



Village Elections in China: Procedure, Popularity and Politics

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The Chinese society has undergone a huge transformation in the period of economic reforms. Prior to the economic reforms in China, the state and society relations were largely based on collectivism. This policy started to change after the reforms, when more and more emphasis has been given on individualism in matters related to state and society relations. In over thirty years of reforms, China has observed the emergence of different social strata/groups within the society, which had never existed prior to the reforms. In 2002, according to a published research report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, it was seen that as many as up to 10 major social strata groups have come into existence in the Chinese society after the reforms. Some of these new social groups were: private entrepreneurs, owners of small and medium enterprises, clerical staff, industrial workers in private entrepreneurs, individuals practicing independent agricultural activities and so on.

It has been claimed that there are three different systems that co-exist in the modern day Chinese society – one is socialist China, second is third-world China, and the third system can be more seen as the newly-industrializing China. Under the system of socialist China, there are state owned industries and individuals who are working for them. Under the system of third-world China, there are vast rural exteriors more specifically the western areas of China that have not benefitted much from the Chinese economic reforms. While the third system of the newly-industrializing Chinese society, includes the emerging private business and entrepreneurs. This unique structure of the Chinese society has led to many scholars coming forward with their various theories. Some scholars believe that in the near future, the newly emerging entrepreneurs and business class will take over the socialist nature of the government, while others share the view that the socialist state will always be prevalent and will continue to control the other parts and groups of the society.

Individuals across China in the reform period have more say in matters related to Chinese state and politics, and thus the Chinese Government also wants to take only those steps which would appease the larger set of the population. As a result, in order to appease the larger set of the rural population of China, National People's Congress passed the Organic Law and Village Committee, which would ultimately allow a democratic form of voting to be done in order to elect officials at the village level. The Organic Law of Village Committees sets the rules and regulations under which the Chinese villagers may govern their villages as well as terms and conditions on how to carry out the village elections. After a trial implementation in 1987, the Organic Law of Village Committees was fully adopted in 1998 by the National People's Congress of China. It is understood that four major reasons pushed the Chinese Government to initiate elections at the village level. One of the reasons was to curb and limit the corrupt actives within the county government. The second reason was to attract the interest of bright and rural individuals into village politics. Furthermore, the third reason emphasised

better implementation of the state policies at the village level. The last and most important factor was to show the international societies that some form of democratic system of elections does take place in socialist China.

According to the Organic Law and Village Committee, village elections should be conducted once in every three years. However, there is no standardization of election dates across all the villages in the different provinces of China. As a result, it may take between six to even 12 months before the election formalities are completed in a certain province. The rules of the village elections also stress on the idea that there should ideally be two or maybe even more candidates fighting for a single post. Moreover, secret balloting should be initiated, counting of the votes should be done in open, and a candidate will only be declared a winner if he/she holds 50 percent of the majority votes in the village elections. Although the village elections set of rules and law had been initiated in 1987, but it took considerable amount of time to standardize this process of elections across all the villages throughout China. Prior to 1998, there were many instances when only five candidates were nominated to contest for the five available seats, or the practice of closed voting did not take place, which in turn resulted in the manipulation of the votes but also led to conflict between government officials and villagers. Moreover, there were also instances when only one member of the family was proxy voting for his/her entire family in different villages across China. However, after 1998, the process of voting has become more organized. After 1998, the situation now is that firstly Ministry of Civil Affairs controls the entire voting process at the village level from the top, and then the necessary voting information is passed onto the provincial government. The provincial government then passes the relevant voting related information to the township government, who finally passes it to the county government, giving them the go ahead to kick-start the process of elections in their respective villages.

In terms of the functioning of the village voting process, it all starts with a notice reaching the township government from the Ministry of Civil Affairs that voting for certain villages will have to be conducted within a certain time frame. This letter is then passed on to the respective villages by the township government. Then after some time, members from the Ministry of Civil Affairs reach the villages in order to have a mass campaign to highlight the benefits of voting, and why each and every individual should be part of the village voting process. Once this is done, the villagers are then called, and in the presence of the Ministry officials, the villagers are to come up with names of those individuals who will be part of the election committee of the village. It will be the responsibility of this election committee to successfully carry out the entire process of elections through the guidance and backup provided by the ministry officials.

Before the final village elections take place, village election committee has the task to carry out primary elections where the villagers are asked to nominate their candidates for the post of Village Chairman, Village Vice-Chairman and for the five members that will also be part of the village committee. For these posts, usually 10 candidates are nominated by the villagers and the election committee. The other organizations like women's league or China's youth league nominate their set of candidates for the available posts at the village level elections. As a result, sometimes even 20 to 25 candidates are competing with each other for the seven available seats.

Even when the list of nominated candidates is finalized, villagers have the right to raise their objections towards the candidature of nominees. After this process, the election committee usually does a background check of the candidate in order to verify if the candidate has a criminal record or not, if the candidate is registered at the same village or not, and if the candidate is mentally capable to handle the village post. These are some of the ways through which the election committee verify background of the candidate whose candidature is challenged. Once the research is conducted, the election committee takes the final call on either to debar or accept the application of the candidate.

Once the final elections are completed, voting is to be done secretly, and counting is to be done within 30 days of the date of the elections. In terms of campaigning, candidates are not allowed to campaign a day before the actual elections. Furthermore, a village voter in China also has a special privilege where he/she can consider/elect a new candidate for any of the village posts, even when the election process has already been initiated. If this is the case, then another ballot box of the new candidate is brought forward, whose votes will also be counted in the final counting.

Some of the complexities associated with the Chinese village elections process are: candidates bribing villagers either through cash or kind in order to receive their votes in exchange. In many instances candidates that are part of the township government are also nominated and then further elected as the chairman of certain villages, and sometimes the situation is such that village committees are sandwiched between the endless expectations and pressure of the central government, and as a result they fail to deliver positive results. In the end, one may still refer back to the question which many scholars were raising that if this democratic structure of village level voting is likely to threaten the central authority and socialist nature of the Chinese Government.

During the discussion, many suggestions were put forward by the participants to the speaker, in order to improve his existing research paper. Some of the important suggestions are listed below. Instead of just focussing on two case studies, more could have been consulted in order to add more purpose to the research paper. In addition to this, what role media is playing in the village election process can also be looked into in some minor detail. Furthermore, another question worth exploring could be if election committees are given any incentives which ultimately encourage them to be part of the village election process.

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