

Development of Democratic Processes in the People's Republic of China: Prospects of Transformation of the Political Regime⁺

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Abstract

Rapid economic growth of the PRC has brought new challenges and promoted social transformation in Chinese society. China suffers profound changes involving fundamental principles of public relations. The political regime in China is in a changeable condition, and continues to transform. Some decisions of the Chinese government affect not only the economy and public administration, but also in some ways human rights and political changes. Chinese political regime takes on the pending social problems and begins to gently lift old political bans. There is development of processes which at least by the formal features can be attributed to be democratic or quasi-democratic. However, despite a number of political changes and improving of human rights situation in last decades, China is still an illiberal state. Moreover, the level of repression in China has increased in the last few years. All of these actions raise questions about the political future of China. The scale of the socio-economic changes that have occurred in the PRC is so significant, that the maintaining of the existing governance structure is

not possible. Rapid economic growth reduced public discontent at the disregard to fundamental human rights. Yet the “economic miracle” is coming to an end, and the country desperately needs economic and political reforms. Lack of reforms or its incorrect implementation can put the existing system out of balance, which will lead to adverse effects not only in China but also in the world. Depending on the reforms we can assume several scenarios for further development of the PRC.

Keywords: *China, Taiwan, democratization, civil society, political regime*

JEL classification: *D72, D73, D74, F52*

1. Introduction

Contemporary China is one of the largest and rapidly evolving world powers. The success of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is largely caused by the policy of modernization which has been carried out by its government for the last thirty years and primarily affects the economic sphere.

The “economic miracle” of the PRC, being the result of the “four modernizations” policy, has promoted social transformation in the Chinese society. Rapid economic growth and China’s transformation into the second economic power in the world has brought new challenges. Changes in the political structure of the country affect its public life. China suffers profound changes involving fundamental principles of public relations.

The scale of the socio-economic changes that have occurred in the PRC is so significant, that the maintaining of the existing governance structure is not possible. Therefore adjustment of the governance structure happens all the time.

The modernization of the Chinese economy has not yet led to the creation of a liberal electoral democracy, which would allow at least limited political competition. Nevertheless, the political regime in China continues to evolve.

Some decisions of the Chinese government affect not only the economy and public administration, but also in some ways human rights and political changes: the family planning policy was softened, there was some liberalization of criminal legislation, the system of “correctional” labor camps was abolished. The Communist Party of China (CPC) promotes the development of so-called “inner-party democracy”. China’s government conducted experiments with voting for multicandidate party secretaries. Business people and intellectuals were recruited into the CPC; party consultation with nonparty groups was expanded, feedback mechanisms within the party were improved; Politburo’s proceedings become more transparent.

Specific elements of civil society appear as a system of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which can form a centerpiece of public authorities and become a bridge between the government and the society. The establishment of the public authorities as a new independent social institution has actualized the issue of “fifth modernization”, a reform of the political system.

Political leaders point to the special conditions of China which allows them to justify many of the provisions incompatible with Marxism, for example, recognition of private property, creation of special economic zones, and others. However, the possibility of further reforming of other spheres of public life, politics in particular, still causes a lot of controversy.

The Chinese political regime considers modernization under the leadership of the Communist Party of China and ensuring stability in society as its main task. It is assumed that the essence of political reform

should be the improvement of existing political institutions and the rejection of Western democratic models. However, the question of the effectiveness of political reforms carried out in such a manner remains open.

Meanwhile, the ideologist of China's modernization, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, recognized the necessity of political reforming. However, when speaking about the prospects of modernization in the political sphere, we should not forget that the Chinese leadership has never meant political reform as transformation based on the model of the Western democracies. The issue of the introduction of elections on a competitive basis, the principle of the separation of powers, a true multi-party system etc. were never widely discussed in China. Chinese leaders have always pointed to "the special conditions of China", meaning by this, in particular, the rejection of the Western democratic model of development.

Ever since China felt its weakness and backwardness in an encounter with the West, the idea of constructing a strong and prosperous state began to acquire new content in the social and political thought of China. On the one hand, there is growing awareness in China that without learning from the West and borrowing of technical achievements, as well as political institutions and ideas it is impossible to overcome backwardness. On the other hand, many of the Chinese ideologists and political figures have sought learning of the Western experience to preserve their national identity without losing those traditions that, in their opinion, were the essence of China.

However, the political changes have not kept pace with the social and economic developments. Despite a number of positive changes, the Chinese government has intensified repressions and pressure on society. In the background there is a gradual slowing down of the Chinese economy, which can cause serious economic and financial problems and

exposes the accumulated social conflicts. It creates a dangerous situation, fraught with social explosion and mass protests.

The question of the political future of China and the possibility of its democratization is one of the most important in modern political science. Many researchers still believe that the democratization of the political regime in China is impossible. However, in the process of its development, the Chinese leadership has repeatedly destroyed the established stereotypes of Marxism, so it is possible that the country could follow the path of democratization. Thus, the question about the possibility of the political system of China to evolve towards democracy remains open. The processes taking place in China require the most attention and research, both in the interest of international security and in terms of using the experience.

The key scientific challenge of research is to study the features and patterns of the development of democratic processes in the PRC, identifying their quality parameters and the possibility/impossibility of transforming the existing format of interaction with the state.

It seems important to define the capabilities and features of civil initiative manifestation in an authoritarian state, to uncover the degree of coincidence/non-conformity of these interests, and to identify the mechanisms of leveling the contradictions.

Academic novelty of the study is connected with researching the transformation of political regime and the development of elements of a forming civil society, as well as studying and analyzing constructive and negative (inhibiting) factors for the development of dialogue in the “state-society” format. The rates, methods and results of democratization and political transformations in the PRC are specific. They are in many ways unique and very different from the usual approach of the Western democracies. They are especially important for understanding the essence of China’s social development prospects.

The purpose of this study is to consider the processes which at least by the formal features can be attributed to be democratic and to analyze the main directions of these processes in the PRC, as well as make an attempt to suggest possible scenarios of the political future of China.

2. Development of democratic processes in the PRC

Modern China is the biggest authoritarian state in the world, which has a very serious situation with censorship, where more than one billion people live in conditions of a lack of human rights.

But the political regime in China is in a changeable condition, and continues to transform. Since Deng Xiaoping launched the Chinese economic reform (“Reform and Opening up”), the era of Maoism in China was over. The political regime in the PRC has changed from totalitarian to authoritarian. The concept of communism with Chinese characteristics remained only in the rhetoric of some party leaders. In fact, China is close to implementing capitalism with Chinese characteristics (Huang, 2008). Andrew Nathan concluded that “the reforms aimed to change China from a terror-based, totalitarian dictatorship to a “mature”, administered dictatorship of the Post-Stalinist Soviet or Eastern European type” (Nathan 1985). Thus “democracy” in China would not involve elections or participation in decision-making but “the rule of law”, which was based in procedural regularity in the exercise of power.

Since the early 1980s, during economic reforms, China has launched six administrative reforms. The main aims of administrative reforms were solving the socioeconomic issues associated with rapid economic development and aligning the structure of the executive authorities and its functions with the needs of market reforms (Wang, 2010).

Virtually every Congress of the CPC acknowledged the task of reforming as the topical. Herewith there was not only the reorganization of the State Council, ministries and departments, but also the reduction of the number of their workforces (Wang, 1998). One of the goals of the reform was to limit the state intervention in the regulation of the issues that can be resolved at the level of market participants, public organizations and civil society. However, after each reduction there was an increase of the staff of the government officials, and the problem of bureaucracy costs in the management still remains relevant.

Despite the fact that the Chinese government approaches the issue of political reform very carefully, the country has come a long way during this period. Before the start of modernization of the political system it could be characterized as a totalitarian one-party regime with a high role of the party leader and an extremely important role of official state ideology, a full political and ideological monopoly of the party and the absence of any freedom in the economic sphere. The contemporary political regime in China is the new type of authoritarianism. This type of regime is often called “post-totalitarian” or “neo-authoritarian”.

The Chinese post-totalitarian authoritarian regime has preserved totalitarian institutions such as the party, secret police and state-controlled mass media, but “ideological orthodoxy has declined in favor of routinization, repression has declined, the state’s top leadership is less personalized and more secure, and the level of mass mobilization has declined substantially” (Gasiorowski, 2006: 110).

Some scholars have deemed the Chinese system a “fragmented authoritarianism” (Lieberthal, 1992: 9), a “negotiated state” or a “consultative authoritarian regime”. The current Chinese system has created space for autonomy, loopholes for bargaining, and hopes for democratization (Xia, 2006).

Although China remains authoritarian, it is nevertheless responsive to the increasingly diverse demands of the Chinese society. Andrew Mertha argued that the rules of the policy-making process are still captured by the fragmented authoritarianism framework, but that process has become increasingly pluralized: barriers to entry have been lowered, at least for certain actors such as peripheral officials, non-governmental organizations and the media (Mertha, 2009). Despite egalitarianism, which is present in the rhetoric of the party, the designation of the political regime in the PRC as “managed” or “illiberal” democracy is premature.

Despite the fact that China is still an authoritarian state with a lack of human rights, there is development of the individual elements, the formal features of which can be attributed to the democratic process in China.

According to the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, People’s Congresses of cities that are not divided into districts, counties, city districts, towns, townships, and lastly ethnic townships, are directly elected (Article 97). Additionally, village committee members and chairpersons are also directly elected (Article 111). Local People’s Congresses have the constitutional authority to recall the heads and deputy heads of government at the provincial level and below.

Starting in the 1980s, in the period of “Reform & Opening Up”, the government organized village elections in which several candidates would run. However, each candidate was chosen or approved by the CPC. Higher levels of government were indirectly elected, with candidates vetted by the government. As a result, the higher levels of government contain either Communist Party members, their United Front allies, or sympathetic independents. Opposition parties are outlawed.

The right to nominate candidates to the National People's Congress received not only political parties and public organizations that are part of the United Front but also a group, consisting of at least 10 voters, or deputies (National People's Congress, n.d.). In addition, people's congresses above the county level got the opportunity of the election of their standing committees, reinforcing their position.

Elections do not play an important role in Chinese politics today. But since the late 1990s the Chinese authorities have experimented with some electoral methods in the selection and confirmation of Party and government officials at various levels of leadership (Li, 2008). In Jiangsu and Sichuan experiments were conducted with direct election of party secretaries and members of township committees (Lai, 2004).

Despite the undemocratic nature of the system as a whole, the principle of change of power is implemented in the PRC. For officials and military officers a system of job rotation every couple of years was introduced. And most importantly, China's senior government leaders are changed regularly. This rule established by Deng Xiaoping means that in ten years the leader must resign. Deng resigned, Jiang Zemin 江澤民 and Hu Jintao 胡錦濤 also left their posts, and now leaders of the fifth generation are in the government, headed by Xi Jinping 習近平. The successor is always known in advance, but his views are not known. Note that under the democratic elections it happens the other way: it is not known who will win, but the views of the winner are known in advance. In addition, decisions are not made by one person but by all nine members of the Politburo.

It also should be noted that the lessons learned from the collapse of the USSR promote the development of the so-called "inner-party democracy" (*dangnei minzhu* 黨內民主) in China. Among the party members apathy is widespread, and "wavering ideals and beliefs, a weak

sense of purpose, and lax organization and discipline” also reportedly alarmed the leadership (Bergsten, Freeman, Lardy and Mitchell, 2009).

Inner-party democracy has been defined as greater competition within the party. The declared aim of inner-party democracy is to establish democracy first within the party, then expand it to society at large – first at the grassroots level and then at higher levels.

Elections inside the CPC are regarded by Chinese leaders as an object of efforts to increase competition. Some experts believe that the development of inner-party democracy is even more important for the long-term political reform in China than the experiments with the local authorities (Thornton, 2008). They believe that if the CPC goes for an open discussion, internal party elections of the heads and decision-making by vote, it will be a precondition to the establishment of democracy in the country as a whole.

At each level of the party, members must vote for the major decisions – including the critical area of personnel appointments – and party standing committees at all levels must deliver annual work reports. Rules governing the convening of party congresses, selection for and retirement from official posts etc. have helped to institutionalize processes in the CPC. The formerly dominant role of paramount leaders and retired elders diminished.

It should be noted that in early 2015 the CPC published a plan for “strengthening the electoral socialist democracy”. However, it is still unclear how the deliberative character would be provided in various government and public institutions, if those of them who are unwilling to change themselves were not be punished.

The co-existence of the various interests within the party promotes the development of inner-party democracy. However, this kind of democracy inside CPC is still in infancy. At this stage of its existence, in most cases this phenomenon manifests itself not in systematization, but

in inconsistency; not in higher level of legal settlement, but in the care to the scope of personal relationships; not in the presence of clear rules, but in the dominance of unwritten norms.

The essence of China's inner-party democracy is not that the decisions of the party expresses the will of the majority of its members, but that within the party there is a certain compromise of opinions, something like the system of checks and balances. However, this, in turn, inhibits implementation of political reforms: people who do not want to carry out reforms do not give in to others.

Minxin Pei argues that competitive elections within the CPC are unlikely to lead to the real deal in China, unless they topple the system outright (Pei, 2012). In his view, "inner-party democracy" cannot solve the problems of authoritarian rule.

China carries out the development of so-called "limited pluralism" or "moderate pluralism" (Gries and Rosen 2004: 237). This pluralism does not imply party competition; it is built on the principles of collaboration of the various levels of the social strata represented in the government. In order to increase the representation of this type, the ideology of political reform in China has been supplemented by the theory of the "Three Represents" (*sange daibiao* 三個代表). According to this theory, the "Three Represents" are as follows: advanced social productive forces stand for economic production; the progressive course of China's advanced culture stands for cultural development, the fundamental interests of the majority stand for political consensus. One of the main goals of the "Three Represents" is to change the CPC into a governmental and more democratic party. This opens up the Party to "the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people", as well as businessmen and managers. In 2002, the 16th National Congress of the CPC approved these ideas as guiding, and added them to the Charter of the party, along with Marxism-Leninism, the ideas of Mao Zedong 毛澤

東 and the theory of Deng Xiaoping (Zhang, 2004). Thereby, the attempt was made to solve the problem of ensuring representation in power of a new social group, the national bourgeoisie, the appearance of which was due to economic transformations. Thus, business people and intellectuals were recruited into the CPC. In 2004, the doctrine of the “Three Represents” was enshrined in the introduction of the Constitution of the PRC.

The development of “inner-party democracy” and “limited pluralism” under certain conditions can have a significant impact on the greater openness of the different aspects of public life in China and further lead to partial democratization of the PRC in the future.

On 4th December 2015, during his expert interview, Dr Wang Jenn-hwan 王振寰, Chair Professor of the Graduate Institute of Development Studies at the National Chengchi University (國立政治大學), said that development of “inner-party democracy” could be the possibility to push the democratization in the future (Dr Wang Jenn-hwan, 2015, personal communication, 4th December). In his opinion, these kinds of actions within the political establishment of China could potentially open up more space for inner-party competition, possibility of debates, etc., because inner-party democratization and inner-party competition always trigger inner-party conflict and inner-party post struggle. This is the approach we can observe in the future, and there is also a possibility of the rise of the different factions in the party. Of course, at the current stage neither “inner-party democracy” nor “limited pluralism” is really a democratic element. However, it may be a certain reserve for the future, and the development of these elements may be the first step towards greater openness of the political regime in the PRC.

It is also important to note that feedback mechanisms within the CPC were improved. In democracies through elections and through free press there is an inverse relationship between the government and its

people, and it makes the regime resistant. China has no elections, no free media, but regime responsiveness is at a good level (Korolev, 2015). It is a matter of survival of authorities: the people in China are organized well and all the great Chinese dynasties collapsed as a result of uprisings. If China were to move towards a policy of “responsive authoritarianism”, it may prove a gradual step towards a more democratic society while enhancing the CCP’s stability. Authoritarian governments can continue for a long time through the benefit of feedback mechanisms such as NGOs, petitions, complaints, and even local demonstrations. Couched in the language of regime survival, such openness may come to seem attractive to the CPC (Gilley and Diamond, 2008). However, the wall between the party and non-party is still very high. This makes it difficult for the Communist Party to implement their decisions effectively and this negatively affects its credibility. Moreover, irritation of the society caused by closed party offices and deafness to the views of the population is growing.

China has declared the future political reforms to mitigate social tensions, and new forms of relationships between Party members and non-party individuals are probably one of the attempts to liberalize social life and create conditions for political reform.

Politburo’s proceedings become more transparent. The CPC is showing efforts to make its procedures more transparent. It plans to eradicate the “informal politics” that have historically dominated inner-party life. To make Party procedures more transparent, the Chinese media now report on politburo meetings as well as discuss the division of responsibilities among its members. The official media lauded the “democratic processes” applied in the election of the Party’s new leaders at the 17th CPC Congress, where there were 8 percent more candidates than slots available.

The most significant decisions of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th National Congress of the CPC touched upon not only the economy, but also human rights. It is worthy to mention among the most significant changes the easing of the demographic policy, the gradual reduction of articles of the Criminal Code allowing for death penalty as a punishment, the elimination of the “corrective” labor camps, and the simplification of the rules for registration of non-governmental organizations. Concerned about its future, the Chinese political regime takes on the pending social problems and begins to gently lift old political bans.

It is important to note that on the eve of the congress within the Chinese party leadership there was a discussion regarding the inclusion of Mao Zedong’s ideas in the number of basic slogans of the Congress and the new version of the Charter of the Party, because some of the politicians suggested to enclose in the theory of “Chinese socialism” only three leaders – Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, and the name of Mao was not mentioned (Lousianin, 2012). Despite the fact that the mention of Mao remained and was included in the new edition the Charter of the CPC, and the fact that this discussion took place indicates the presence of certain forces within China’s leadership. These forces are configured to separate the class methodology of Mao’s from China’s current modernization, which is constructed on the convergence of socialism and capitalism.

We should also pay attention to the fact that on the eve of the 18th Party Congress an open letter calling for more transparency and more intraparty democracy swirled around the Internet. One of the letter’s authors was Chen Xiaolu 陳小魯, son of one of the most decorated marshals of the Chinese army Chen Yi 陳毅 who was also a former vice-premier and foreign minister and a trusted aide to former premier Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (Huang, 2013). Chen Xiaolu and many other Chinese

elites no longer believe the status quo is viable. Thus, some of China's establishment figures have come to believe that stability comes not from repression but from greater political and economic openness.

In addition, some figures and plans for the socio-economic development of China until 2020, which were announced at the Congress, became fundamentally new. Earlier, the Chinese leaders had planned to increase the total gross domestic product (GDP) of China, and at the 18th National Congress of CPC it was first formulated the task of doubling GDP per capita twice as part of the strategy of creating a "moderately prosperous society" (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社會). In other words, emphasis was placed on the social parameters and improving of the quality of life.

China has embarked on the gradual liberalization of its criminal legislation. In particular, the labor camps that operated in the country since 1957 are now being liquidated. The system of the labor camps created during Mao Zedong's rule made it possible to send people there without a court order for up to four years and was one of the tools to combat dissent. Until recently there were more than 300 labor camps in China (Wu, 2007), with 260,000 people serving their sentences there (*Laogai Handbook 2008*). Many of the current generation of Chinese leaders know firsthand about the camps; many of them had also passed this hard school. As part of the partial liberalization, the system of "correction through labor" has been abolished; the list of crimes for which the death penalty is the punishment is reducing; there is an activity to prevent the imposition of illegal court judgments; there is also a struggle with the methods of extracting confessions under torture, physical violence and cruel treatment

China has launched a new policy in the field of family planning: the policy of "one family – one child" has been softened. Chinese families were allowed to have two children – if one of the parents was an only

child. This has now led to a new two-child policy.

The family planning policy, known as the one-child policy in the West, was an eloquent example of how human rights are sacrificed to the public interest. In the 1970s, the Chinese leadership feared that the unpredictable growth of the population would threaten the planned economic breakthrough. The paradox is that the abolition of these restrictions was also caused by the economy: by 2050 more than a quarter of the population will consist of people over 65 years old, while the number of working-age population will be reduced to 615 million, compared to 1 billion today (Wei and Liu, 2009); that means labor shortages in the future and the possibility of provoking a crisis of the developing pension system.

In the social sector, the phasing out of the official line of “one child in one family” signifies some progress, but this is hardly enough to reverse the unfavorable demographic situation.

Changes in the political system of China inevitably stimulate the formation of various non-governmental organizations. In this regard, it is worth noting that in recent years the Chinese society has been showing signs of growth of the civic consciousness, and political reforms can stimulate social progress and the initiative of NGOs which is coming from “below”.

Economic reforms in China, which began in the late 1970s, have contributed to the rapid growth of NGOs and social organizations (*shehui zuzhi* 社會組織) in China. In 1965, the number of public organizations in China was only about 100 on the national level and about 6,000 on the regional level. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA), in 1992 there were about 154,000 registered social organizations/NGOs, 200,000 in 1996, 230,000 in 2002, 354,000 in 2006, 413,600 in 2008, 439,000 in 2010, and about half a million in 2012 (Nicholas, 2012).

A great number of Chinese NGOs operate without being registered, including some that the party suspects of being too independent or confrontational. They include everything: from self-help groups for the parents of autistic children, to outfits defending the rights of migrant workers, to house-church groups looking after the elderly. According to MCA, about 90 percent of NGOs operating in China were not officially registered (“Unleashing the NGOs”, *Beijing Review*, Vol. 48, No. 43, 2005, p. 4). This figure is estimated at 1.5-3 million.

This was due to the fact that until recently, the process of official registration of NGOs was very difficult. The so-called “dual management system” was the main barrier to registration and activities of NGOs (Shieh, 2015). NGOs are required to operate under a system of “dual management”, in which they must generally first obtain the sponsorship of a “professional supervising unit”, such as a government ministry or provincial government agency, then seek registration and approval from the Ministry of Civil Affairs in Beijing or a local civil affairs bureau, and finally, remain under the dual control of both agencies throughout their organizational life. In practice, it is not easy to obtain such sponsorship, particularly if a social organization lacks good connections in the government or is operating in sensitive sectors such as advocacy, legal aid, labor, religion and ethnic minority affairs.

At the end of 2013, the amendments to the legislation on the current process of registration of NGOs in China came into force (*NGOs in China*, 2013). The most important change was that dual-management system was abolished.

The new registration process will allow direct registration for the following four categories: industry associations, charities, organizations engaged in public services and organizations concerned with the development of science and technology. An organization meeting the criteria of the four categories will register directly with the Ministry of

Civil Affairs of the PRC without prior review and approval of other regulatory authorities and without public institutions as a co-signer. Currently, about 85 percent of registered NGOs in China come under the definition of the four indicated categories. The amendment also formulated the rules for the creation of branches of foreign NGOs or any NGO created by overseas Chinese in mainland China. Exceptions to this new optimized process regulation were provided for them.

The following types of NGOs will still be obliged to pre-register and be adopted by other regulators: NGOs involved in political activities, religious organizations, representative offices of foreign NGOs.

However, the new rules can give an additional impulse to the development and increase in the number of charities and NGOs in China, by giving opportunity to hundreds of thousands of currently unregistered Chinese non-governmental organizations to log in and start working legally in China.

Small reforms are also being carried out in other areas, but they do not lead to genuine transformation of China's social and political structure. At the end of 2012, on the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the emphasis was made on judicial reform, but until now it has not led to any significant results except administrative restructuring. The decision of the Central Committee adopted at the end of 2014 contained a promise to "strengthen institutions and work mechanisms", but as the main principle of judicial reform it was proclaimed the approval of the leadership of the Communist Party (Communique of the 4th Plenary Session 2014).

In November 2013, at the Third Plenary Session the forthcoming package of economic reforms was declared, and Xi Jinping as an "authoritarian reformer" was promoting significant economic reforms, including the expansion of free-trade zones (Xinhuanet, 2014), the

linking of mainland stock markets with the Hong Kong exchange, and the experimentation with the management and purview of state-owned enterprises (McGuire, 2015). Nevertheless, until now, many of the initiatives have not been implemented in full, and some researchers believe that, in general, this ambitious plan proved stillborn (Shambaugh, 2015). The reforms are blocked by powerful groups, because they affect the interests of the management of state-owned enterprises and local party cadres. Meanwhile, China's economy has been mired in system traps, from which it is not easy to get out.

Despite a number of conditional democratic transformations, the Chinese government has taken certain steps to restrict freedom. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the CPC has introduced greater restrictions to academic freedom: universities were ordered to steer clear of seven topics in their teaching: universal values, freedom of speech, civil society, civil rights, historical errors of the CPC, crony capitalism and judicial independence (Li, 2013).

In 2013, the Central Committee distributed an order among the members of the CPC, "Concerning the Situation in the Ideological Sphere" (關於當前意識形態領域情況的通報) also known as "Document No. 9" (Buckley, 2013). In this way, China launched a campaign against "Western values" and "Western ideas", such as "Western Constitutional Democracy", freedom of the press, and universal human rights. They pounce on bloggers who dare mock Chairman Mao. They scour the nation's classrooms and newspapers for strains of Western-inspired liberal heresies (Buckley and Jacobs, 2015). Moreover, they have taken down professors, journalists and others deemed disloyal to the Communist Party orthodoxy. The control over media was tightened.

Thus, despite the relative liberalization in a number of areas, the level of repression in China was increased. The restrictions concerned

the press, social media, the Internet, intellectuals, students and textbooks. All of these actions raise questions about the political future of China.

3. Possible Scenarios of Transformation of Political Regime in China

Despite a number of political changes and improvements of the human rights situation in China in the last few decades, China is still an illiberal state.

Under the old types of authoritarian regimes, the power of repression and propaganda makes people view the authoritarian rule as safer and more natural than freedom. New forms of dictatorship are based on manipulation of information rather than on mass violence. Modern authoritarian states use propaganda to convince the public that they are competent (Guriev and Treisman, 2015). The same situation can be traced in every authoritarian state.

Rapid economic growth of the PRC reduced public discontent at disregard to fundamental human rights. Yet the Chinese “economic miracle” is coming to an end. According to the International Monetary Fund, China’s GDP growth in 2014 was less than 7.4 percent (International Monetary Fund – World Economic Outlook Database). It is a good result which many states can only envy; but it is the lowest annual figure since 1980, and the forecasts are disappointing.

China’s economy is approaching the middle-income trap (Eichengreen, Park and Shin, 2013). The state strategy, which raised the country out of poverty, will no longer work. Nevertheless, due to political reasons, the government is not willing to change it.

Economic development is not the number one factor in the decline of democracy. The efficiency of the government is the primary problem. If the government cannot provide a safe and equal economic and

political playground then any work in promoting economic development will be useless.

We can assume several possible scenarios of development of China, depending on the way the economic and political reforms will be carried out.

The first scenario for the future of China is maintaining the status quo. Despite the fact that China is experiencing a number of significant problems, the current political model has not yet exhausted itself, and the regime clings to it. Factors such as the demographic potential, urbanization, globalization and the revolution in information technology have contributed to the rise of China. These factors will remain for a few more years, so the regime can continue to gain benefits from them.

Still, it will not last forever. The regime, which is based on the legitimacy of specific achievements, needs continuous economic growth to retain its power. The slower growth of the Chinese economy, financial instability, income inequality, inefficiency of state-owned enterprises, etc. make the current system extremely vulnerable. Possible serious economic problems could spill over into the political sector.

The combination of inactivity and serious challenges threatens to put an end to the economic takeoff of China. The lack of economic and political reforms in China could lead to a crisis (Youwei, 2015). Such an outcome would not be too desirable.

Minxin Pei raises the possibility of China collapsing chiefly due to its “governance deficit” and its regression from a “developmental” to a “predatory” state (Pei, 2006).

Taking into account the peculiarities of the Chinese society and the high potential of the society for conflict, which was historically confirmed, any forcing of the political reforms’ implementation process can put the existing system out of balance, which will lead to adverse effects not only in China but also in the world. In view of the high

degree of PRC's involvement in the global processes and considering its enormous demographic potential, problems of the PRC tends to gain a global character. Any possible social shocks in this state will not go unnoticed not only for China's nearest neighbors but also for the global community as a whole, and that is essential for global and regional stability.

In China, the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime is becoming more controversial; the potential for mass protests is growing. One side of a potential conflict wants to rely on the support of the people, as much as Mao Zedong relied on the Red Guards (*hongweibing* 紅衛兵) during the Cultural Revolution because his position in the government elite was severely undermined by economic failures.

In case of damage to the county's economy and the multiplying of political demands, the number of conflicts in the society will increase. Several "time bombs" which were laid down by the current regime, such as the demographic crisis, damage to the environment and ethnic disagreements, are fraught with an explosion that further complicate the situation. As a result, some new kind of authoritarian regime will likely emerge in China, in response to the chaos.

Economic downturns often prompt an increase in censorship and propaganda. Populism will once again serve the regime. Opponents will try to displace adherents of the already obsolete communist ideology using moderate nationalism. New nationalist (and probably military) regime will not be as peaceful as the present one, and probably will want to do the revision of boundaries and the correction of the "historical injustices". In such a great power as China, political demagoguery, appealing to the glorious past, can arouse the terrible forces of the people. And in order to please them, Beijing will have to transform its foreign policy: start looking for geopolitical enemies and punish them.

It is a worst-case scenario; the emergence and development of the crisis in China is not profitable for the CPC, neither for China's economic partners who are interested in a strong and stable China.

There is another popular development scenario for China: Singapore-style development, the so-called "Singapore on steroids" (Economy, 2014). If the campaign against corruption is deep and consistent, there may appear a new group that will be able to run the country effectively and generously. Political reforms will continue; the economic potential will be unlocked. As a result, improvement in the efficiency of the economy and progress will ensure legitimacy and authority of the renewed Communist Party.

Lee Kuan Yew 李光耀 realized that gradual democratization should continue, and it would take place one way or another. Singapore still is not a democratic country, but now its regime is much more open than at the beginning of Lee Kuan Yew's. Singapore is much less authoritarian than China; it has a multi-party system and more political freedoms. Political competition is not quite fair, but during the 2011 elections, opposition parties received about 40 percent of votes (however, it should be noted that due to the nature of the electoral system in Singapore the opposition's representation in the parliament is not sufficient; in fact the ruling People's Action Party holds 93.10 percent of the seats in parliament). Nevertheless, in order for China to become similar to Singapore, it will have to expand the political competition significantly.

In China conversations about democratization are still being clamped down on. Despite the fact that the CPC was able to achieve tremendous economic growth, currently Chinese citizens do not benefit from this as much as they could have. Recent research on elections at the local level shows that where there are elections the Chinese authorities are more concerned about the citizens and they steal less (Martinez-Bravo, Padro i Miquel, Qian and Yao, 2011). However, the Chinese

government prefers to distance itself from the policy of democratization, as to not hold elections, and corruption continues.

Xi Jinping has launched a campaign against corruption which is unprecedented in its scale. However, the roots of corruption lie in the one-party system, non-transparent economy, state-controlled media and the lack of rule of law. Corruption permeates not only the Chinese elite but also the entire Chinese society. Instead of encouraging the development of free media, human rights groups and independence of courts to expose and deter corruption, the anti-corruption campaign is carried out from the above and is characterized by secrecy, ruthlessness and political prudence.

In terms of public goods and corruption, we can understand why the super popular CPC does not want to run in elections: where the latter are conducted, more money is spent on public goods for voters; the government becomes more accountable and less corrupt.

Thus, for the implementation of the “Singaporean scenario” it is necessary at least to eliminate corruption and carry out economic and political reforms.

Some observers impressed by the growth of China and shocked by the world financial crisis have recently begun to call authoritarian-state capitalism a viable alternative to “ill-functioning” liberal democracy. These sentiments are fueled by confidence in the fact that market reforms in Eastern Europe failed. However, Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman prove that these sentiments are erroneous, and after a transitional period, the post-communist countries develop rapidly. The results of their research show that among post-communist countries a more significant growth of GDP was achieved by those who conducted reforms more radically (Shleifer and Treisman, 2014). These results can be interpreted also for China, which is experiencing increasingly serious problems.

China desperately needs basic reforms in the economic, financial and administrative areas, in order to maintain economic growth and move forward in the right direction. This has already been declared by the World Bank (Magnier, 2015) and the United States government (Davis, 2015), one of the main economic partners of China.

Integrated and radical reforms can cause another development scenario in China: gradual controlled democratization, following the Taiwanese pattern.

In the 1980s, Taiwan was ruled by a single party. It was an authoritarian rule without freedom of speech and where political prisoners were common. Today Taiwan is a multi-party democratic republic. The change was caused by the newly created middle class who had erupted as the result of the economic freedoms allowed under the authoritarian Nationalist (Kuomintang 國民黨) regime.

Taiwan offers an example of stable democracy in a Chinese context. The opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was formed in 1986, and a year later the ruling Kuomintang lifted the martial law.

The first free presidential elections took place in 1996, with the Kuomintang losing power for the first time since 1949 four years later. Changing of the ruling party has already occurred thrice as a result of free and fair elections (in 2001, 2008 and 2016). The transition of power takes place without any undue chaos or confusion.

Taiwan's impressive democratization process has had an indirect impact on mainland China. Taiwan has successfully demonstrated that democracy and Confucian values are compatible. Taiwan has shown that democracy and the Chinese culture are not necessarily incompatible. Moreover, it is proof that democracy does not have to be accompanied by chaos or economic decline.

The experience of democratic reforms in Taiwan is particularly interesting as Taiwan is one of the most developed democracies in Asia. While before the end of the 1980s Taiwan attracted the attention of policy-makers and researchers mainly as an area that gave an example of rapid economic development under an authoritarian political regime (the “economic miracle” of Taiwan).

Thus, during the last decades, Taiwan has impressed the world by a quite successful approach to the modernization and democratization of its political system. Political reforms in Taiwan have been implemented rapidly and peacefully, which has been related to the development of a multi-party system and holding free and fair elections. The experience of the Taiwanese political reforms can be applied in PRC’s possible transition to democracy.

Those in support of the position stating that Asian values and liberal Western democracy were not compatible (Fukuyama, 1995) only mean to try to legitimize their own rule and secure their claims to power. Taiwan did not abandon its original values for accelerated development, but these values were successfully connected to the concept of modernization.

This scenario could be the best both for China and for the world. Enlightened political leaders in Beijing could now work on laying the foundation for the subsequent transition. The organization of multi-party elections would be the final step.

In order for China to escape serious upheavals, this should be done gradually and comprehensively. Ensuring the independence of the courts, empowering the National People’s Congress to deal with financial issues, etc. can pave the way for a smoother transition in the future and the strengthening of civil society.

According to Zhao Suisheng, after the end of the Cold War, as other communist regimes were collapsing, Chinese leaders felt increasingly lonely and vulnerable on the world stage (Zhao, 2005). China has had a long history of problematic relations with the West, starting from the Opium Wars. China's shameful defeat by Great Britain in 1840-1842 pushed the Chinese leadership to rethink the country's position on the world stage. Since then, China has had a certain peculiar complex in relation to the West, which is expressed in constant attempts to absorb Western ideas (Marxism, capitalism) in a special way and find its own authentic version of nationalism. These attempts were expressed particularly clearly in the dispute of the Chinese "universalists" (supporters of the Western way and gradual democratization of China) with the supporters of the "Chinese exceptionalism" (supporters of the special way and the preservation of the authoritarian system).

Morton Halperin, Joseph Siegle and Michael Weinstein proved that among the group of rich countries the democratic ones grow faster, but among the poorest groups, there is no such dependency on the type of regime. In addition, they concluded that in democratic countries economic disasters happen less often (Halperin, Siegle and Weinstein, 2005). The fact that the most powerful countries are typically liberal democracies creates ideological incentives for China. External pressure has a tendency to inflame nationalism in the Chinese society and weaken the nascent liberalism. In a country as large as China, a state with a rich history, democratization should come from within. Therefore, the best thing that the West could make to contribute to the political evolution of China is to remain strong, liberal, democratic and successful.

The Chinese government has achieved great success in the economy over the past few decades. However, it has proved ineffective at reducing income inequality, fighting against corruption, and reducing

environmental damage. The wider society is not involved in the benefits of progress.

As David Lake and Mathew Baum have shown, democracies provide a higher level of public services compared to authoritarian regimes (Baum and Lake, 2001). Furthermore, countries that make the transition to democracy experience an immediate improvement. Thus, democracy has a profound effect on the daily lives and well-being of people around the world. This has been argued theoretically and supported empirically and thus represents a step forward in the democratic theory, as the causal link between democracy and growth has been tested many times without a consistent pattern emerging. There is no argument that democracy produces a socially optimal level of public services; only that democracy will produce more.

It is already possible to see the positive effects of limited democratization in China. The introduction of village elections has improved accountability and increased expenditures on public services (Martinez-Bravo, Padro i Miquel, Qian and Yao, 2011). The development of local self-government is important for the development and strengthening of democracy, and direct elections of village-level representatives are an interesting phenomenon. Elections at the grassroots level could be more important for building democracy than the elections of highest state leadership; and it is very interesting that sprouts of a civil society appear not only in the developed large cities in the east of the country but also in rural China (Babones, 2015). The civil society in China is still weak, and local elections are held under the supervision of the party, but these quasi-democratic processes can have a significant impact on the development of the political system in China.

Two aspects of the Chinese economy can help to predict that the country is on the path of democratization.

The first aspect is the growth of GDP per capita: China has already surpassed the level of GDP per capita, at which, according to sociologists, societies begin to move toward democracy. With regard to the impact of economic growth on democratization, New York University professor Adam Przeworski and his colleagues set the pattern: a stable democracy occurs at US\$13-15 thousand per capita GDP (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi, 2000).

They claim that the relationship between income and regime types is the result of the impact of higher incomes on the stability of democracies: once democratic countries (regardless of how or why they became democratic) reach a certain level of income, they are extremely unlikely to revert to dictatorship. They believe that upon achieving of this threshold, the reverse transition from democracy to authoritarian regimes becomes impossible.

China has been steadily approaching this level. Moreover, out of the 25 countries which surpass China in terms of GDP per capita and are not free or partly free, 21 countries live at the expense of their natural resources. Besides this special category of countries, all government systems become more democratic with increasing incomes (Huang, 2013).

The second structural prerequisite for the democratization of China is the almost inevitable slow down of incredible economic growth. It will accentuate the existing conflicts within the system and make corruption a heavy burden for the country.

When the economy grows, people are more indulgent to corruption. When there is no growth, the same level of corruption becomes unbearable. If China continues to maintain the political status quo, conflicts will become more acute, and the rate of capital outflow from the country, which is growing now, due to loss of confidence in the political and economic future of China, will increase even more.

If the growing uncertainty about the future among the economic elites of China is ignored, serious financial issues may occur in the country. It is unlikely that a democratic China will outride the current China in the growth of GDP, but, at least, more Chinese people will be able to feel this growth. Proceeds will go not only into the pockets of the government officials and a small group of oligarchs but will be used for the needs of the majority of the population of China, because democracy strives to achieve the maximum good for the greatest number of people.

4. Conclusion

The Chinese leadership has proclaimed a war on “Western values”, including a free press, democracy and the constitutional separation of powers. They believe that all of the above pose an insidious threat to China; yet it is a threat only to the one-party rule. Freedom and human rights are not only Western values; democracy works well not only in the West. On the other hand, the one-party rule could be a threat to China in the future.

China’s liberal-minded public intellectuals have been actively engaged in the political and scholarly discourse on the desirability and feasibility of democracy in China. Yu Keping 俞可平, director of the Center for Chinese Government Innovations at Peking University (北京大学), ex-adviser to Hu Jintao and a leading Party theoretician, states that “democracy is a good thing” (Yu, Thornton and Li, 2009), and he means that it is good for the entire human society, not just for the Americans or the Chinese. In his discussion of cultural and political developments in the era of globalization, Yu observes, “globalization not only makes people realize that they share a common fate but also helps them identify with such basic values as freedom, equality, justice, security, welfare, and dignity. Pursuit of such basic values is both the

core principle, and the ultimate goal, of cultural globalization”.

China is in dire need of further economic, financial, administrative and political reforms. Political reforms obviously will imply more transparency and partial democratization. However, the state cannot accept the basic elements of democracy without adopting them, sooner or later, as the political regime. It is impossible to conduct free local elections while having, at the same time, the central government with elements of the communist dictatorship.

The example of Taiwan, where democracy developed gradually, is very revealing. In the early 1970s, Chiang Ching-kuo 蔣經國, who was supposed to become the president in 1978, began to reform the ruling party, Kuomintang, to permit holding local elections and to include the Taiwanese population in the political process. Prior to these changes only immigrants from mainland China could occupy high posts. In addition, these changes allowed the society to control the budget of the party. Chiang Ching-kuo granted amnesty to political prisoners and significantly loosened the control of the press and public associations. The emergence of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party in 1986 became a logical consequence of the reforms of Chiang Ching-kuo. The next president, Lee Teng-hui 李登輝, successfully completed the reforms in Taiwan and turned it into a developed democratic state.

In almost 50 years, a viable and prosperous society was created in Taiwan. As a result of reforms promoting the establishment of pluralism and democracy, particularly deep and revolutionary changes have occurred. However, this process was well thought out and peaceful. Contemporary Taiwan is one of the major trading nations of the world. Political reforms carried out in Taiwan, the so-called “quiet revolution”, certainly do deserve recognition.

In Taiwan, it proved impossible to draw the line between partial and full democratization. The same may be true for China.

The advantage of democracy is not in providing universal happiness and the power of good, qualified and honest people. It does not bear full justice, equality and even the power to all the people. Nevertheless, under a democratic government the elite is wise enough to reach the agreement on a periodic change of power between different representative groups in order to keep the system as a whole; this is what gives stability.

The famous words of Winston Churchill that “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others” are often perceived as a joke. But the famous politician was not joking. Critics of democracy argue that under this form of government the society is overwhelmed with many problems. However, if democracy really takes root, it gives such a level of political stability which makes possible economic development, and the level of freedom and justice acceptable for most people. No worthy alternative to this has been found yet. Of course, the Chinese regime is now stable, but in the long term accumulated problems could come back to haunt it.

In any dictatorship (individual, collective or “people’s”) in case of any problems and crises the social unrest is directed at the elite as a whole. Today, legitimacy in China rests on the fact that it provides a high level of economic growth and improves the welfare of the population. However, history has not shown cases of perpetual growth. Eventually the growth will slow down or stop, and then the one-party elite will become the object of sharp criticism. In case of serious growth of protest moods not only the government will have to resign, but also the elite as a whole; perhaps they will have to resign in an atmosphere of chaos and violence, and so many of their real achievements will be lost.

If Xi Jinping wins in the anti-corruption war, it will be his main achievement. If China starts the much-needed economic reforms it will

make a step towards greater transparency, which in the future may be capable of leading to the democratization of China and its transformation into a legal state.

The example of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which became a historical trauma for China, shows that political reforms should take place only after economic reforms and combat corruption effectively. Examples of the collapse of numerous dictatorships demonstrate that the lack of political reforms could lead to disasters.

In view of the high level of the PRC's involvement in the global processes and considering its enormous demographic potential, the effects of a possible democratic transition in China would extend far beyond its borders. The lack of reforms in China could lead to the collapse of and serious instability in the entire Asian region. On the other hand, Chinese democratization would likely fatally undermine the authoritarian and totalitarian regimes in neighboring countries, such as North Korea, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. The fall of dictatorial regimes in the absence of legitimate and peaceful mechanisms for the transfer of power can radically change the security situation in East and Southeast Asia, and will inevitably lead to instability and conflicts. The international community should prepare for possible upcoming challenges.

The question of democratization in China is fully in the hands of the CPC. Despite the development of some quasi-democratic processes in China, since 1989 there were no truly significant political reforms adopted by the CPC. The CPC remains relying on high growth rates to maintain its rule. However, this strategy works well only in the conditions of the "economic miracle", but not in a situation where economic growth inevitably slows down. In view of the current situation and possible shocks in the future, there are only two alternatives: the CPC voluntarily begin active economic and political reforms, or they

will be forced to implement reforms under the influence of a serious system crisis. Of course, it would be much better for the Chinese political regime to change gradually and in a controlled manner, rather than through crisis and riots. The CPC could improve China's political system without having to surrender its power, and acquire the image of reformers, which will positively affect the international prestige of China, investment climate, etc. Very few authoritarian regimes get this kind of opportunity, and it could be a great chance for the CPC.

Notes

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