

Political Reform Was Never on the Agenda

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In August Premier Wen Jiabao went to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, which was approaching the celebration of its 30th anniversary, and gave a speech that, among other things, called for political reform. What exactly Wen meant by his remarks, and whether he differed significantly from General Secretary Hu Jintao, who gave an official and less enthusiastic address in Shenzhen two weeks later, have become topics of intense media speculation. Whatever distance may or may not lie between the general secretary and his premier, it is safe to assume that Wen was not crossing swords with Hu and that significant political reform—meaning reform that would challenge the Chinese Communist Party’s monopoly on power—was never on the agenda. There is, on the contrary, good evidence that the CCP is continuing on a trajectory of limited, inner-party “democracy” that it set on some time ago.

Preparations for the Fifth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee, as with similar Party gatherings in the past, had plainly been ongoing in the weeks and months before the meeting actually convened on October 15. The editorial marking the 89th anniversary of the CCP, which was carried by *People’s Daily* on July 1, clearly anticipated the main theme of the Fifth Plenum when it said, “the importance and urgency of speeding up the change in the mode of economic development have become more prominent,” and, as appropriate for a Party Day article, it stressed the importance of Party building. It did not, however, call for political reform, making only traditional calls for Party members to “respond in good time to the people’s concerns and expectations.” Such phrases are in the “serve the people” tradition of the CCP and do not indicate any intention of promoting new political reforms.¹ Similarly the Xinhua announcement of the Fifth Plenum specified that the meeting would discuss the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–2015), not political reform.²

Since late August, however, Chinese and foreign media discussed the possibility that political reform would become a major topic at the Fifth Plenum. These speculations, which turned out to be just that, were set off by a speech given by Premier Wen Jiabao while inspecting the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. Wen declared,³

Without the guarantee of the reform of the political structure, the achievements made in the reform of the economic structure will be lost and it will be impossible to realize the goal of modernization. It is necessary to protect the people’s democratic rights and interests and their legitimate rights and interests; it is necessary to most extensively mobilize and organize the people to manage state affairs and economic, social and cultural affairs according to law; it is necessary to resolve the issue of the

excessive concentration of unrestrained power, create conditions for the people to criticize and supervise the government and resolutely punish corruption; it is necessary to build a society with fairness and justice, and it is especially necessary to ensure judicial justice, pay attention to protecting and helping the easily vulnerable groups, and enable the people to live with a sense of security and to have confidence in the development of the country.

Premier Wen would return to the theme of political reform repeatedly in the following days and weeks, most notably when he spoke to the National Legal Administration Work Conference on August 27. According to Wen, “Accelerating the construction of legal government is an important part of deepening political structural reform. China’s reform is comprehensive reform, and all parts of reform must be pushed ahead in a coordinated manner. Without political structural reform, reform of the economic structure and other areas, and indeed the entire construction of modernization cannot possibly succeed. Deepening political structural reform takes guaranteeing that people are the masters of their house as its basis, and firmly develops socialist democratic politics and builds a socialist country ruled by law.”⁴

The theme of political reform came up again in Wen’s interview with Fareed Zakaria on CNN. Wen summed up his governing philosophy as “To let everyone lead a happy life with dignity. To let everyone feel safe and secure. To let the society be one with equity and justice, and to let everyone have confidence in the future.” He followed this by saying that “in spite of some resistance,” he would “act in accordance with these ideals unswervingly and advance, within the realm of my capabilities, political restructuring.” He concluded by vowing, “I will not fall in spite of a strong wind and harsh rain and I will not yield till the last day of my life.”⁵

Reactions

These expressions of support for political reform soon evoked strong responses from China’s more liberal media. *Southern Weekend* (南方周末) suggested that little had been done in the area of political reform since the 17th Party Congress in 2007, and declared that the problems facing reform today are even greater than in the 1980s: “Some new ‘left’ ideologies are using various pretexts to obstruct our reform efforts. They are even ‘urging us to stop’ or ‘forcing us to stop’ the pilot reform projects in some localities.”⁶

On September 6, *Southern Daily* followed up with a series of articles, each calling for political reform. Zhong Jian, director of Shenzhen University’s Center for the Study of Special Economic Zones [SEZs], declared, “To achieve genuine social justice, we must have modern democratic politics to safeguard it. Thus, we must accelerate the process of political structural reform and our democratic construction so that the government will take up the main responsibility of safeguarding market order and social justice.” Similarly Wan Liwen of the Development and Research Center under the Guangdong provincial government

called for making “political structural reform the core that guides other reforms.” And veteran reformer Gao Shangquan argued that Shenzhen should be a pioneer in developing social justice.

Support also came from the Central Party School. On September 13, the *Study Times* carried an article that put political reform in terms of “universal values,” stating,

China’s development has been influenced by the prevailing democratization trend in the world. Instead of being an isolated existence, socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics is an important part of the construction process of human political civilization. The splendid advancement toward democracy of more than 1.3 billion people will surely leave a new imperishable chapter in the history of human political civilization.⁷

The reason Wen Jiabao’s comments evoked such strong reactions seem evident. Veteran commentator Hu Shuli, formerly the editor of *Caijing* and now of *Caijing Guancha*, noted pointedly that the absence of political reform has stalled important economic reforms, such as those of the tax system and the prices of the factors of production. The failure to reform the political system has also meant that reforms in social structure and culture could not move forward. Perhaps more important, Hu Shuli pointed out the new sense in public opinion that China’s economic reforms have been very successful, that a “China model” (中国模式) has emerged that takes advantage of China’s “political superiority” (政治优势). The logic of this sentiment, according to Hu Shuli, is that China does not need to reform.⁸

Indeed, in recent months there has been much talk of the supposed China model. This trend has been promoted by a number of Chinese scholars, most notably Beijing University professor Pan Wei, who recently published a 630-page edited volume titled “*China Model: A New Development Model from the 60 Years of the People’s Republic*.”⁹ In it Pan argues that the China Model is analogous to the mythological kunpeng (鲲鹏), which is a gigantic fish-turned-bird in Chinese legend. According to *Global Times*, “the bird has a unique Chinese polity as its head, a unique social system as its body, and a unique economic system as its wings. In the first 30 years, it braved the wind and waves for 3,000 li, and in the second 30 years, it rose to the sky, riding on the Soviet and American tornados.”¹⁰

Liberal scholars, like Hu Shuli, worry that the notion of a “China model” implies an unwarranted degree of self-satisfaction, which undermines the belief that further reform is needed. Like Hu, Li Junru, the former vice president of the Central Party School, argue that the increasing emphasis on the China model is unrealistic and dangerous. It is dangerous because it is “blindly optimistic” and it could change the direction of reform. At a time when the old structures have not been completely changed and the new

structure has not been perfected, to say one already has a model would undermine the felt need for reform.¹¹

It is apparent that the appeal of the China model, whatever its roots in nationalistic thought might be, has gained from the economic troubles of the West since the financial crisis of 2008—and the apparent ability of the Chinese government to ride the crisis out. The sense of China as a “rising power” and the United States as a “declining power” has been palpable in the Chinese media.

Hu Jintao

Controversy over political reform and what Wen Jiabao may or may not have meant exploded when General Secretary Hu Jintao went to Shenzhen on September 6 to give a speech celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Special Economic Zone. In contrast to Wen Jiabao’s tendency to put issues in dramatic fashion, Hu Jintao tends toward anodyne bureaucratic statements. In the blandest of language, he praised the Shenzhen SEZ for “persistingly carrying out reform with great gusto, daring to embark on a venture of experimentation ahead of the rest of the country, bravely [breaking] the shackles of the traditional economic system, and taking the lead in carrying out market-oriented reform to the economic system.”¹² The general secretary did not even utter the phrase “political structural reform” (政治体制改革), settling on a blander formula of calling for strengthening “socialist political civilization” and for the “self-perfection and development of the socialist political system.” Hu called for the implementation of rule by law, including extending democratic election, democratic decision making, democratic management, and democratic supervision and protecting the four democratic rights of knowledge (知情权), participation, expression, and supervision—a formulation that comes out of the political report delivered at the 17th Party Congress in 2007.

Controversy

The apparent difference between Wen’s more dramatic phrasing and Hu’s blander endorsement immediately stimulated controversy. Veteran China watcher Willy Lam called the contrast between the Wen and Hu speeches “stark” and said the difference suggested an ideological rift between the two leaders.¹³ The normally cautious *South China Morning Post* declared that the two speeches marked “sharp divisions” between China’s leaders.¹⁴

In contrast, Wang Yukai, the oft-cited commentator from the National School of Administration, argued that the speeches of Wen and Hu encouraged the SEZ to not only continue carrying out economic but also political reforms. He hoped that if Shenzhen could raise the flag of an “administrative special zone” or even a “political special zone” then its future achievements could eclipse its accomplishments of the past 30 years.¹⁵ And Du Daozheng, the editor of the often controversial journal, *Yanhuang chunqiu*, said that he believed that Wen’s

comments did not represent “his personal view” and that “Wen Jiabao has Hu Jintao’s great support.”¹⁶

Wen Jiabao’s Outspokenness

On several occasions in the past, Wen Jiabao has expressed himself more openly and more liberally than the rest of the senior leadership. For instance, in December 2006, Wen addressed writers and artists with an ease and openness not normally seen in the Chinese media. Wen did not mention such traditional ideological tropes as the need for intellectuals to “integrate” themselves with the masses or the “social effects” of cultural works. He also rooted contemporary writing in China’s long Confucian tradition, drawing freely on quotations from the great writers of the past. Wen also stated, “In order to build our country into a modern country that stands independently among all nations of the world or to build a national image, we must not only rely on economic development and better living standards, but also rely on democracy, the legal system, spiritual civilization, national quality, and moral strength.”¹⁷

Similarly, in a long article in February 2007, Wen wrote:¹⁸

Science, democracy, legal system, freedom, and human rights are not just possessed by capitalism but are *values long pursued together by mankind* through the long process of history and the fruits of civilization that mankind has created together. It is just that the forms of practice and ways of different countries at different stages of history are not the same, and there is no uniform model; this diversity of world civilization objectively exists and cannot be changed by man’s subjective will. It is precisely the coexistence, convergence, and fusion of diverse cultures that has spurred mankind’s progress. We should recognize world cultural diversity; different cultures should not discriminate against, be hostile to, or exclude each other, but should respect and learn from each other, learn from each other’s strong points to offset their own weaknesses, and form together a harmonious and variegated human culture.

Such expressions have incurred criticism from conservatives and have not been notably successful in moving China’s political discourse in a more liberal direction, but neither have they appeared to stirred conflict with Hu Jintao. Perhaps Wen’s recent comments in Shenzhen should be read the same way, as an effort to raise important issues and to open up discourse on political reform, but not as an effort to influence a specific political meeting or to cross swords with Hu Jintao or any other senior leader.

Fifth Plenum

Media hype brought expectations that the Fifth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee would take up political reform. Agence France-Presse speculated that

political reform would be a “hot topic” at the plenum, and the *South China Morning Post* pointed to several reports in the Chinese media to suggest that the plenum would take up political reform.¹⁹ These speculations were fed by Chinese speculations. In an article published on October 13, Yu Keping, deputy director of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, speculated that the Fifth Plenum would raise the curtain on the third 30-year period in PRC history and that this new period would focus on social and political reform in addition to economic reform.²⁰ Yu’s article, however, was removed from the Xinhua website two days later.²¹

Whatever differences there may have been in emphasis between Wen Jiabao and Hu Jintao, there was little indication that the plenum was ever intending to discuss political reform. The primary subject of the plenum was the 12th Five-Year Plan, and the authoritative journal *Liaowang*, in a curtain-raising article, discussed the need for economic reform in some depth but said nothing about political reform.²² To say that political reform was not intended as a topic of discussion at the Fifth Plenum is not to say that the topic would be completely absent; there has long been a recognition that economic reform as well as the social tensions facing China require continued adjustment of the political system. But that is a very different matter than what some people were suggesting might happen. It is nevertheless possible that the atmosphere of the plenum was affected by the announcement on October 8 that Liu Xiaobo, the imprisoned author of “Charter 08,” had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, giving conservatives a chance to emphasize the dangers of political reform.

When the communiqué of the Fifth Plenum was issued on October 18, it said very little in concrete terms about political reform. It did stress that “leadership by the Party is the fundamental guarantee” for success in the 12th Five-Year Plan and that “[p]arty committees at all levels should accurately understand the trends of development, scientifically make development blueprints, diligently innovate in the pattern of development, promote the overall and balanced planning and coordination of development, and effectively boost the quality of development.” Such statements fall far short of what some observers had hoped for, but they are entirely consistent with what the CCP had been saying in the months leading up to the plenum.

Perhaps the most accurate gauge of where the CCP currently stands with regard to political reform comes in a recent speech by Li Yuanchao, head of the Organization Department, and a circular on studying the spirit of the Fifth Plenum issued by the Organization department. The circular said, “In promoting scientific development, we must put a greater emphasis on correct guidance in appointing cadres.” It went on to say, “We should deepen the reform of the cadre-related system and uphold the principle of selecting and appointing cadres on the basis of democracy, openness, competition and merit.”²³

Although this mention of political reform is extremely brief, it seems very much in line with what the Party has been trying to do in recent years. Li Yuanchao

laid this out in a speech last December that was carried in the Party's theoretical journal *Qiushi* in March. Li outlines the problems of the cadre system—the closed nature of the promotion system, the solicitation for votes (within the Party), corruption, and so forth—and goes on to call for selecting cadres through competition. This selection process, Li makes clear, should not conflict with the principle of the party managing the cadres (党管干部).²⁴

This sort of “inner-party democracy” is what the Party has been experimenting with in recent years. It has not, so far, been very successful, but the CCP seems determined to continue along this path, presumably because there is indeed a pressing need for reform and because breaking out of the “party manages the cadres” model remains unacceptable. But it is a long way from the sort of political reform that outside observers and disillusioned retired cadres hoped the Fifth Plenum would take up. That sort of far-reaching political reform was never on the agenda.

Zheng Qingyuan

Following the plenum, *People's Daily* ran prominently a highly unusual series of articles by “Zheng Qingyuan,” a pseudonym that apparently plays on the Chinese expression *zhengben qingyuan* (正本清源), meaning “rectifying the roots and clarifying the origins.” The Xinhua website later informed readers that the articles were written under the guidance of the Politburo, presumably indicating those in charge of propaganda. The third article in the series of five (so far) was particularly striking because it insisted that “the steps of the reform of the political structure of our country centering around socialist democracy and the socialist rule of law have never stopped.” It went on to state boldly that the view that “the reform of the political system is seriously lagging behind . . . does not tally with the facts.”²⁵

The tone of this article was in such contrast to Wen Jiabao's remarks in Shenzhen that there has been much speculation that it was intended to criticize the premier. Whether that is the case or not, the fact that it is widely believed has the effect of exacerbating tensions in Chinese society

Conclusion

Whatever Wen Jiabao's intention, his speech in Shenzhen resonated with those in China and abroad who hoped that political reform would be back on the government's agenda, perhaps at the Fifth Plenum in October. Perhaps ironically, the response to Wen's speech appears to have been driven by the increasingly dismal prospects for significant political reform as nationalistic voices find satisfaction with the “China model,” particularly in contrast to the economic problems of the West. This is a mood that finds little need to copy the West, particularly in political terms. In any event, it seems clear that political reform was never on the agenda of the Fifth Plenum, except in the broad sense that continued

economic reform would inevitably require political changes, so much of the media discussion that took place in the six weeks following Wen's remarks was simply disconnected from what was going on in China. Whatever Wen intended, and whatever the import of the "Zhen Qingyuan" articles, it is clear that China's leadership has outlined a trajectory of modest inner-party democracy that in no way loosens the control of the Party, and there is no reason to think that this course will change in the immediate future.

Notes

¹ Editorial, "Zhengdang shidai xianfeng yongbao shengji huoli" [Strive to be the vanguard of the age, forever preserve vigor and vitality], *Renmin ribao*, July 1, 2010, p. 1.

² Xinhua, July 22, 2010.

³ Wen Jiabao, "Zhi you jianchi gaige kaifang guojia cai you guangming qiantu" [Only by upholding reform and opening up can the country have a glorious future], Xinhua, August 22, 2010, available at <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/12505398.html>.

⁴ Wen Jiabao, "Zai quanguo yifa xingzheng gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua" [Talk at the national legal administrative conference], retrieved from <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/12772621.html>.

⁵ Interview available at

<http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/podcasts/fareedzakaria/site/2010/10/03/gps.podcast.10.03.cnn>. This interview became particularly controversial because sensitive parts were blocked in China, except by *Southern Weekend*.

⁶ Zhou Hucheng, "A New Generation of Reformers Should Come Out," *Nanfang Zhoumo*, August 24, 2010.

⁷ Hou Shaowen, "Tuijin zhengzhi tizhi gaige shi minyi suoxiang" [Promoting political structural reform is the will of the people], *Xuexi shibao*, September 13.

⁸ Hu Shuli, "Wen zongli de si 'yao' zhuzhang tigang jiling, wenhan shenyi, keshi wei zhenggai topokou, er zuizhongyaode shi jinkuai xingdongqilai" [Premier Wen outlines his proposal for the four 'musts,' which is profound and foresighted, and most important, can be mobilized quickly], *Caijing guancha*, August 28, 2010, available at <http://www.chinaelections.org/printnews.asp?newsid=185772>.

⁹ Pan Wei, ed., *China Model: A New Development Model from the 60 Years of the People's Republic* (Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Xu Donghuan, "China Model Both Fish and Fowl," *Global Times*, May 27, 2010, available at http://special.globaltimes.cn/2010-05/536162_2.html.

¹¹ Li Junru, "Cong kexue yanjiu de jiaodu, wo zhuzhang to 'Zhongguo tese'" [From the perspective of scientific research, I advocate "Chinese characteristics"], *Xuexi shibao*, December 7, 2009, available at <http://www.chinaelections.org/printnews.asp?newsid=162958>.

¹² "Hu Jintao: Zai Shenzhen jingji tequ jianli 30 zhounian qingzhu dahui shang de jianghua" [Hu Jintao: Talk at the celebratory meeting for the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Shenzhen special economic zone], available at <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1024/12649569.html>.

¹³ Willy Lam, "Greater China: Wen, Hu Speeches Hint at Ideological Rift," *Asia Times*, September 30, 2010. Available at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/LI30Ad01.html>.

¹⁴ Verna Yu, "Shenzhen Speeches Show Divide on 'Political Reform,'" *South China Morning Post*, September 7, 2010.

¹⁵ Xiong Junhui, Li Wangxian, and Wang Jue, "Hu: Tuijin zhengzhi tizhi gaige baozhang renmin dangjia zuozhu" [Hu: Political structural reform guarantees people as masters of their house], *Wen Wei Po*, September 7, 2010.

¹⁶ Hsin Tsao, "Relations between Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao: They both have Hu Yaobang's Sentiments—Du Daozheng analyzing the two speeches concerning the Shenzhen special economic zone," *Ming Pao Yuekan*, October 4, 2010, pp. 34–36.

¹⁷ Xinhua, November 28, 2006.

¹⁸ Wen Jiabao, “*Guanyu shehui zhuyi chuji jieduan de lishi renwu he woguo duiwai zhengce de jige wenti*” [A Number of Issues Regarding the historical tasks in the initial stage of socialism and China’s foreign policy], *Renmin ribao*, February 27, 2007. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Agence France-Presse, October 15, 2010; and Priscilla Jiao, “Mainland Media’s Political Reform Push Gathers Steam,” *South China Morning Post*, October 14, 2010.

²⁰ Yu Keping, “*Weilai jiang gaige shehui zhengzhi lingyu shixian shanzhen shanzhi*” [Future reforms will be in the social and political arenas and will realize good government and good governance], Xinhua wang, October 13, 2010, available at <http://www.chinaelections.org/printnews.asp?newsid=188742>.

²¹ “*Wuzhong quanhui zhaokai gedi jiaqiang weiwen*” [The Fifth Plenum opens, localities strengthen stability], *Tungfang Jihpao*, October 15, 2010.

²² “*Wuzhong quanhui redian qianzhan*” [Prospects for hot points of the Fifth Plenary Session], *Liaowang*, October 10, 2010, pp. 6–8.

²³ “*Shenru xuexi guanche shiqi jie wuzhong quanhui jingshen wei shiwu shiqi fazhan tigong jianqiang zuzhi baozhang*” [Deeply study and implement the spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee and provide a powerful organizational guarantee for the development of the 12th Five-Year Plan period], Xinhua, October 20, 2010.

²⁴ Li Yuanchao, “*Quanmian Luoshi ‘Guihua gangyao’ haobu dongyaode tuijin renshi zhidu gaige*” [Comprehensively implement the “programmatic outline” and promote unswervingly the reform of the personnel system], *Qiushi*, No. 5 [March 1, 2010], pp. 1–8.

²⁵ Zheng Qingyuan, “*Yanzhe zhengque zhengzhi fangxiang jiji wentuo tuijin zhengzhi tizhi gaige*” [Promote political structural reform actively and steadily along the correct political orientation], *Renmin ribao*, October 27, 2010, available at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2010-10/27/nw.D110000renmrb_20101027_4-01.htm.