society.

Here lies the challenge for Chinese democracy. China's democracy, through its redefinition, or conceptual conversion, of 'democracy', has emerged as an attractive

alternative to Western representative democracy. It claims that even without Western-style representation it is able to more fully realize democracy. However, if China craves a creative society that offers a foundation for ongoing policy success (and moreover that is also capable of economic development), it will have no choice but to re-define a Chinese alternative to freedom as well. In other words, if China is capable of producing innovative talent even without Western-style freedom, Chinese democracy may become a powerful alternative to Western representative democracy, which is currently under threat. As a result, it is in reality 'freedom' rather than 'democracy' that will determine whether or not Chinese-style 'democracy' can succeed.

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