

Statement of
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Roundtable on Village Elections in China
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Thank you for inviting me to speak about China's village elections and The Carter Center's efforts to provide advice and assistance in improving the quality of these elections since 1997. In my statement I will briefly talk about three issues:

1. The current status of China's villager committee elections;
2. The impact of direct village elections on other forms of elections in China; and
3. The Carter Center's growing involvement in China's slow but firm quest for greater choice and accountability.

The Status of China's Villager Committee Elections

Following the collapse of the people's commune, the Chinese countryside slid into anarchy, instability and chaos. The peasants first began experimenting with various forms of self-government in the early 1980s. These creative initiatives were soon seized by the central government in order to maintain social stability and raise revenue. After a tenacious battle led by a few reform-minded political leaders, the self-governing procedures were written into a law that could only be passed by China's National People's Congress on a provisional basis in 1987.

It took another decade before the Organic Law on the Villager Committees was implemented in earnest and finally revised in 1998 to include universally recognized procedures that guaranteed electoral openness, fairness and competitiveness. For the first time, all administrative villages in China, totaling about 730,000, have to conduct direct elections every three years. For the first time, local Party committees cannot openly intervene in the nomination phase, and more elected village chairs begin to challenge the Party's control in the villages. Also, more villagers complained to the officials at higher levels of government about violations of the Organic Law.

The relatively objective official and academic verdict of this enormous preliminary exercise of democracy is as follows:

1. It has provided a safety valve to hundreds of millions of Chinese peasants who are angry and confused as their life is often subject to constant exploitation and pressure;
2. It has introduced legal procedures of elections into a culture that never entertained open and free elections; and
3. It has cultivated a new value system, a much-needed sense of political ownership and rights awareness among the Chinese peasants that do not have any leverage in bargaining with the heavy-handed government.

The popularity of these elections, the penetration of rights awareness among the peasants and the urban dwellers, the loss of influence and power on the part of the officials at the township/town level, and the

fear that these elections will eventually dislodge the embattled Party apparatus from the villages have triggered a backlash so severe and ferocious that it may render these elections into a hollow and meaningless practice.

The assault seems to have come from two sectors, political and academic. While the motivation for the political attacks is easy to apprehend, the charges are lethal in the Chinese political discourse. There is a systematic and almost conspiratorial effort to label village elections as a source of evil that is

1. undermining the Party's leadership in the rural areas,
2. affecting rural stability,
3. turning the rural economy upside down, and
4. helping clan and other old forms of power and control to grow in the countryside.

Scholars' criticisms might be well intentioned but are equally detrimental. They tend to argue that village elections are government imposed, that they

to expand the nomination process and make determination of formal candidates competitive and transparent.

The anticipated boom of political experiments did not take place due to a Party circular which declared,

In the past, a few areas proposed to experiment with the direct election of township/town magistrates, and in a few isolated places, there were direct elections of township/town magistrates by all the voters. This violates the relevant articles of the Constitution and the Organic Law of Local Governments. During this round of election of township/town level people's congress deputies, the election of township/town magistrates must be conducted strictly in accordance with the stipulation of the Constitution and other laws.

Despite this, on the last day of December 2001, Buyun went ahead again with its own "direct" election of a township magistrate. One province in China introduced public elections of magistrates in 45% of its 5,000 some townships/towns by June 2002. More locales are going to use this so-called public election method to choose township/town leaders. It is said that one county in Sichuan used the same measure in picking a county magistrate. A scholar boldly predicted recently that one measure to be adopted by the Party's 16th Congress would be the direct election of Party leaders at the grassroots level. All these progresses are being made in the context of direct village elections.

Finally, no matter how democratic China is going to become and what forms of electoral system China is going to adopt, voter education, voter registration, nomination and determination of candidates, the use of secret ballot booths, the application of the proxies and rovippp4xtwe a

The Carter Center's China Village Elections Project

The Carter Center initiated the China Village Elections project in 1997 during President Carter's visit to China. After a successful pilot phase, a three-year agreement of cooperation was signed with the national Ministry of Civil Affairs in March 1999. This agreement allows the Center to work primarily in four Chinese provinces to install computers and software to collect village election data, to conduct training of election officials and elected villager committee members in any province in China, to observe village elections everywhere, to help conduct civic education, and to invite Chinese election officials to observe US elections and elections that are monitored by The Carter Center in other parts of the world. In September 2001, President Carter observed a village election in Zhouzhuang, Jiangsu and opened an international conference on village elections in Beijing attended by over 150 Chinese Peopleters Conis stion, her ofp(tiage Tj040002 Tc -060021 Tw 20.08 0(ons to conBeijsons tio,ownship)in