

CHINA CLAIMS IT'S THE 'LARGEST DEMOCRACY'

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Comparison of Indian Constitutional System with that of other Countries - Parliamentary & Presidential Systems of Governance

Power point:A file photo of Xi Jinping during a session of China's National People's Congress in Beijing. AP/Aijaz Rahi

As U.S. President Joe Biden on Friday hosted world leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on the second day of a democracy summit, China's government capped a week-long campaign criticising liberal democratic systems by attacking America's "democratic malaise".

China's Foreign Ministry on Friday said democracy was "a common value of humanity instead of a geostrategic tool" and the summit this week was aimed at "defending U.S. hegemony, which is out-and-out anti-democratic".

"The self-styled 'beacon of democracy,'" spokesperson Wang Wenbin said, "has evident democratic malaise and huge democratic deficits." In the lead-up to the summit, China's government and official media launched a two-pronged campaign: showcasing the strengths of China's political system while pointing out the deficiencies of democratic systems. The Chinese government, a week ahead of the summit, put out a white paper on democracy that made the rather stunning claim that one-party ruled China hosted the world's largest electoral democratic process.

"In 2016 and 2017, more than 900 million voters participated in elections to people's congresses at the township and county-levels — the world's largest direct elections," the white paper said. It did not, however, mention that the congresses, both at lower levels and at the national level, are largely rubber-stamp bodies that rarely question Communist Party policies, or that what are called "one-candidate elections", including for the post of President and Premier, are not uncommon.

Foreign models

While defending the Communist Party's governance as "democratic", the paper also warned of the dangers of countries adopting foreign political models. "Blindly copying other models of democracy is a problematic endeavour — it risks creating cultural conflict, political volatility or even social turmoil and causing great pain to its people," the paper said.

To make that case, China's official media routinely point to India's political system being "chaotic" or "inefficient" to justify why large developing countries are better off following China's authoritarian model. This week, official English-language broadcaster China Global Television Network published a commentary headlined "Women's status in China and India: Who has human rights and democracy?", authored by a foreign scholar at Beijing's Renmin University.

"Biden's summit may try to argue that India's system embodies democracy and human rights, and China's does not. But that purely verbal claim will not alter the fact that the life and real rights of a Chinese woman are far superior to those of an Indian woman," the commentary said, adding that "it is only necessary to look at the contrast in the lives of one-fifth of humanity, Chinese and Indian women, to see that China has delivered 'the people rule' on a gigantic scale and infinitely more than the entirely unreal criteria chosen by Biden."

The white paper, titled "Democracy That Works" and published by China's State Council or

Cabinet, said “CPC leadership is the fundamental guarantee” for what it called “whole-process people’s democracy”, adding that “China did not duplicate Western models of democracy, but created its own.” “The best way to evaluate whether a country’s political system is democratic and efficient,” the paper concluded, “is to observe whether the succession of its leaders is orderly and in line with the law”, a reference that left some observers perplexed, considering that Xi Jinping, in 2018, removed term limits, a key part of the system of succession that had enabled, in the past three decades, three smooth transfers of power.

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