

The gap between a single-party system and democracy

On the eve of the first annual session of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) in China, the world's largest parliamentary body, President Xi Jinping was all praise for the "one party system" model of China. He said that it prevents the "nasty competition" of multi-party democracies. By this, he meant that competing parties confine themselves to their narrow agendas pursuing the interests of certain groups, regions or classes, and thus tearing society apart. Is a single-party system capable of delivering democratic governance? Xi said the leadership of the Communist Party was not meant to do away with democracy.

There are two points to note in President Xi's comments. First, he is not repudiating the concept of democracy itself as a form of governance. He is merely asserting that one-party rule is a better way to achieve outcomes than a multi-party system. Second, he is implying that political competition (as among rival parties) is bad for democracy. This seems like a contradiction. The world over, democracies function through political parties, which play an integral role. Interestingly, the term "political party" does not find mention in either the American or Indian constitutions. Are political parties really indispensable for democracies to function? If so, what is the ideal number? One or two or many? While Xi deplores the ill effects of multi-party competition in democracies, he talks of multi-party cooperation through consultation and deliberation. Thus a single-party system need not imply complete unanimity or groupthink. Differing views are welcome so long as they are within the (single) party framework. Interestingly, these views of Xi were made in his consultation with other non-Communist parties.

Sceptics will, of course, pooh-pooh these comments. China is not a democracy by any stretch of the imagination, but a single-party dictatorship, they will say, and the NPC meeting is just a rubber-stamping ceremony. Buttressing the sceptical view is the fact that this year the NPC is expected to ratify a constitutional amendment, removing term limits for the president. Which means that Xi can potentially remain president for life, the only one to do so after founder leader Mao Zedong.

Xi also has the rare distinction that an amendment in his party's constitution has been named after him. He has certainly consolidated power in the past five years. His popularity has grown tremendously. He has put a million officials in jail for corruption. He is overseeing China's five-dimensional rebalancing of the economy (from old to new, from export to domestic, investment to consumption, polluting to green, and to more innovation-led).

China has assumed global leadership in climate change and free trade, as was evident from Xi's speech in Davos last year. The Belt and Road Initiative has great geopolitical ambition and implication. The assertion of expanding maritime power is clearly visible. The West sees it as sabre rattling. Seeing Xi's move to remove term limits, *The Economist* said China is moving from autocracy to dictatorship. Many in the West are wringing their hands, with a "how did we get China so wrong" refrain. The West believed that instead of isolating China, engaging closely with it, and bringing it into the fold of the World Trade Organization, would make China more market oriented and "democratic". Instead, these despairing commentators fear a descent into deeper authoritarianism.

So let's step back from this Western angst, and look at China's so-called "democracy". How do we define it? The best, time-tested, shortest and terse definition of democracy was given by Abraham Lincoln. Just 10 words—"government of the people, by the people, for the people"—which even a schoolchild can understand. By that definition, in the last 40 years China has lifted an astonishing 800 million people out of poverty. It has built world-class infrastructure, created jobs on a mega scale, a burgeoning middle class, dozens of its universities are now globally top-ranked, and its

health indicators are closing in on OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation And Development) standards. Has it not delivered “governance” to its people? Lee Kuan Yew used to call this Asian-style democracy. He would certainly know, since Singapore too is essentially a single-party democracy. Indeed, in the past 70 years, many countries such as Japan, Mexico and others have had the same ruling party for most of the time. Clearly, these single-party democracies were different from what we are seeing in China.

In their book *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt identify two norms that underpin democracies. They call these “mutual toleration” and “institutional forbearance”. When these wither away, we have authoritarian regimes. Strongmen who seek to undermine democracy don’t simply suspend or violate the constitution, but subvert or ignore it, and reduce the element of tolerance and forbearance.

If democracy is supposed to deliver stability, progress, good governance, improved standards of living for all, then all these can be ticked in China’s one-party system. But if democracy is fundamentally about the independence and forbearance of institutions (such as the judiciary and the press and other constitutional bodies), if it is about unrestricted freedom of speech, if it is complete decentralization of power, if it is about giving voice to the minorities, about checks and balances against the reign of brute majorities, then China’s one-party system is far from it.

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