Peaceful Evolution in China and the World Wide Web: Part I, Two Democracies?

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Peaceful Evolution in China and the World Wide Web: Part I, Two Democracies?

Posted on September 1, 2009 by Editor

Editorial by Jeffrey Barlow

1. Introduction

Clearly, there are relationships between globalism, the rise of the World Wide Web, and what we might loosely call democracy. Unfortunately, none of these relationships are really clear. Having studied both China and the World Wide Web for some years, I try to clarify those relationships here.

We might usefully begin at the question, what do we mean by democracy? Many would be surprised to hear that, in fact, Asian communists think of their systems as democratic. Many Asians, including many who are not communist, also think of the American system as only qualifiedly democratic or actually undemocratic.

The Chinese argument is a simple one. They view the role of the Communist Party in China as to focus the inchoate sentiments and hopes of the broader population and then to put into policy what that population truly wants and needs. Lacking a leading party then, there would be no democracy.

The American view of democracy thinks that a multiparty system is necessary to true democracy. In this perspective then, the Chinese system cannot be democratic.

2. The American Case Against Chinese Democracy

For most Americans, the notion of "Chinese Democracy" almost inevitably and necessarily implies opposition to the Chinese government. The underlying reasoning is, I think, quite simple: Chinese Communists are Communists first and Chinese second. The Party, in this view, represents a totalitarian monolith which speaks and acts in a united voice, guided not by the needs and desires of the people, but by "Communism."

Recently, there is another American view which holds that China is no longer capital "C" Communist, but rather that the Chinese Communist Party has simply become a corrupt elite which uses ideological appeals to hang onto power. Many are balanced rather uneasily between these two views.

The hope of many Chinese and some foreigners and certainly my own position, is that as Chinese gain a broader international perspective and China achieves the economic base which creates a larger middle class and reduces the potential costs of economic failures, then it will peacefully evolve.

But for many Americans, the notion of peaceful evolution in the Chinese system is an illusory hope. For these individuals the only realistic policy is "Regime Change"—here we capitalize the term to identify it as an external policy of outsiders rather than as an internal process.

Surely it is necessary for any reasonable person to be suspicious of the motives of many who support Regime Change in the governments of others. Regime Change in Iraq, for the Bush administration, clearly implied dragging Iraqi natural resources, especially, of course, oil, into American-dominated economic relationships.

Many interests which support Regime Change are demonstrably less concerned about democracy than about market access, control, and a stable climate for their own investments. The evidence for this is all around us, in every totalitarian regime supported by those interests from the Mid-east to Latin America. In those regimes, citizens may have less freedom than any Chinese, but their totalitarian leaders nonetheless enjoy American state and corporate support.

China has been a frustration to supporters of extreme free market capitalism because the Chinese insist on controlling foreign ownership and investment right down to the local level, but especially banking and insurance, the financial centers of market capitalism. Until China undergoes thorough Regime Change, there will be no place for the sort of predatory offshore capitalism that many global firms prefer to practice.

This distinction between peaceful evolution and "Regime Change" is, of course, sometimes very artificial. It is possible to have what we might call "Regime Change Light" by giving external support or stimulus to internal groups and processes. This is what foreign regimes, like China, often see as the sole meaning of "Peaceful Evolution," which is, in their view, a forced process amounting to external intervention in their internal affairs. We mean something quite different here, and hence do not capitalize the term when using it in our own more limited sense.

Many of us, while in general opposing the notion of imposing our views on others, can be brought into support of Regime Change Light no matter our
For those who support the peaceful evolution of foreign states, China included, uninfluenced by external self-interested forces, the issues remain complex. Obviously, all bureaucracies respond most satisfactorily when there is at least some pressure for reform, and a relatively open market for ideas which might generate peaceful and positive changes.

From this perspective then, some change or continual evolution is necessary in all states, and particularly in those in which are in some way markedly deficient by accepted international standards. Lacking such change the argument for Regime Change comes to seem more palatable, a matter of balancing potential goods against potential bads.

This makes the central question in assessing the pace of change a stark one: how much change is enough, and how fast must such changes occur? This is a daily question for many of us, and hard to assess even with regard to the policies of our own government, let alone within such very different systems as the People’s Republic of China.

However, despite its complexities, I find the “peaceful evolutionary” position much the more realistic and satisfactory one. This is because I think that “Regime Change” necessarily implies violence and chaos. In China, with its limited food resources and its huge populations, anything remotely resembling systemic chaos inevitably results in death and suffering on a scale simply unthinkable to most Westerners.

I also support peaceful evolution, because I think that changes growing out of indigenous historical and cultural roots are much more likely to prove successful and enduring than forced or externally generated “Regime Change.” Surely events in Iraq, to name only the most recent example, are a case in point.

I think it best then, that Chinese notions of democracy evolve along with their governmental practices at their own measured pace without direct foreign pressures. And there is much reason to believe that the People’s Republic of China will be highly influential in engendering such changes. But first, let me return to the Chinese case against American democracy, because I think we can learn much from it about both their system and ours.

3. The Chinese Case Against American Democracy

Many Chinese have a perspective toward the American system that we might find puzzling. To us, the very essence of democracy is a multiparty system. In practice, this means a two party system, and for the foreseeable future, one divided between Democrats and Republicans—(fair disclosure: I am a lifelong registered Republican).

This multiparty system is one which has evolved in the American system. It is not written into the constitution, and many founders saw such partisanship or “factionalism” as an evil to be feared and avoided. [6] Nonetheless, it remains in the minds of most, the critical difference between the American and the Chinese systems.

The Chinese, however, see no real difference between Republicans and Democrats. To the Chinese, the two major American parties are basically participants in a Beijing opera in which variously painted characters whirl across the stage, distracting the audience with loud noises and colorful costumes, while basic policies remain the same.

The Chinese believe that the American democracy is so corrupted by market capitalism that policy is, in fact, for sale. American citizens, they say, have clearly expressed their desires for such policies as universal health care, universal access to education, full employment, women and minorities’ rights and many other issues which the great majority of us consistently support. A true democracy, the Chinese think, surely would realize those goals, the central job of the government in the Chinese system.

American special interests, the Chinese believe, simply buy political influence via a highly corrupt process for financing elections. These interests first oppose change, but if necessary, simply shape any changes which might occur as to be less reforms than new ways to expand their own huge share of the wealth and power of the United States.

An intelligent and well-read Chinese worker, with whom I had quite a long discussion in Beijing the day after the last presidential election, had a very elaborate perspective. He believed that since the problems of the U.S. were clearly intractable, the elites had chosen to allow the election of Obama in order to discredit both minorities and reform. To him, Obama is just an especially colorful character in the ongoing opera.

We might tell my Chinese discussant that at least our system lets minority parties emerge and have a chance at becoming majority ones. He might well reply, truthfully, that the Chinese system has minority parties as well, and unlike our system, their minorities are guaranteed minimal representation in the key governmental bodies. And as an Oregonian, while arguing that point, I would be aware of an element of hypocrisy in my position—Oregon’s electoral laws, like those of most states, make it all but impossible for minority parties to emerge, the one point upon which Democrats and Republicans can be counted to agree.

The Chinese perspective on the American two party system clearly has some merit. There is considerable disillusionment with the system as shown by the increasingly high percentage of Americans who register as independents or having lost faith in the American electoral system, refuse to vote at all. [7] And reportedly, the election of Obama has stimulated the growth of right-wing militia groups that believe in the necessity of violently overthrowing an American political system gone very wrong. [8]

The Chinese would argue, or at least many have to me, that their system in fact works rather like ours in many regards; it is just that the candidates in their elections must be of the same party. In our case, the candidates, regardless of party, must represent the same interests in order to achieve the financing necessary to win election, and even if the are elected for their maverick reputation or earlier record, they soon find that in Congress, in Sam Rayburn’s immortal words, “If you want to get along, go along.” [9]

4. Conclusion

http://bcis.pacific.edu/interface/?p=3660
We must, of course, recognize many of our own views in these Chinese perspectives. What many of us might ruefully say is that such problems do exist, but Americans are making progress anyway. Certainly, Obama supporters see his election as the dawn of a hopeful new era in which real progress will be made on such of the above issues as we might recognize to be real ones.

One of the reasons, it is believed, that Obama was elected was his group’s very skillful use of the Internet. [10] Many have felt that the Internet is permitting Americans to more fully realize the promises of democracy. In the next segment of this editorial, I will argue that the Internet is also doing so for the Chinese democracy, as different as it is from the American one. This is because the two share one common element, inevitable in any politicized process that permits transitions within elite groups: factions.

See Part II

Endnotes


[3] As evidence of this see the many articles found on Google Search (Chinese Democracy NOT Guns N Roses): http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla%3Aen-US%3Aofficial&as_q=chinese+democracy+&as_epq=&as_oq=&as_eq=Guns+N+robes&num=10&lr=&as_filetype=&as_sitesearch=&as_qdr=all&as_rights=&as_occt=ar


[5] I wrote about the perils and costs of supporting internal dissidence in disequilibrated states in “Attila to Soltan: Media Savvy and Democracy” found at: http://bcis.pacific.edu/journal/2009/06/article.php?id=88


[7] I am aware that there are many reasons other than loss of faith in the system for not voting, and that claim is often a cover for sheer sloth.

[8] See, for example, The Southern Poverty Law Center at: http://www.splcenter.org/ I have had some doubts about these reports as the Left is often as willing to demonize the Right in America as vice-versa. However, I recently found in discussions with what I can only call a right wing extremist that there is indeed a nexus of agreement between the so-called “birthers” (See a birthers site at: http://www.thebirthers.org/) who argue that Obama is an usurper because not American born, and the militia movement. This individual believes that an armed uprising, led by militias, would be joined by regular military forces and overthrow the Obama regime.


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