

China: Vote as I say

Independent candidates for elections appear to be a spontaneous step too far for the Communist Party

The Economist, June 16th 2011 | *BEIJING* | from the print edition

“A LIVE-FIRE exercise in democracy” is how one of China’s sparkier newspapers hailed a recent move by dozens of citizens to promote themselves online as independent candidates in forthcoming local elections. Communist Party officials, unnerved by Arab revolutions and sporadic unrest in the provinces, are far less jubilant. Voting rituals long choreographed by the party suddenly face a new challenge from the internet.

Elections at the lowest tier of China’s multi-layered parliamentary structure are the only ones in which citizens can directly vote for their legislators. But the party likes to leave nothing to chance. Citizens can, in theory, stand for election with support from ten fellow constituents. In practice, the party usually ensures that only its endorsed candidates make it to the shortlist. Ordinary Chinese often refer to the “people’s congresses”, as the legislatures are called, as mere ornamental “flower vases”.

So a flurry of internet-fuelled enthusiasm for such polls has attracted considerable attention, including in some state-owned media (to the disquiet of propaganda officials, say Chinese journalists). Li Fan of the World and China Institute in Beijing, thinks that more than 100 people have declared themselves as candidates in recent weeks for elections for people’s congresses that are due to be held around the country in the coming months. They have mustered support using microblogging tools such as Sina Weibo, a hugely popular Twitter-like service.

Even a hint of spontaneity in legislative elections can make the party squirm. In 1980 the first experiment with such polls led to heated campaigns on campuses. Officials intervened to block outspoken candidates from winning seats. Six years later, attempts to exclude independent candidates from local elections prompted student protests. The crackdown on the Tiananmen Square unrest in 1989 all but ended activists’ efforts at the ballots until 2003, when a slightly more liberal atmosphere encouraged dozens from the newly emerging middle classes to run. But when elections were held three years later, the party stifled media coverage.

Now, despite a sweeping crackdown on dissent this year involving the arrest of dozens of activists, the party is finding it harder to impose silence. A surge in online social networking has enabled citizens to connect instantly with vast numbers of like-minded people. Intellectuals and journalists with high profiles online are among those who have declared their candidacies. Li Chengpeng, an author and social critic in Sichuan province, has more than 3m followers of his Sina Weibo account. In a message posted on June 15th Mr Li wrote that a policeman had said he would vote for him, with many fellow officers wanting to follow suit.

The emergence of these candidates has coincided with a spate of local disturbances in different parts of the country. They make the party, which is preparing to celebrate its 90th birthday on July 1st, all the more anxious. In Zengcheng, a town in Guangdong province that manufactures jeans, thousands of police appear to have quelled days of rioting which broke out on June 10th after an altercation between security guards and a migrant street vendor. This came after rioting in Lichuan in Hubei province over the death in police custody of a local legislator and anti-corruption campaigner. In late May a man with grievances against the government in Fuzhou, Jiangxi province, blew up himself and two others, prompting an outpouring of sympathy on the internet. Xu Chunliu, a self-proclaimed candidate in Beijing, who has 12,000-plus Sina Weibo followers, says such incidents have encouraged some to venture into politics. Better, he says, to battle it out in parliament than on the streets.

On June 8th the government revealed its jitteriness about elections in an interview by the state-run news agency, Xinhua, with an unnamed official of the National People’s Congress, the apex of the legislative hierarchy. The official said independent candidates had “no legal basis” and hinted that campaigning in non-approved settings would not be tolerated. But the official did not rule out the

possibility that independents could run. A harder-hitting commentary appeared in *Global Times*, a Beijing newspaper. By soliciting votes through the internet, it said, independent candidates “could destroy the operating rules of Chinese society”. It urged them to “return from microblogging to reality”.

Mid-May elections for the people’s congress in Xinyu, a city in Jiangxi province, underlined the difficulties independents can face. Liu Ping (pictured above), a retired worker with more than 31,000 online followers, tried to run but was disqualified, apparently because of her labour activism. Her home was later raided by police, who detained her for several days. Ms Liu’s microblog postings about her experiences aroused sympathy among internet users and helped launch the recent wave of independent candidacies.

The party is not united, though. On June 13th *Study Times*, a newspaper published by the Communist Party’s top academy for party officials, argued in defence of independent candidates. China, it said, had failed sufficiently to emphasise the right to get elected. The newspaper said the idea that “you can only be a representative if we let you be a representative” was a “serious violation of socialist democratic principles”. The party, it appears, has some internal differences of its own to resolve.