# Democracy, China and the Communist Party

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## A growing dilemma for Hu Jintao: how should he deal with democracy inside the Communist Party?

YOU might have thought China's leaders would be brimming over with confidence just now. Even as the West is struggling, their economy is growing strongly. China's eclectic mix of free-market principles, spoon-fed state enterprises and intolerance of dissent may be contradictory, but it seems to have paid dividends. Around the world those disillusioned with American capitalism have half an eye on China as an alternative.

Yet the ruling Communist Party is acutely conscious of its own frailties. Although students are still desperate to join the party, that is not because they believe in Marxism, but because they are worried about their job prospects and party membership can pull strings. Once in, they find an organisation that cloaks itself in the mind-numbing dogma of yesteryear, pays little heed to the will of its 76m members and revels in costly, time-wasting meetings to rubber-stamp the leaders' decisions. It is a formula that buys the party short-term comfort at the expense of long-term instability.

Seven years ago the party abandoned its scruples about recruiting private entrepreneurs. It has worked hard to restock its grassroots after the havoc caused when thousands of state-owned enterprises closed. As a result, party cells have been sprouting in private businesses, including in many which are partly foreign-owned. But within the party's ranks, power still flows much as it did in the dictatorial days of Mao Zedong.

Party leaders admit that this is a weakness. The party's immunity to scrutiny, even by its own members, fosters corruption and leaves decisions prone to error. Giving supposedly elected posts in the party to hand-picked favourites generates resentment and cynicism. Members from the private sector are often still marginalised. So too, at the top, are women.

# Let a hundred flowers wilt

China usually scorns lessons from the developing world, but party scholars have travelled to study Vietnam. Many have come back inspired. The Vietnamese Communist Party brooks no opposition, but in recent years it has introduced a semblance of competition for top positions. Hu Jintao has often spoken of the need for "inner-party democracy" in China too. The media have heaped dutiful praise on his words. But China's experiments have been timid and puny (see article).

This is bad news for those in China who had believed that Mr Hu's inner-party democracy would foster the countrywide sort. In fact it is becoming clear that Mr Hu is as fearful of giving a voice to the party as he is of giving one to the country. It is also bad for China's stability. Mr Hu himself has often warned that corruption could destroy

the party. Its isolation from public opinion makes it vulnerable to nasty surprises such as the explosions of unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang.

China's leaders have begun manoeuvring their favourites into senior positions in readiness for them to take power in 2012 when Mr Hu, it is assumed, steps down as party chief. Success or failure in the struggle for power will be decided not by the ballot box but by backroom deals between factions. Mr Hu's rise to power in 2002 went smoothly, but previous post-Mao transitions had resulted in a coup and a popular uprising.

Mr Hu appears to worry that his remaining years in office could be marred by turmoil. Intense security remains in force in Xinjiang and Tibet. Controls on the internet have been tightened in the past few months. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have been blocked: their role in Iran's recent upheaval clearly spooked China's leaders. The lawyer of Liu Xiaobo, a prominent dissident, has learnt that his client will face trial for subversion. Mr Liu's offence, apparently, was to organise a petition calling for more democracy.

Optimists in China have suggested that internal democracy could help the party evolve into something like Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, which ruled for 54 years with only a brief interruption until its defeat this year. But that would happen only if party factions could compete openly before facing the electorate. Mr Hu, for all his talk of democracy, stresses the need to uphold the party's tradition of "centralism"—following the leader, with no open dissent.

Party bosses can either choose their successors themselves or give the members a say. They cannot do both.

Article:

# Big surprise

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## Attempts to democratise the Communist Party have failed. Again

"INNER-PARTY democracy is the life of the party," enthused China's former president, Jiang Zemin, as he prepared to hand over to Hu Jintao seven years ago. It could, he said, promote democracy in the country as a whole. But Mr Hu's cautious experiments with reform inside the party appear to have fizzled. So too, it seems, has his own commitment to the idea.

Rhetorically at least, Mr Hu had shown more enthusiasm for reform than did Mr Jiang who, as party chief from 1989 to 2002, made no obvious effort to change the party's top-down dictatorial style. But in September Mr Hu dropped a not-so-subtle hint of his own reservations, emphasising the principle of "centralism"—which means upholding party decisions without dissent. The party's own literature, especially that intended for official readership, suggests his reforms have often resulted in more pointless rubber-stamp meetings, confusion and disillusionment. They have also been a drain on government funds.

Party reformers had hoped that the new generation of leaders who will come to the top in 2012 would be chosen after at least a modicum of competition. The transfer of power, during which Mr Hu himself is expected to step down, is getting under way. But the stagnation of reform experiments at the bottom, together with the recent appointment at the top of five new provincial party leaders, apparently without any real consultation, does not bode well for inner-party democracy.

A critical feature of that reform involves a system that Mao Zedong briefly toyed with in the mid-1950s. Known as the "tenure system" (*changrenzhi*), it gives delegates to party congresses notional supervisory powers over officials for the entire five years of a congress, instead of just for one meeting at the beginning of it. It also gives delegates some say in the appointment of party officials. The system was written into the party's constitution in 1956, during the "hundred flowers" campaign of modest liberalisation. But Mao rapidly lost his appetite for such things as he moved to crush growing dissent. It was removed again in 1969 during the Cultural Revolution.

Not until the late 1980s, more than a decade after Mao's death, did party officials dare revisit the idea. They were still far from brave enough to promote it from top to bottom of the party, as Mao did. But they chose a dozen county towns and urban districts for experiments. Then came the bloody suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and the leadership's enthusiasm waned once more. Under Mr Jiang, more than half the selected areas abandoned their trials. Mr Jiang instead tried to bolster his reformist credentials by promoting direct elections to village-level posts.

For a while these elections entranced Western governments and lobby groups, which hoped they would lead to competitive elections higher up the political system. They did not, except in rare cases. And they had problems of their own. By the time Mr Hu took over in 2002, village democracy had become mired in disputes over the role of elected leaders, and cramped by the resurgence of ancient clan rivalries. Soaring numbers of rural protests suggested that village-level democracy had done little to make peasants happier, or to resolve their disputes.

To Mr Hu, anxious to show that he still believed in political reform (a central if often-ignored plank of party policy since the 1980s), reforming the party itself seemed a safer option. Once again, the tenure system was taken down and dusted off. Party officials got experiments going in 97 counties and urban districts spread across two-thirds of China's provinces.


But now their enthusiasm has faltered. At the last national party congress in 2007, Mr Hu merely reaffirmed the need for experiments. There has been little further expansion of the tenure system to the rest of China's more than 2,800 counties, and none at all to congresses at the prefectural, provincial or central levels. Inner-party democracy was a theme of the party's annual central-committee meeting in September. But the communiqué at the end of the meeting did not mention the tenure idea, nor did it specify plans for wider trials of any other reforms.

A particularly frank admission of the tenure system's lacklustre progress appeared in a recent edition of a journal published by the party's Central School. It was written by researchers from Yaan prefecture in southwestern Sichuan province—an area that only last year was being hailed by China's state-run news agency for having achieved "notable success" with the tenure system. The researchers' findings revealed an entirely different picture. During the past seven years of tenure-system trials, they said, the "bold reformist spirit" of party members in Yaan had ebbed. Reforms, they said, were often mere window-dressing.

It looked good on paper. Congresses would be elevated to what the party constitution says they are supposed to be: the supreme organs of party power. Their delegates would be directly elected by party members (or in the case of higher-level congresses, by their lower-level counterparts). They would meet annually instead of every five years. They would debate and vote on key party decisions. They would conduct competitive elections for party committees which, in turn, would elect the top leadership at that level.

As the Yaan researchers found, however, snags abound. The tenure system is supposed to set up "parliaments within the party", as Mao called them. Many party bosses have dug in their heels to resist this and cautious delegates have shied away from challenging them. The majority of delegates are still senior officials (68% in one Yaan county cited). Even in Jiaojiang, a district of Taizhou city in the eastern province of Zhejiang which has been trying out the tenure system for 21 years and is often cited as a model for such reform, regulations keep the share of senior officials among the delegates at around 55%. As if this rigging were not enough, the party constitution allows for leaders to be

removed or transferred without reference to the congresses to which they are notionally answerable.

Critics of the tenure system say that annual meetings of party congresses often just repeat the work of parliamentary bodies, themselves stacked with the party faithful. Officials who are members of several such bodies end up wasting a huge amount of time. The costs of party congresses are borne by local governments, many of which struggle to sustain their own bloated bureaucracies.

The core of the problem is the principle of “centralism”. This means that members must uphold party decisions without dissent. Liberals think reforms will not work unless this requirement is changed. But at the party meeting in September, Mr Hu qualified his predecessor’s remark. “Inner-party democracy is the life of the party,” he said, before adding: “Centralism and unity are the guarantee of its strength.”

Mr Hu is doubtless especially keen that the party follows his orders as he tries to line up like-minded successors to take over in 2012. At the end of November new party chiefs were appointed in five provinces in what appeared to be a prelude to the upcoming changes. Much attention focused on the choice of two unusually young men, both aged 46—Hu Chunhua in Inner Mongolia and Sun Zhengcai in Jilin. If Mr Hu is grooming them for Politburo slots, he will leave nothing to chance—least of all the possibility that party congresses might block their rise. Li Fan, a Beijing-based consultant on grassroots democracy, believes that the tenure system has “basically failed”.