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Party Watch Annual Report 2019  
Scrambling to Achieve a Moderately Prosperous  
Society

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## About the Editor

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# The Contradictions of Xi Jinping’s Socialist Democracy

Jean-Pierre Cabestan

Deepening “socialist political democracy” has been one of the important objectives of both the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping eras. Yet, since Xi came to power in late 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has clearly given priority to strengthening its leadership on all fronts—“north, south, east, and west,” as the current CCP General Secretary once said. Under these circumstances, it is useful to first give an accurate definition of socialist democracy, then to assess the progress made in this area since 2012, before attempting to better comprehend where democracy sits in Xi’s overall rejuvenation plan of the Chinese nation.

## The Basic Features of Socialist Political Democracy

The most authoritative document defining China’s socialist democracy is the white paper “Building of Political Democracy in China,” published by the State Council Information Office on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2005. This document clearly defines the four basic pillars of “socialist political democracy”:

1. “China’s democracy is a people’s democracy under the leadership of the [CCP].”
2. “China’s democracy is a democracy in which the overwhelming majority of the people act as masters of state affairs.”
3. “China’s democracy is a democracy guaranteed by the people’s democratic dictatorship.”
4. “China’s democracy is a democracy with democratic centralism as the basic organizational principle and mode of operation.”<sup>53</sup>

Although these four principles seem contradictory to the very idea of democracy, we can try to explain the rationale behind them. First, the CCP has viewed itself as the sole legitimate ruler of the country ever since it won the Civil War and established the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Second, adopting a highly instrumental approach to politics, as the white paper further explains in detail, the CCP’s leadership “*is needed*” for guaranteeing the realization of the country’s major goals: “promoting socialist modernization and realizing great national rejuvenation”; “safeguarding China’s unification and keeping Chinese society harmonious and stable”; “making state power stable”; “uniting hundreds of millions of people to work in concerted efforts in building a beautiful future”; and “ensuring that the people are the masters of the state.”<sup>54</sup> In retrospect, Xi Jinping’s report to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress did not innovate as much as many observers have argued: rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, national unification and building a beautiful future were already among the key objectives of the CCP as well as the major pillars of

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<sup>53</sup> “Building of Political Democracy in China,” State Council Information Office, October 19, 2005, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Oct/145718.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

its regime's legitimacy in 2005. The two others mentioned here—economic modernization and political stability—are not new either, having been invoked by the CCP since the beginning of the reform era to justify its opposition to any evolution towards multiparty democracy.

Finally as the 2005 white paper reminds us, the CCP's ideology is Marxism-Leninism, a set of theories and principles that have three major political implications. First, while “people enjoying the democratic rights include[s] everyone who has not been deprived of political rights by law” (a notion borrowed from the Soviet Union), public ownership of the economy remains dominant so that “China's democracy will not be manipulated by capital.” Second, segments of the people, particularly those opposed to the one-party system, are excluded from democratic life: “criminal activities, such as sabotage of the socialist system, endangering state security and public security, infringement on citizens' rights of the person or their democratic rights, embezzlement, bribery and dereliction of duty, are penalized according to law so as to safeguard the fundamental interests of the broad masses.” Third, democratic centralism, a key Leninist principle, means that the Party has the final say, even if it is not openly mentioned here: “all the correct opinions are pooled, and decisions are made collectively so that the people's wishes and demands are realized and met.”<sup>55</sup> This principle is very close to Mao Zedong's and now Xi Jinping's mass line (群众路线).

In other words, China's socialist democracy is very similar to the one practiced by the defunct Soviet Union and people's democracy created by Stalin in Eastern Europe after WWII, or by Cuba and Vietnam today. It is based on harsh criticism of Western democracy and the failure of Sun Yat-sen's “bourgeois republic” that “included parliamentarism and a multiparty system.”<sup>56</sup>

### Socialist Democracy Can be Perfected and Deepened

However, the 2005 white paper and subsequent statements have clearly emphasized that democracy is not only, as official scholar Yu Keping once said, “a good thing,” but is also perfectible and should be gradually improved and deepened.<sup>57</sup> Yet for the CCP, each country's “path to develop democracy” is “different” and differences should be respected.

The 2005 white paper presents in great detail the major features of China's governance to demonstrate that China is a full-fledged democracy while maintaining all the characteristics of a one-party “socialist democracy”:

- It pretends that people's congresses (or local parliaments) at various levels are democratically elected though the candidates are strictly selected by the CCP and their powers are limited;
- It lends credence to the national and local Chinese people's political consultative conferences (CPPCC) at each level while, as symbols and tools of the CCP's united front

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Yu Keping (俞可平), *Democracy is a Good Thing* [民主是好东西] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2006).

policy, these conferences are constituted of CCP-co-opted local elites, including the new powerful and wealthy, and operate under the CCP leadership;

- It praises the system of autonomy put in place since the 1950s as the best way of managing ethnic minorities in spite of the multitude of problems that this policy faces, especially in Xinjiang and Tibet;
- It highlights the improvement of grassroots democracy, particularly village and urban resident committee elections though most elections are manipulated by the local CCP committees;
- It underscores the progress of citizens' economic and political rights and attempts to show that China abides by the United Nations approach to human rights;
- It tries to demonstrate that the CCP itself operates according to democratic principles and that its intraparty democracy is deepening;
- It presents both the government and the judiciary as practicing democracy in their interactions with citizens.

Both the content and the conclusions of this important document are still considered valid today. Of course, since Xi Jinping came to power, the Party's leading role has been more forcefully promoted and enhanced. As a result, Xi has deprioritized the development of intraparty democracy, which had been a priority of the Hu Jintao era, particularly after the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2007. Nonetheless, the definition of socialist political democracy as well as all the institutions and mechanisms on which it is based have remained identical.

### Progress Since 2012

It is therefore on the basis of the 2005 white paper that Hu Jintao's report to the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress<sup>58</sup> and Xi Jinping's report to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress<sup>59</sup> have spelled out the reforms that need to be introduced in order to perfect "socialist political democracy with Chinese characteristics."

As alluded to above, there are a number of differences between Hu and Xi's respective reports. First of all, "democracy" (民主) appears 70 times in the Chinese version of the former document against 61 times in the latter. While the development of intraparty democracy (党内民主) was one of Hu's major objectives (with six occurrences), Xi pays only lip-service to this reform (one occurrence). Likewise, Hu's report includes an entire section on "promoting reform of the political structure" (推进政治体制改革). In contrast, Xi does not even use this concept in his report, an expression that was coined by Deng Xiaoping in 1986 and probably resurrects too openly previous

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<sup>58</sup> Hu Jintao, "Firmly March on the Path of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive to Complete the Building of a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects," Speech before the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, November 8, 2012, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th\\_cpc\\_congress/2012-11/16/content\\_27137540.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-11/16/content_27137540.htm).

<sup>59</sup> Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," Speech before the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf).

failed attempts to open up the political system, although the difference between “structure” (体制) and “system” (制度) should not be overlooked: structural reform refers to modifications and improvement of the internal organization of the one-party system while systemic reform implies a regime change or at least an evolution towards another political system.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps more importantly, Hu gives priority to the expansion of the role of the local people’s congresses, the diversification of its membership (with fewer party officials) and the improvement of its contact with society. In contrast, Xi insists on the Party’s absolute leadership, including over supposedly elected people’s congresses.

### Priority to Consultative Democracy

A main feature common in both reports is the CCP’s willingness to expand what it calls a “system of consultative (or deliberative) democracy” (协商民主制度). To be sure, consultative democracy is not new in China. For example, the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan for National and Social Development of March 2011 already mentioned the need to “improve the public hearing and expert consultation system of public decision-making process,” a suggestion that was included in the chapter regarding the invitation to “actively and proactively respond to social concerns.”<sup>61</sup> Consequently, already under Hu, citizens handpicked by the Party were more often invited to attend local people’s congress hearings. Yet, officially introduced and adopted in November 2012 at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, this particular feature of “socialist democracy” occupies a much more prominent place today.

Here is what Hu’s report says on the matter:

*“Extensive consultations should be carried out on major issues relating to economic and social development as well as specific problems involving the people’s immediate interests through organs of state power, committees of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, political parties, people’s organizations and other channels to solicit a wide range of opinions, pool the wisdom of the people, increase consensus, and build up synergy.*

*We should conduct intensive consultations on special issues with those who work on these issues, with representatives from all sectors of society, and with relevant government authorities on the handling of proposals. We should actively carry out democratic consultation at the community level.”<sup>62</sup>*

And here is what Xi’s report indicates:

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<sup>60</sup> To be fair, political structure reform is still used by the CCP today.

<sup>61</sup> “Outline of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan for the National Economic and Social Development” [国民经济和社会发展第十二个五年规划纲要], *Xinhua*, March 17, 2011, [http://jjuban.moa.gov.cn/fwllm/jjps/201103/t20110317\\_1949003.htm](http://jjuban.moa.gov.cn/fwllm/jjps/201103/t20110317_1949003.htm).

<sup>62</sup> Hu Jintao, “Firmly March on the Path of Socialism”: “Keeping to the Socialist Path of Making Political Advance with Chinese Characteristics and Promoting Reform of the Political Structure.”

*“The essence of the people’s democracy is that the people get to discuss their own affairs. Consultative democracy is an important way of effecting Party leadership and a model and strength unique to China’s socialist democracy. We will advance extensive, multilevel, and institutionalized development of consultative democracy, and adopt a coordinated approach to promoting consultations carried out by political parties, people’s congresses, government departments, CPPCC committees, people’s organizations, communities, and social organizations. We will strengthen the institutions of consultative democracy and develop complete procedures and practices to enable the people’s broad, continuous, and intensive participation in day-to-day political activities.”*<sup>63</sup>

Interestingly, neither of the reports directly indicate the rationale behind this reform. Its main objective is very pragmatic, though: to reduce contradictions within society and between the government and society, and promote consensus, harmony, and stability.<sup>64</sup>

At first glance, Xi appears to go further than Hu. He has turned consultative democracy into the major feature of China’s democratic life and wishes to institutionalize it. As early as 2013, he sees it as an important component of the political structure reforms introduced by the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee’s Third Plenum.<sup>65</sup> And less than a year and a half later, the CCP Central Committee issued a specific and authoritative “opinion” (意见) on the issue that emphasizes the importance of developing consultative democracy both at the national and community levels—under CCP leadership, of course—in order to better tackle social conflicts and control interest networks that have emerged from the introduction of a market economy.<sup>66</sup>

As a result, consultative democracy has become a major and arguably “unique” feature of China’s socialist political democracy today.<sup>67</sup> Yet, Xi is clearly more willing than his predecessor to keep “democratic consultation” within proper boundaries; he closely associates them with the CCP’s

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<sup>63</sup> Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” [习近平:决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会], *Xinhua*, October 27, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Fang Ning (房宁), “Specificity and Uniqueness of China’s Socialist Democratic Politics” [我国社会主义民主政治的特有形式和独特优势], *People’s Daily*, November 25, 2018, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2018/1125/c1003-30419616.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Xi Jinping, “Explanatory Notes to the ‘Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Continuing Reforms,’” November 9, 2013, in *The Governance of China, Vol. I*. (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2014), 91-92.

<sup>66</sup> “CCP Central Committee Publishes ‘Opinion of Strengthening the Building of Consultative Democracy’” [中共中央印发《关于加强社会主义协商民主建设的意见》], *Xinhua*, February 9, 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-02/09/c\\_1114310670.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-02/09/c_1114310670.htm).

<sup>67</sup> Xi Jinping, “Confidence in the Political System of Chinese Socialism,” September 5, 2014, in *The Governance of China, Vol. II*. (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2018), 313; Wang Yongxiang (王永香) and Lu Weiming (陆卫明), “Deliberative Democracy is the Unique Form and Unique Advantage of Chinese Socialist Democratic Politics” [协商民主是中国社会主义民主政治的特有形式和独特优势], *Red Flag Manuscript* (红旗文稿) 2019.5, March 5, 2019, [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwg/2019-03/05/c\\_1124193748.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwg/2019-03/05/c_1124193748.htm).

united front work as well as with the Party's "mass line," and seems less ready to open this exercise to segments of society that the Party does not control.<sup>68</sup> He mainly relies on local and national elites co-opted by the CPPCC and official mass organizations.<sup>69</sup> Xi also considers consultative democracy an important contribution to the "scientification" (科学化) and democratization (民主化) of political decision making.<sup>70</sup>

Positive examples of consultative democracy building at the community level have been publicized. For example, in Beijing's Chaoyang District, local communities have introduced mechanisms with the help of the district government and party committee to conduct deliberations; for the author of the investigation into this development, the inclusive nature of local consultations and the flexibility of topic setting demonstrate that Chaoyang overpasses the Western model of deliberative politics.<sup>71</sup> More generally and more modestly, consultative democracy helps solve problems, alleviate tensions, and improve the party-state's policy-making as well as policy implementation. As He Baogang has shown in a recent case study about Guangming Village in Guangdong, even in the countryside consultative democracy has contributed to reducing what he calls "over-petitioning" and economic conflicts, particularly disputes about the village's married-out women.<sup>72</sup>

Nonetheless, problems regarding the implementation of consultative democracy abound. Firstly, contrary to what some may have expected, it is far from being standardized and institutionalized everywhere. Party experts and academics keep debating and making suggestions about it. For instance, Fan Ning, former head of the Institute of Political Science of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has insisted on the need to increase consultative democracy's transparency and accountability.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid; see also Xi Jinping, "Broad, Multilevel and Institutional Consultative Democracy," September 21, 2014, in *The Governance of China, Vol. II*. (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2018), 318-26.

<sup>69</sup> Rebekka A. Sagild and Anna L. Ahlers, "Honorary Intermediaries? The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences in Theory and Practice," *China Perspectives* 2019.2, 9-16.

<sup>70</sup> Xiong Jie (熊玠), "The Xi Jinping Era: Turning Consultative Democracy into a National Strategy" [《习近平时代》：把协商民主作为国家战略], *The Study Times* (学习时报), June 30, 2016, [http://www.ceps.gov.cn/zt/xjpsdxz/wz/201812/t20181211\\_118033.shtml](http://www.ceps.gov.cn/zt/xjpsdxz/wz/201812/t20181211_118033.shtml).

<sup>71</sup> Lang Zhangxing (郎友兴) and Zhang Pin (张品), "The New Development in the Deliberative Democracy and Chinese Practices' Overpassing of the West: The Study on Deliberative Democracy Practice of Chaoyang District in Beijing" [中国协商民主的新进展及对西方经验的超越——北京市朝阳区协商民主实践之分析], *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)* (浙江大学学报(人文社会科学版)) 3.6, 2017, <http://www.zjujournals.com/soc/CN/abstract/abstract11708.shtml>.

<sup>72</sup> He Baogang, "Deliberative citizenship and deliberative governance: a case study of one deliberative experimental in China," *Citizenship Studies* 19 (January 2018).

<sup>73</sup> Fang Ning, "Consultative Democracy is an Important Characteristic of China's Democracy" [协商民主是当代中国民主的重要特色], *Qiushi*, 25 Oct. 2018, [http://www.qstheory.cn/politics/2018-10/25/c\\_1123610204.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/politics/2018-10/25/c_1123610204.htm).

Secondly, at the countryside's grassroots level and using Anhui Province as an example, consultative democracy is limited by villagers' committees' lack of executive economic power and the hollowing out of many villages since the acceleration of China's urbanization process.<sup>74</sup> This phenomenon has been observed elsewhere. A study shows that in 2016, improving community-level consultative democracy in the countryside is complicated by the fact that villages are more and more deserted and as a result 70% of all rural associations have been set up with the help of the county government. As a solution, the author unsurprisingly recommends strengthening party leadership as local CCP branches could more effectively introduce newborn political elites like graduate students to rural areas, a policy called *daxuesheng cun guan* (大学生村官).<sup>75</sup>

In other words, it is fair to conclude that this reform is still in its infancy.

### The Building of Community-level Democracy

Under Xi, the building of community-level democracy has remained an important feature of socialist democracy. While the Party continues to be part of the picture, its relationship with grassroots communities has become less top-down and more transactional, giving more breathing space to the latter.

In the most developed part of the country, it appears that local communities have been able to assert their authority and create a new form of cooperation with local party branches and housing management companies. For example, in Shanghai's Bamboo Garden Community, residents, or their representatives, have been more often involved in community decisions regarding cultural activities, housing management and security.<sup>76</sup> Some authors go so far as to assert this as proof that local democracy is viable in a one-party state.<sup>77</sup> In any event, on political, administrative, and legal matters, the local party branch of each urban community (社区) has the final say, not the urban residents' elected representatives.

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<sup>74</sup> Liu Haijing and Liu Haitao, "Research on Mechanisms of Anhui Province Rural Basic-level Democracy Construction from Perspective of Consultative Democracy" [协商民主视角下安徽农村基层民主建设的机制研究, 南京航空航天大学学报(社会科学版)], *Journal of Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Social Sciences)* 15.1, March 2013, 14-19.

<sup>75</sup> Bai Qipeng (白启鹏) and Yan Liguang (闫立光), "A Survey and Forward Outline on Problems of Construction of Base-Level Consultative Democracy in Rural Villages: A Rational Perspective Based on the Phenomenon of Hollowing in Rural Villages," [农村基层协商民主建设的问题扫描与路径建构——基于农村“空心化”现象的理性透视], *Academic Exchange* [学术交流] (2016).

<sup>76</sup> Liu Chunrong, "Empowered Autonomy: The Politics of Community Governance Innovations in Shanghai," *Chinese Public Administration Review* (2016).

<sup>77</sup> Wang Zhengxu, Liu Jianxiong, and Dragan Pavličević, "Democratic Localism: The Case of Grassroots Self-Governance in Urban China," *Chinese Political Science Review* (March 2018), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323737065\\_Democratic\\_Localism\\_The\\_Case\\_of\\_Grassroots\\_Self-Governance\\_in\\_Urban\\_China](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323737065_Democratic_Localism_The_Case_of_Grassroots_Self-Governance_in_Urban_China).

In the countryside, the situation remains complicated ever since village elections were introduced in the late 1980s. In many villages there has been a tug-of-war between elected but weak village committees and non-elected but powerful village party branches. There is also more at stake in this conflict as village authorities have more say on the local affairs than their urban counterparts. In order to overcome this tension, some provinces such as Guangdong, Hubei, and Shandong, have introduced a new system in which the elected president of the village committee is recommended to become secretary of the party branch.<sup>78</sup> Nicknamed “*yijiantiao*” (一肩挑) or “one person shoulders all responsibilities,” this new model has been gradually adopted by other regions. For example, by 2008, in Xixia County, Henan, 95% of the villages had adopted this reform.<sup>79</sup>

After Xi came to power, this creative method of legitimizing party leadership at the grassroots level seems to have been questioned. Yet, as a 2017 *Qiushi* article noted, only 41.05% of resident committee chairpersons and 34% of village committee chairpersons are simultaneously CCP secretaries at the same level. For the author, generalizing the above-mentioned method of appointment of the party branch secretary can only enhance the Party’s legitimacy and as a result help community-level organizations both better implement local regulations, and become more transparent and accountable.<sup>80</sup>

Even under Xi, therefore, community-level democracy has not gone backwards. It has rather continued to be gradually introduced in order to better guarantee the stability of the state-society relationship and the legitimacy of the Party’s leading role.

### What Remains of Intraparty Democracy?

The development of intraparty democracy remains an objective of the CCP under Xi. Some articles refer to its significance in tackling “unhealthy phenomena” such as corruption, cronyism, and factionalism. It is also presented as having a “demonstrating and guiding effect” (示范和带动作用) on “people’s democracy.”<sup>81</sup> They claim that Xi himself has made an important theoretical contribution to intraparty democracy, promoting in particular the principle of equality among

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<sup>78</sup> Liu Yiqiang (刘义强), “Democratic Innovation: Developing Structure of Grassroots Democracy in China” [民主创新：中国基层民主发展机制的一种阐释], Institute for China Rural Studies, November 9, 2017, <http://www.ccrs.org.cn/List/Details.aspx?tid=4911>.

<sup>79</sup> Zhang Qianghua (张强华), “Reflections about the Practice of the Village Party Secretary and Village Chief ‘Shoulders all Responsibilities’” [对村支书、村主任“一肩挑”的实践与思考], *Chinese Communist Party News* (中国共产党新闻网), October 6, 2008, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/117092/8130620.html>.

<sup>80</sup> “Remarkable Achievements of Grassroots Democracy Building with Chinese characteristics since the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress” [党的十八大以来中国特色基层民主建设的显著成就党的十八大以来中国特色基层民主建设的显著成就] Party Committee of the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs (中共民政部党组), *Qiushi* 2017.11, May 31, 2017, [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-05/31/c\\_1121047632.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-05/31/c_1121047632.htm).

<sup>81</sup> Yang Weibing (杨伟宾), “On the Three Dimensions of Xi Jinping’s Thought on Intra-Party Democracy” [论习近平党内民主思想的三个维度], *Mao Zedong Thought Study* (毛泽东思想研究) 2018.1, via *Qiushi*, [http://www.qstheory.cn/lqikan/2018-01/24/c\\_1122309401.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/lqikan/2018-01/24/c_1122309401.htm).

members, as well as the need to listen and take into account all members' views. Moreover, for them, Xi wants to increase the Party's openness (开放性) to the society.<sup>82</sup>

Nonetheless, Xi clearly places much more emphasis on democratic centralism and discipline than intraparty democracy and collective leadership. He prefers to consult before appointing new leaders rather than rely on elections. The expulsion of Sun Zhengcai from the Politburo and the Party in the summer of 2017 after he was accused of manipulating top CCP leadership elections gives a good indication of Xi's limited trust in intraparty democracy. As a consequence, all the initiatives taken at the grassroots to better articulate community-level democracy into intraparty democracy have been abandoned since 2012. Such has been the case, for instance, of the so-called "Xindu model," named for a county in Sichuan where the party secretary had been directly elected by the county's adult population since 2003; this stopped after the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.<sup>83</sup> According to some studies, this practice had greatly enhanced the legitimacy of local CCP leaders.<sup>84</sup>

### Socialist Political Democracy under Xi

Under Xi, the Party's leadership has become an obsession, as if its very future was in immediate danger. While asserting more and more self-confidence, the PRC regime gives a strong impression of increasing paranoia, perceiving itself to be surrounded by dangers and enemies, and keeping a constant eye on the triggers that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this particular environment, socialist political democracy can only be developed under the close oversight of the CCP.

In his report to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi has acknowledged the new, and growing, expectations of the Chinese people:

*"Not only have their material and cultural needs grown; their demands for democracy, rule of law, fairness and justice, security, and a better environment are increasing."*

But he has remained very cautious:

*"We must uphold long-term and steadily strengthen China's socialist democracy, make active and prudent efforts to advance the reform of the political system, and improve the institutions, standards, and procedures of socialist democracy. We should ensure that people participate, in accordance with law and in various ways and forms, in the management of state, economic, cultural, and social affairs, and consolidate and enhance political stability, unity, and vitality."*

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ren Zhongping (任仲平), "Recollection and Prospect on the Creative System of the Political Building of Grassroots Democracy in Sichuan" [回顾与展望四川省基层民主政治建设的制度创新], Institute for China Rural Studies, October 11, 2016, <http://www.ccrs.org.cn/List/Details.aspx?tid=2706>.

<sup>84</sup> Ma Deyong and Hsu Szu-Chien, "The Political Consequences of Deliberative Democracy and Electoral Democracy in China: An Empirical Comparative Analysis from Four Counties," *China Review* 18.2, May 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26435646>.

Xi, of course, asks party cadres to change their mindset:

*“Officials at all levels must deepen their understanding of democracy, be democratic in their conduct, willingly accept public oversight, and perform as they should in their role as public servants.”*

But for Xi, all reforms are linked together, and political structure reform is subordinate to the country’s five-sphere integrated plan (五位一体), namely, promoting coordinated economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological advancement.

Xi has also established a close linkage between the establishment of a moderately prosperous society (小康社会) and not only “deepening reform” but also “advancing law-based governance and strengthening party self-governance.” This has been summarized in the “Four Comprehensives” or “Four-pronged Comprehensive Strategy” (四个全面), introduced in December 2014. The strategy’s objective is “to make comprehensive moves to finish building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, deepen reform, advance law-based governance, and strengthen party self-governance” (“四个全面”，即全面建成小康社会、全面深化改革、全面依法治国、全面从严治党).<sup>85</sup>

This set of priorities for 2021, when the moderately prosperous society goal is supposed to be achieved, is much more important in Xi’s eyes than improving political democracy. Though political structure reform is included in overall reform plans, for Xi, the development of “socialist democracy” has become more closely associated with the establishment of a “socialist rule of law” and progress in this area since the Third Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in 2013 (which dealt with the creation of circuit courts, the fight against local judicial protectionism, professionalization, and partial autonomization of the judiciary). For critics of the regime, it is also associated with all the political restrictions indicated above. In addition, under Xi’s governance, top-down discipline and control has clearly taken the priority over the development of intraparty democracy, transparency, and accountability.

Finally, Xi has set for the CCP and China a much more ambitious objective for 2049, which coincides with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PRC: the complete rejuvenation of the Chinese nation or “develop China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful.”

Obviously, democracy is part of the plan but Xi refers to “socialist democracy” or democracy under the Party’s leadership. More than a set of values, socialist democracy is understood by Xi as much as his predecessors as an instrument aimed at strengthening the CCP’s legitimacy and power. In other words, socialist democracy’s objective is not to weaken the Party’s leadership but to strengthen it and help it, as well as the whole country, fulfilling today the China Dream (中国梦), namely the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Yet it can be added that under Xi, socialist

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<sup>85</sup> Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society.”

democracy is more clearly overwhelmed by a general plan which appears above all to be the revival of the late Qing *fuyang* (wealth and power) nationalist dream.

More importantly perhaps for the foreseeable future, all the socialist democracy- or intraparty democracy-related proposals made in Xi's report are now part of "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想), the new dogma that is going to dominate the PRC as long as Xi remains in power. Although Xi's "Thought" does include a disposition to pursue political structure reforms, it is dominated by an ominous priority given to the absolute leadership of the Party, on the government, the military and the society as a whole.

### Conclusion

China does not have the same approach to democracy as "liberal" democracies. And under Xi Jinping, the gap between what Beijing calls socialist political democracy and liberal democracies has been widening. Yet, this article has tried to underscore the fact that the foundations of the CCP approach to "democracy" have not really changed since the beginning of the reform era, and even since 1949. True, it is now perfectible; new forms of societal consultation, particularly at the grassroots, have been explored and developed. But these innovations have been very pragmatic, and linking up with Chinese political reformers and modernizers' old penchant or bias, very instrumentalist. All the reforms described above have no other objective than to preserve and improve social and political stability, and as a result, the Party's legitimacy and survival.

In other words, the PRC feigns to practice democracy. It claims to have a multiparty system but the so-called "democratic parties" sitting in the CPPCCs operate under the leadership of the CCP, which largely finances them; it has national and local parliaments, the people's congresses, but the election of their members remains tightly controlled by the Party which uses these bodies to co-opt local elites that it can trust, and their capabilities are limited; the CPPCC network is aimed at taming as many segments of society as possible, particularly the new elites (private entrepreneurs); in other words, there are no checks and balances, apart from the anti-corruption and political controls exerted by the Party's much-feared and very opaque discipline inspection commissions.

No external force, in other words, is able to limit and restrain the CCP's power. Is this democracy? In my view, democracy does not need to be qualified (liberal, illiberal or socialist). It is first of all a set of values and behaviors, values and behaviors that are still very much missing in the PRC and will continue to be missing as long as the CCP keeps the monopoly of political power.

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