

# Could China Be the Next Wave?

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China accounts for roughly 60 percent of the world population living under authoritarian rule. If authoritarian rule were to end in that country, the number of people brought under democratic rule would equal the number who began to experience democracy during the entire “third wave” of the late twentieth century, when authoritarian regimes in much of the communist and developing world collapsed.

Yet, in part because of China’s size, many are pessimistic about its democratic prospects. Also contributing to the pessimism is that, according to the Chinese economic historian Qin Hui, China has been booming economically since the early 1920s—albeit with several serious setbacks along the way—and yet has not become democratic despite popular democratic movements in 1938, 1956, and most recently 1989.

Samuel Huntington famously concluded in a 1984 article that prospects for regime change in the communist world were “virtually nil”; today’s mainstream opinion holds that China’s regime is here to stay.

An obvious response is to point out that most countries begin to see democratic pressures and changes when incomes exceed about \$10,000 per capita, and that China (with per capita income of \$7,570 in 2010, according to the World Bank) does not yet qualify as an outlier given its level of development. So it is too early to say if China will buck the trends of history.

In Asia, Singapore is the only country that has become rich without becoming democratic, while the Philippines and Indonesia became democratic before they became rich. Otherwise, democracy has come to Asia pretty much as expected, and there is no a priori reason to expect that China will be any different.

The only question we *can* answer today is whether China is experiencing the sorts of transformations that have preceded democratization in other countries. In general, three kinds of transformations—which in different countries have occurred in varying combinations and strengths—have been good predictors of democratic change.

## THE CONVERSATION SPREADS

One is a pluralization of social values and interests. This is particularly important in communist states because communist regimes with their singular ideology are, unlike standard-issue authoritarian regimes, typically quite bad at handling pluralism. By all accounts, pluralizing social change is happening rapidly in China. Aggressive new media outlets like the magazine *Caixin* and increasingly outspoken commentators like the writer Yu Jie (who has written a book mocking as “an actor” Prime Minister Wen Jiabao) reflect an astounding transfer of national discourse into the hands of society.

In the former Soviet Union, the ruling party’s loss of social control can be dated to the late 1960s, when for the first time dissidents stopped being afraid of police and detention, freely trading “three minutes of freedom for three years in prison,” as one put it. The same waning of state terror is apparent in China today.

This is feeding through into more critical views of the regime. A 2007 survey of 505 students at five leading universities in Beijing, reported in the March 2011 issue of the journal *Chinese Education and Society*, found that 74 percent like the American system of divided powers, and 56 percent like the US-style multiparty system. Only 28 percent said they like China’s political system overall: The mean response to this question hovered between the “so-so” and “somewhat dislike” categories.

Overall, a significantly greater number of these students, who have been the subject of very rigorous indoctrination by the party since 1989, say they prefer the American political system to the Chinese (according to the author, an academic

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named Chen Shengluo). This may help explain why, between 2001 and 2010, a total of 330,000 Chinese nationals emigrated to the United States, among them many of the children of the regime elite. It is clear that, seen from the bottom up, the future of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not look promising.

## NOT-SO-DIVINE RIGHT

The second transformation that facilitates democratization is a waning belief among regime elites in their god-given right to rule.

Although the CCP accommodates a democratic faction, mainstream members—including the designated future party boss, Xi Jinping—are of a generation that regards the reform-era party-state as irreplaceable. Further down the ranks, however, one sees doubts. A major party document from 2004 admitted for the first time that the CCP's ruling status "is not congenital, nor is it something settled once and for all."

Since then, experiments in power sharing with local legislatures and civil society groups have blossomed. For instance, officials in the city of Shenyang have passed laws insisting on "start-to-finish" public participation in environmental policy making, in recognition of the need for policy legitimacy in this area. Governments in the Zhejiang province city of Wenling hold annual deliberative forums where citizens prioritize spending projects.

The third transformation has to do with international incentives that threaten to bankrupt a regime—financially, morally, or diplomatically—if it does not democratize. This is probably the weakest dimension of transformation in contemporary China, which has learned to insulate itself from pressures to democratize and still thrive in the international system.

The smooth incorporation of Hong Kong into China and the slow Finlandization of Taiwan reveal a People's Republic that can thrive globally without altering its authoritarian ways. Some in Beijing now speak of an emerging "Eastphalian system" in which authoritarianism is perfectly compatible with being a member of good standing in international society.

On the other hand, this global integration has its costs, especially as norms infiltrate across national borders. Taiwan's electoral politics are more

admired than disdained in China today. Li Keqiang, China's designated future prime minister, praised Hong Kong's "open and diverse" society on a visit to the territory in August 2011. China's official views on humanitarian interventions by the international community have gradually shifted in favor of the concept. And the country's Supreme Court, in response to international pressures, is now reviewing all death penalty sentences and striking down about a third of them.

When Google in 2010 shut down its internet search engine in China rather than censor itself, there was an outpouring of support for the decision from Chinese netizens who became more acutely aware of the "Great Firewall" that prevents them from viewing politically sensitive information. The more that China strains against the values of global liberal society, the more it finds itself implicated in them.

## LESSONS OF HISTORY

So on the evidence, prospects for democratization in China are mixed, but by no means dismal. All countries that are neither oil-states nor city-states have democratized when incomes have exceeded a certain level (about \$15,000 per capita). But China will not reach that level for 20 to 30 years. This means we could be debating the dynamics of political change in China for a long time. The CCP, which had a near-death experience in 1989, may well end up extending its rule for a generation or more.

The bigger question, however, is whether all the lessons of history remain relevant to this debate. Democratic change came to Egypt and Tunisia just as new books were pouring off the presses about the resilience of those countries' authoritarian regimes. Perhaps new forces are at play that challenge even seemingly durable regimes. In Asia, Malaysia now appears poised for a democratic transition, to the surprise of many experts on the country.

Apparently, whatever the "alignment of forces," the ideal of democracy continues to hold great sway around the world. People fed up with the indignity of being treated as political inferiors can quickly mobilize and find both allies within the state and support abroad—as many Chinese did, after all, when they protested in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989.

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These liberating sentiments can appear “out of nowhere,” as Duke University’s Timur Kuran argued, especially today when information technology accelerates cascades of opinion.

### **THROUGH THE LENS**

What would democracy in China look like? Current institutions and sentiments provide some clues. Minority areas would enjoy substantial cultural and economic autonomy, though the country would remain a unitary state. A bicameral legislature would include a weak upper house, likely appointed by the lower house, which would be composed on the basis of regional representation.

As elsewhere in Asia, there would be a strong bias in favor of majoritarian electoral systems rather than the proportional systems favored in Western democracies (except the Anglophone ones). The CCP might well hold onto power in the initial

elections, just as the Kuomintang did in the 1992 and 1996 elections in Taiwan.

An administrative state composed of a strong bureaucracy led by a relatively unconstrained executive would be the favored political model. The state would continue to be a major player in the economy, and human rights would be expanded, but constrained by limited judicial review of government decisions.

A final point: No matter what the future holds, thinking about democracy provides a powerful lens through which to examine contemporary China. Maybe the pessimists are right. But in making their arguments, often with much passion, they reinforce the usefulness of the democratic lens. And the undeniable fact is that among the Chinese themselves, the debate on democracy remains a central one. Next wave or not, the ideal of democracy is inextricably linked with China’s future. ■