

THE DEMOCRATIZATION MOVEMENT IN CHINA: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

THE DEMOCRATIZATION MOVEMENT in the People's Republic of China is not entirely a novelty although its recent expression has been the most dramatic in terms of the scale of the mass demonstrations, the widespread and spontaneous public support it was able to generate in major cities and the brutal repression it provoked. Most observers would trace the origin of the present movement to the first Tiananmen incident in 1976 when spontaneous demonstrations erupted at the time of Zhou Enlai's death and the call for democracy was sounded. One may even stretch the sense of continuity to include the period of the mid-fifties when some of the key intellectual leaders of the present movement such as Liu Binyan cut their political teeth. It was in 1955 when the Party, under Mao's leadership, first called for a period of "blooming and contending" and then turned on the intellectuals who had criticized the Party by launching an "Anti-Rightist Campaign" (Goodman, pp.255-270). In other words, there is historical evidence to indicate that Chinese students and intellectuals have periodically engaged in attempts to effect changes in Party policies through public articulation of their criticisms. What makes the democratization movement of the 1980s different from the early expressions is the socio-economic and political context in which it is being generated, the increasingly organized nature of the movement and the growing interest and participation of the working class as well as the urban population in the movement. These will have significant implications for the prospects of the movement and the development of socialism in China.

NATURE OF THE DEMOCRATIZATION MOVEMENT

MANY OF THE INITIAL DEMANDS for democracy articulated in 1976, 1978 and again in 1981 were reactions to the Cultural Revolution and the most vocal advocates of these demands were former Red Guards who felt they had been tools in the power struggle between Party factions. The early phase of the democratization movement was thus led by the Red Guard generation who felt betrayed by the Cultural Revolution but still looked to the Chinese Revolution as their source of inspiration. Reacting to the extremist policies and State abuses unleashed by the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guard generation sought the socialist legalization of human rights, particularly the protection of individuals from these abuses. The primary aim of the early phase of the movement was thus the development of a legal system to control State violence. (Kagami, AMPO, vol.20, p.104)

This phase of the movement ended in the massive arrests of its leaders, some of whom fled abroad while a few went underground. The second phase of this movement erupted in 1986 and while it gained the support of some Party leaders (e.g. Hu Yaobang) and leading Party intellectuals (Liu Binyan, Fang Lizhi), the bulk of the movement consisted of a new generation of Chinese youth who had no direct experience of the Cultural Revolution and could not identify with the revolution of 1949. Raised in an atmosphere of "opening to the West", it is a generation that is looking "outward" for models to emulate rather than "inward" towards China's revolutionary heritage. For some of its leaders, the problem is how to transplant Western democracy to China. For most, however, the approach has been pragmatic rather than ideological; reformist rather than radical. One of the legacies of the Cultural Revolution has been the widespread distrust of ideology as an instrument of mass mobilization; student leaders have avoided or have been incapable of articulating their demands in any systematic manner. In this respect, "democracy" has functioned as a "catchword" for a variety of political demands.

Consistent demands of the students and intellectuals have been for improvements in the legal system, more spending on education, more press freedom and the freedom to demonstrate. The Communist Party

and the socialist economic system have never been targets of attack by the movement although in the latest demonstrations, individual leaders of the Party have been singled out for criticism and attack. In sum, the demands have focussed on more "democratic space" for individuals and mass organizations and the institutionalization of legal controls on State power.

To advance these demands, different tactics have been employed. For the Red Guard generation of reformists, the main strategy has been to work from within the Party either through direct membership of the Party or through influential advisory positions. For the younger generation of students and intellectuals with little access to the power centers, pressure tactics have been employed. It has been noted that the Red Guard generation regarded the second phase of the movement, which relied heavily on pressure tactics, as dangerous because it threatened both the system and the reform agenda. (Kagami, p.104). Their apprehensions proved correct. In many ways, the intransigence of the students in occupying Tiananmen in April/May 1989 gave the anti-reformists in the Party the opportunity to crack down on the reformists. One can anticipate that the current Party rectification campaign will seek to neutralize if not to destroy the reformist network within the Party that helped the students. It is doubtful, however, that this will prevent the recurrence of student demonstrations and public expressions of political dissent in the future. To the extent that the Party will continue to pursue economic reforms or simply maintain those that have already been undertaken, the same contradictions will remain that sparked the democratization movement. This will be particularly true of the situation in the urban areas.

INTELLECTUALS AND THE MOVEMENT

AS EARLIER OBSERVED, the bulk of the movement up to June 1989 has consisted of students and intellectuals. Their participation in the movement is rooted in their experience of downward social mobility over the last decade and the discontent stimulated by the "internationalization of the economy". While economic reforms have raised peasants' income by as much as 200 per cent over the last decade, those receiving fixed incomes in the cities have suffered spiralling inflation with no concomitant increase in their wages. Teachers have been protesting

about their poor status, bad working conditions and low pay for some time. A university professor earns about half the income of a street vendor, a surgeon less than a barber and one teacher discovered he could earn as much in three days selling tea as he was paid for a whole term teaching. Delegates to the National People's Congress expressed their concern about the plight of teachers and intellectuals in March 1988 but there was no decision to increase expenditures on education which is limited to less than 3% of China's Gross Domestic Product.

Increased dissatisfaction has also been generated by the tendency of intellectuals and students to compare their situation with their counterparts in Western countries. This has been compounded by increased opportunities for academic exchange. The Chinese government has admitted that fewer than 50% of the students it sent abroad for graduate studies have returned to China.

The discontent of the educated with their declining social status has been translated into demands for more participation in decision-making or at least for the expansion of the parameters for critical discussion and self-expression. It is interesting to note that despite economic problems and inflation, participants in the 1989 demonstration only listed political reforms in their demands. However, the single demand that probably struck the most responsive chord among the general public and which posed the strongest challenge to the regime was the call for an end to corruption.

CORRUPTION, LEGITIMACY AND DEMOCRACY

THE FRONTAL ATTACK launched by the students against corruption appeared to be a key element in mobilizing public sympathy for the democratization movement in the cities. It served to justify the demands for political reform and democracy by substantiating the need to check abuses of State power. Apart from expanding the base of support for the movement that began to include workers in the industrial and service sectors, the attack on corruption and simultaneous demand for democratization seriously called into question the regime's legitimacy which had hinged on promises of democracy, political stability (as opposed to the mobilizational demands of the Cultural Revolution period), increased material well-being and improved Party leadership as reflected in better work style and commitment of cadres. (See Goodman, *op.cit.*)

In consolidating his rise to power after the death of Mao, Deng Xiaoping had based his popular appeal both within and without the Party on these promises. The failure of the Cultural Revolution had rendered the Long March inadequate as a symbol of legitimacy for the Party among the youth. In his attempt to restore Party legitimacy among the people in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Deng could no longer rely on the ideological norms and charisma that had fueled it. The first Tiananmen incident of 1976 provided Deng both the opportunity and the symbols to oust the Maoist faction from its position of dominance within the Party, to change the course of economic policies and to reestablish the bases of Party legitimacy. As a symbol of opposition to the politics of the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four, the Tiananmen Incident of 1976 has maintained a democratic and populist mystique. Deng capitalized on its potency both as a weapon against the politics of the Gang of Four and as one of the bases for restoring Party legitimacy which had been seriously undermined by the Cultural Revolution. The appeal to democracy was first emphasized at the 3rd Plenum and occasioned by the reversal of the verdict on the Tiananmen Incident of 1976 which had been described at that time as a "counter-revolutionary incident". By November 15, 1978, the Beijing Party Committee had decided that the Tiananmen Incident had after all been a "completely revolutionary event". The reversal of verdicts was presented as a triumph, not only for democracy, but for a democracy bereft of Party leadership or participation. (Goodman, p. 297-98)

This has subsequently posed a dilemma for the Party. By signalling its approval of the students' demands for democracy, the Party was demonstrating a responsiveness to popular demands that regained for it support from the urban population. Yet in doing so, it introduced the potential risk of losing its control and omnipotence in Chinese political life. The dilemma that the Party has been posed with is how to continue meeting popular demands, which is essential to maintaining regime legitimacy, and yet retain Party control.

As long as democracy remained ill-defined and abstract, the danger to Party control remained minimal. In more recent years, however, the demands for democratization have become increasingly concretised and have been linked to intra-Party disputes over decentralization, economic liberalization, and bureaucratic corruption.

ECONOMIC REFORMS AND DEMOCRATIZATION

IT IS CLEAR that experiments with market mechanisms, with the resultant two-tiered pricing system and the drive to attract capital and technology from the West have opened up the floodgates to bureaucratic corruption, growing economic disparities, inflation, unemployment and increased rural-urban migration. Party reformers see these as some of the inevitable side-effects of economic transition towards market socialism but contend that these problems are manageable and can be resolved through greater liberalization and decentralization. The more cautious reformers, however, including Deng Xiaoping, have deemed it necessary to hold back on decentralization plans and to resist any attempts to further loosen Party control in the cultural and political spheres. Those against rapid and "radical" reforms have argued that economic reforms have engendered corruption, the moral degeneration of the Party and Army, ideological erosion in the Party, the nurturing of decadent lifestyles, increased crimes, growing international dependency and the revival of feudal culture. Given this perspective, the democratization movement is regarded by those against further reforms as another indicator of the instability and turmoil the reforms have generated.

Within the Party, discussions about democracy especially during the late 70s had ranged from extolling the virtues of democratic elections to the desirability of a multi-party system. There were calls for a Chinese declaration of human rights, direct elections to the National People's Congress and even elections to the bureaucracy. (See Goodman, p. 298) The relatively open debate on democracy was brought to an end in March 1979 by Deng's speech on "The Four Cardinal Principles". His speech, delivered on the eve of the commemoration of the Tiananmen Incident of 1976 by students, was designed to check the democracy movement on the streets. It stressed the need for adhering to the four cardinal principles of keeping to the socialist road, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the Communist Party and Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. After 1979, discussions have been limited to "socialist democracy", that is, democracy under Party leadership.

At the 13th Party Congress in September 1987, the Party reaffirmed the need for political reforms including the separation of Party and government, the delegation of powers to lower levels (decentralization), the establishment of a professional civil service, and improvement of the socialist legal system. These reforms are clearly organizational rather than ideological and assume the supervision of the Party. It is doubtful, however, that even these reforms will be fully implemented given the continuing dissension within the Party between the radical reformers and the more conservative ones. For the leadership that belongs to the first generation of revolutionaries, Party control is primary. Political reforms are regarded as important only to the extent they will enhance the success of economic reforms. Among the leaders of Deng's generation, there is strong conviction that ballot box democracy cannot check abuses — citizens must entrust the Party in solving problems.

In this respect, whether the Party can in fact effectively stem corruption that has tainted not only the Party rank and file but also high level officials and leaders will be crucial to its credibility, moral authority and in the long run, its survival. Beyond the specific issue of corruption, however, the Party will also have to meet increasingly higher economic expectations from the people. This will not only be in the form of increased incomes and higher standards of living but also in terms of better working conditions, more workplace democracy and more government responsiveness to social needs. In the long term, one can expect more rather than less pressure from the populace to be allowed to organize themselves in order to have greater self-determination in their social and economic life.

The massive public support that students received in the major cities during the demonstrations of April and May 1989 revealed the extent to which the democratization movement had spread beyond the circle of students and intellectuals. In the citywide demonstrations of May 17 and 18 in Beijing, close to a million people participated. What was significant was that at points, the students were in fact outnumbered by workers. More important, the demonstrations provided the setting for the emergence of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation which has subsequently been banned by the Chinese government.

Members of the union were mostly production workers, service sector workers and worker intellectuals. Among the core members

were steelworkers, railway workers, aviation workers, restaurant cooks, students and lawyers. Their action was the first open attempt by workers to set up an autonomous organization outside the official All-China Federation of Trade Unions. (Trini Leung. *Echoes from Tiananmen, Hong Kong*, p. 13) Even more interesting were the reasons they cited for organizing an independent union: they were extremely critical of government corruption and the existence of a privileged elite in China. They also complained about the wide wage discrepancy between the workers and plant managers, the lack of workplace democracy, the lack of genuine workers' representation in the policy-making process, poor labor protection and working conditions and the deterioration of workers' living standards in recent years.

Until the organization was banned in the aftermath of the June 4 Incident, its leaders were insistent that they would organize their Autonomous Federation through legal and constitutional means. There was no opposition to the role of the Party. Like much of the democratization movement, the Autonomous Federation did not question Party hegemony. What it did question, however, was the Party's monopoly of power.

There are no reliable reports as to how widespread the movement for independent unions is. Having been labelled "counter-revolutionary" by the Party, it no doubt has been driven underground. Nevertheless, its fledgling attempts at organization do indicate that the democratization movement has spread to include workers and a widening swath of the urban populace.

Beyond the cities, however, there is little immediate prospect for the movement to take roots among the rural population. The information and communication gap between the city and the countryside remains wide. Moreover, peasants as a sector have benefitted more from the economic reforms than the urban sectors and will undoubtedly count among the more "conservative" elements of Chinese society today. They would wish to preserve the material benefits that they have enjoyed from the reforms and would be against public expressions of dissent or unrest that might threaten the "stability" necessary for "socialist modernization".

CONCLUSION

COMPARED TO its spontaneous beginnings in 1976, the democratization movement has in its latest manifestations shown a greater capacity for being more sustained and organized despite recent crackdowns on it. Unlike the early phase of the movement which focussed on the institutionalization of a socialist legal system as a reaction to State abuse of power during the Cultural Revolution, the second phase has given expression to more concrete demands that are rooted in the contradictions arising from economic reforms. One key issue obviously has been the issue of widespread corruption within the bureaucracy and Party which threatens to undermine its political legitimacy and authority. The issue of corruption has also underscored the increasing distance between an entrenched and privileged Party elite and the masses. Unless the Party can effectively address this issue, it will continue to be a focus of the democratization movement and will serve to broaden the movement's appeal among the people.

Beyond the issue of corruption, the economic decentralization that is constitutive of current economic reforms will generate demands for more workplace democracy. On one level, there will be greater demands for less Party supervision in management where expertise and professionalism rather than ideological commitment and Party loyalty are being emphasized. On another level, decentralization has given more power and authority to enterprise managers but has not resolved the contradictions between management and workers. In the drive for higher productivity, workers now have less job security but encounter greater pressures and stricter labor discipline. There have been complaints about the large wage differentials between manager and workers and deteriorating work conditions. While there have been some attempts by the Party towards reinvigorating trade union leadership (a much younger leadership emerged at the Tenth National Trade Union Congress in 1983), Party-led unions have generally tended to function as organs for mobilizing workers to achieve goals determined by the Party. There has been growing worker dissatisfaction with the role that has been assigned to trade unions and one can anticipate that there will be a growing desire for more independent unions.

In general, the democratization movement has incorporated demands for improving and strengthening the socialist legal system, a

decentralization of Party-State control over the economy but retaining collective ownership, a greater role for mass organizations and more genuine representation in these organizations and in the bureaucracy. Up to this point, there has been no questioning of Party hegemony but at the same time there are expectations that other power centers will be allowed to emerge to counterbalance the excessive concentration of State power within the Party and the bureaucracy.

The democratization movement cannot be checked without a total reversal of the current economic reforms and a return to a highly centralized and planned economy. The reforms have provided the conditions for the emergence and spread of the movement in the urban centers. Its expansion to the countryside will be contingent on the increase in rural-urban exchange and interaction in the future.

The nature and objectives of the movement will determine the extent to which it will promote genuine socialism in China. This will also be dependent on how the Party will react or respond to the movement's demands. Recent developments in Eastern Europe seem to indicate that attempts to liberalize that are too little or too late could in the long run generate pressures for reform that would seriously undermine the bases for socialism, including the survival of the Party. Clearly, in the light of China's historical experience, change in ownership and economic planning were necessary but not sufficient conditions for the transition to socialism. Equally important is the process by which the forms of State or collective ownership become invested with the substance of mastery by the direct producers. (Selden, p. 25) To the extent that the democratization movement can achieve a greater role for mass organizations, more genuine representation of grassroots interests, and greater workplace democracy, its contributions to the development of socialist democracy can only be positive. A central issue in the struggle for more democracy is the overwhelming power of the State and the question of how to realize a socialist vision that involves the initiative and active participation in social change of the entire working population.

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