

Democracy in China?

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Last week China chose its new leaders in a meritocratic and authoritarian way, despite the incredible economic development it experienced in the last 30 years. Will China tend to become a democracy? My answer is yes, but the democratization process shall be slow.

Democracy would be impossible in China should the country remain a statist society. But Mao Zedong's statism was, after all, the first stage of China's capitalist revolution; it was the stage of the national revolution, which turned the country into a true nation, and it was the stage of its heavy industrialization. Later on, we saw the remarkable stage of the economic opening. Today China is a technobureaucratic-capitalist country, as any rich and middle-income country in the world. For the moment, it is a technobureaucratic rather than capitalist society, but it is rapidly changing.

No national and industrial revolution ever took place in a country in the framework of a true democracy, but once the capitalist revolution is completed in each country, its State tends necessarily to become democratic. The main exception to this rule is Singapore, but the democratic transition shall take place there in a near future. China is far from Singapore's level of development, but the modifications that have already taken place in its society and politics are being considerable and point to a liberalization of the regime.

The Communist Party is still the single party, and its power is undisputed, but this does not mean that there is a monolithic political system. There is a broad political discussion in China. As remarked by Jamil Anderlini in an excellent article in the *Financial Times* (Nov. 5, 2012), the elites inside and outside the Communist Party may be divided into “reformist” and “authoritarian” – and the former are advancing. Even the newspaper *People's Daily* – the official voice of the Communist Party – said in an editorial two weeks ago that “the society is becoming aware of its right to know and to participate, and the guarantee of civil rights advances, but democracy in China has not reached the level expected by many people”.

This debate will not end in the short term. China continues to be oriented to its own national development strategy – to a developmentalist strategy in which the State keeps control of the monopolistic and finance sectors by managing or planning their activities, and at the same time leaves to a free dynamic market the economy's competitive sector.

However, this development is creating a huge middle class that demands to be heard. Manifestations thereof are multiplying. This new middle class and even the popular classes are already being heard on the local level, but in major cities the local level loses identity, and it is necessary to think about a broader political participation.

Will the Chinese be able to achieve this transition without a major crisis? No definite assertion can be made on the subject, but the pragmatism and the search for “social harmony” (a key expression for the Chinese) which has characterized China's politics may suggest so. There is a greater goal, which is the economic development, but the political development, the social development, and even the environmental development are not being ignored and will not be ignored, because this is what society demands.