



Carter Center Delegation Report: Village Elections in China

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Executive Summary:

At China's invitation, The Carter Center sent a seven-person, international team led by Dr. Robert Pastor, a Carter Center Fellow and expert on elections, to observe the village electoral process in Fujian and Hebei provinces. The delegation also held discussions with officials in Beijing on election issues and on future areas of cooperation between The Carter Center and China. The delegation concluded that the village elections are a serious and positive development in empowering China's 900 million villagers, even though many parts of the country might not have fully implemented the election rules yet.

Despite problems, the village elections are important, first, because the election law mandates the basic norms of a democratic process - secret ballot, direct election, multiple candidates, public count, 3-year fixed term - and the Ministry of Civil Affairs is trying hard to implement these norms throughout the country. Second, as each village repeats the process, China widens and deepens its technical capacity to hold elections. Third, the government is open to exchanging views as to the best way to implement the election rules, and the delegation offered 14 specific suggestions on ways to improve the process, including by standardizing the rules and employing a county- or province-wide civic education program.

I. Introduction:

At the invitation of China's Intercontinental Communication Center and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, The Carter Center sent a seven-person, international team led by Dr. Robert Pastor, a Carter Center Fellow and expert on elections, to observe all the stages of the village electoral process in Fujian and Hebei provinces. The team also held discussions with officials in Beijing on election issues and on possible future areas of cooperation between The Carter Center and China.

Included in the delegation were the following election experts and China specialists: Dr. Robert Pastor, a Fellow at The Carter Center and Professor of Political Science at Emory University; Dr. Mary Brown Bullock, President of Agnes Scott College in Atlanta; Dr. David Carroll, Associate Director of the Latin American Program at The Carter Center; Mr. Ian McKinnon, President of Pacific Issues Partners, a public affairs and survey research firm in British Columbia, Canada; Dr. Qingshan Tan, Associate Professor of Political Science at Cleveland State University; and Dr. Anne Thurston, an independent scholar of China. Our delegation also benefitted from the experience and knowledge of Dr. Allen Choate, Director of Program Development for the Asia Foundation, who joined our delegation in Fujian, but was unable to return with us to Beijing (see Appendix A).

The main purpose of our mission was to observe and assess village elections and to offer ideas to the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) on ways the process could be improved. We have appreciated the Ministry's support and cooperation. Several of us have observed other village elections or interviewed village officials in China - Thurston in Jilin and Anhui provinces in January 1995 and in Sichuan and Shanxi provinces in November 1995; Pastor in Zouping County, Shandong Province in July 1995; and Choate in Gansu Province in March 1995 and in interviews in many villages. On this mission, half of the delegation monitored four villages in Hebei Province, and the other half saw the complete electoral process - through nomination, vote, and counting - in two villages in Fujian. We also have been briefed or have interviewed others who have visited village elections.

In a country of about 1 million villages, one should be cautious before generalizing from the small number of cases that we observed. Nevertheless, we have studied every stage of the process in these villages, and based on our studies and what we have heard and learned, we conclude that China's village elections are a significant and positive development in empowering China's 900 million farmers. In those villages which we saw and heard about, the basic norms of a democratic election have been conveyed and are being implemented, albeit with considerable variation among villages and provinces. MOCA, which is responsible for conducting elections, had made real progress in a relatively short time. We suggest that MOCA officials should consider concentrating on two tasks in the next stage: (a) ensuring a higher degree of standardization within counties and perhaps within provinces, and (b) lifting the levels of electoral expertise for all villages to that of the best villages that we saw.

II. The Carter Center and China:

After a visit in July 1996 to speak with officials from the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) in Beijing and to interview village leaders in Zouping County, Shandong province, Dr. Pastor received an invitation from Mr. Wang Zhenyao, the Director of Basic-Level Governance in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, to organize a delegation "to assess the electoral process and to advise us on ways it could be improved." The letter assured that the delegation would "have complete and unrestricted access to all stages of the electoral process."

Chinese government officials said they appreciated Jimmy Carter's role in normalizing relations with China and his initiative in the past decade to help train special education teachers and to assist in bringing modern prosthetics technology to China. Most important, MOCA officials knew of The Carter Center's expertise in monitoring and mediating 17 electoral processes in 11 countries in the Americas and the Middle East.

In our experience monitoring other elections, we often hear that each country feels its experience is unique and of no relevance to others, but we have found that the patterns that connect each case are often more compelling than the differences. Elections are not synonymous with democracy, but democracy is not possible without them. Successful elections can provide a framework for peaceful, stable political change; flawed elections can provoke instability. While most people focus on the political dimension of elections and campaigns, the technical dimension is at least as important. Conducting an election is a very complicated administrative exercise that is very difficult for a poor, developing country to do without considerable practice, assistance, and experience. This technical dimension is most relevant for the case of China.

In a country as vast and populous as China, the process of teaching villagers how to conduct a legitimate election is exceedingly difficult. Nonetheless, China's 1982 Constitution (Art. 111) mandates direct elections for village leaders, and on November 24, 1987, the National People's Congress passed the "Organic Law on Village Committees of the People's Republic of China (for trial implementation) that establishes the framework for

conducting direct elections by secret ballot with multiple candidates for the Village Committee.

Evaluating an electoral process is not as difficult as conducting an election, but it does require a systematic approach. The Carter Center relies on a survey form (see Appendix B) that permits us to draw some generalizations from the various polling sites visited. The survey form's questions divide the electoral process by several stages: registration, nomination (first and second stage), campaigning, the vote, the count, and the election machinery. The following observations are based on our analysis of each of the stages of the electoral process.

III. Fujian and Hebei: Similarities and Differences

In the late 1970s, the communal system in the countryside broke down, and farmers began to produce for their families in what would become known as the "household responsibility system." As production was decentralized, the administrative system in the villages broke down. In the 1980s, the government established Village Committees and decided to permit direct elections to fill the positions.

The Village Committee includes three to seven members headed by a Chair. All the members are elected to a three-year term. The Committee manages the village's finances and, in some cases, its enterprises and organizes projects to develop the infrastructure - bridges, roads, irrigation. The Committee reports to the Representative Assembly, which is composed of 25-50 people from the village, selected by village small groups. Village elections are administered by an Election Leadership Committee selected by the Village Committees and Representative Assemblies. Villages generally range in size from 1,000 to 2,500 people.

After meetings on March 6-7 with numerous officials in Beijing, The Carter Center delegation went to Gutian County, Fujian. Thurston, Carroll, McKinnon, and Choate remained in Fujian until March 13. On March 10, two members of the delegation, Pastor and Tan, flew to Beijing and then travelled to Chengde in Hebei where they met Dr. Mary Brown Bullock and Graham Bullock for two full days of election monitoring. The two teams witnessed two different ways of voting, which, nonetheless, shared some fundamental similarities. The most important difference was the organization of the voting and counting. In Hebei, the whole village gathered together in one mass meeting whereas in Fujian, people arrived at the polling station as individuals.

In Hebei, everyone brought a chair and sat in small village groups. The Township Election Chief led the meeting in a very organized and precise way: attendance was called; monitors were approved; the candidates gave brief presentations; the process of voting was explained; ballot boxes were opened; the citizens presented their voter identification cards at one of four polling stations and then voted in one of 24 or 36 polling booths, which were desks divided in half by cardboard; then the votes were counted, and the results were announced.

The voting was completed very quickly. In the Village of Fuo Ying Zi, 786 people voted in 35 minutes, and in Qui Wo Village, 1,555 people voted in 50 minutes. The counting process was just as quick. Although there were some problems with ensuring a completely secret ballot, we believe these can be corrected easily, by allowing some space between the voting booths. On the whole, the process proved extremely efficient and well organized, and generated high levels of participation. An added advantage was that the entire village listened to the candidates speeches, learned how to vote, and followed the process that morning through the counting and the announcement of results.

In Fujian, voting took place over the course of nearly a whole day in one or several polling stations, each of which contained a single voting booth. Complete voters' lists and information about the candidates and voting procedures were posted outside of each polling station. Each station had additional instructions on how to vote, and photos of each of the candidates were posted.

The process of candidate nomination and primary voting also differed in the two provinces. In Fujian, provincial law now provides for a single uniform method of candidate nomination, whereby any group of five or more persons can nominate candidates by signing a form provided by the Election Committee. The village Representative Assembly then votes in an indirect primary by secret ballot to select two final candidates for Village Committee Chair, and three to six candidates for Village Committee members.

In Hebei, on the other hand, several different methods for nominating candidates are used, including by Representative Assembly, party branch, or by 10 or more persons. In contrast to the indirect primaries in Fujian, Hebei had direct elections in the primaries, which were conducted in large village meetings similar to those for the final election described above.

There were also some differences regarding proxy votes. Fujian did not allow proxies; Hebei did. Fujian used absentee ballots, but because of the short time between the primary and the elections, ballots were mailed before the final candidates were chosen. Roving ballot boxes were used in some villages in both provinces, but differently and with problems in implementation.

Aside from these differences, there were many similarities between the elections in the two provinces, including the fact that elections generally went well. In the villages we visited, the Election Leadership Committees were chaired by the village party secretaries. In Fujian, the Election Committees were proposed by the sitting Village Committee members and approved by the Village Representative Assemblies. Also in Fujian, there were instances of primary candidates occupying seats on the Election Committee, and resigning these positions only after winning the primary, just 2 days before the final Village Committee election.

All the villages posted registration lists, and followed the procedures for announcing and publicizing candidates. Villages in both provinces utilized local cable or closed circuit radio systems to give Village Committee candidates a chance to air their views and positions. In Hebei, at the large village meetings, candidates also gave speeches to the gathered villagers.

In all the villages we visited, election officials were well-trained and seemed to understand both the technical details of the process as well as the underlying rationale (e.g., secret ballot). The party secretary and members played important roles in all of the villages, both on the Election Committee, and in overall guidance of village affairs. In all but one of the elections we observed, there were multiple candidates for the contested positions. A good number of people used the space provided on the ballots for write-ins. Voter participation in all the villages was, on average, above 90 percent of registered voters.

In five of the six villages that we examined most closely in the two provinces, the elections offered the villagers a choice, and three villages voted the incumbent chairs out of office. In Fuo Ying Zi Village in Hebei, the Village Chair lost the primary and tried a write-in comeback for the general election, but he lost that as well. The new leader was an entrepreneur. In Yan Ying Zi village in Hebei, although the party appeared very strong, the campaign for Village Chair was very competitive, and the incumbent, who also was the party secretary, lost. The final election pitted a former party secretary against a young entrepreneur. When we asked the young candidate whether he felt at a disadvantage because of the party's influence in the village, he said that he believed he had the support of the masses. He was correct, although it took two rounds of elections for him to be declared winner. (The election was very close, and in the first round, write-ins prevented either from getting 50 percent.)

In the one village that did not have a secret ballot, there was no primary and little competition in the final election. A party leader won by a margin of 1,037 to 3.

In Fujian's Guanjiang village, the final election was a contest between the incumbent, who claimed credit for a 30 percent increase in per capita income during his tenure and was also a member of the dominant Chen clan, and a younger candidate who made little attempt to mount a credible campaign and was a member of the minority Wei clan. The party secretary, also a Chen, had been nominated during the primary but explained that he already was too busy and wanted to give younger villagers a chance. The incumbent won by a landslide--787 votes to 172.

In Fujian's Laichu village, the incumbent, who was running for a third term, lost to an electrician three years his senior who promised to lead the poorer villagers to become rich as soon as possible. Competition in this village was lively, and one of the candidates for the Village Committee, who had lost the previous election by a single vote, had spent three years campaigning to win the villagers trust and support. While he won the highest number of votes in the primary, he came in second in the final election. Because none of the candidates for village committee won a majority, however, a runoff will be held.

IV. The Significance of the Elections

In seeking to assess China's village elections, much depends on one's criteria. If one judges by the standards of experienced, industrialized democracies, then China's village elections cannot measure. If one bases the assessment on China's 5,000 years of history, which lacks a tradition of competitive elections, then China's new experiment merits a more positive assessment.

China's approach to elections is incremental and experimental, and officials are constantly seeking ways to

improve the process. In a decade, the program has made real progress.

-- First, the Organic Law of 1987 established the central norms that permit meaningful elections: that leaders should be chosen by the people in a direct election by secret ballot with multiple choices. The three-year term limit allows the people to replace their leaders, thereby establishing a bond of accountability. Those principles are understood in the villages that we observed - even in the one in Hebei where the secrecy of the voting was not adequately protected as people marked their ballots while seated next to each other.

-- Second, the election officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs deserve credit for their openness and interest in exchanging ideas for the best ways to implement the principles of an election. Ministry officials noted that many of their most important innovations - secret ballots, for example -- were learned in exchanges with international observers. More important, the officials were always prepared to acknowledge their mistakes.

-- Third, the elections gave a greater sense of autonomy and empowerment to the villagers. Elections also made possible the return of a genuine sense of community that was lost during decades of turmoil.

We had some concerns with the process. One senior election official conceded that with 1 million villages, about half did not conduct the elections in accordance with the above principles. However, with the exception of the one village in Hebei in which the voting had occurred in the open, we did not see any serious violations of the secret ballot. Questions can be raised about the fact that the Communist Party Branch ran all the Village Election Committees, but one senior official said that if there was any violation of the law, the party official would be removed. The Ministry of Civil Affairs made it very clear that "local party organizations must not select or nominate candidates [and] they must respect the selection made by villagers." [China Rural Villagers Self-Government Research Group, Study on the Election of Villagers Committees, Dec. 1, 1993, p. iv].

On the question of the authority of the Village Chair vis-a-vis the Village Party Secretary, both acknowledged that the Chair is required to follow the line of the party, but we are less certain of what that means in practice both because the Village Chair has real powers over the budget and expenditures, and the relationship between the two leaders seems complementary as they both strive to develop the villagers' economy and manage village affairs.

We conclude that the village elections we saw demonstrate a remarkably high level of technical proficiency, and the elections, according to many of the people whom we met, have improved the lives of villagers in many ways. The leaders are more accountable; we could see that clearly as the voters replaced Village Chairs who had not fulfilled their promises. It was clear in the candidates' speeches when they promised very specific commitments for development and in the questions that were asked of the candidates in the Representative Assemblies.

We also were impressed by the absence of police or security from the polling places and by the mediation skills that have been well-developed in the villages. This is a foundation on which to nurture a spirit of compromise that is so important to a civic culture.

V. Suggestions

We were repeatedly asked by our hosts for our suggestions for improving the electoral process, and we offer them here after having exchanged ideas with key officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs. We begin with a pivotal distinction -- between core principles and technical procedures for implementing them. In the villages we observed, the core principles of a democratic election -- secret ballot, multiple candidates, direct election, etc. -- are understood and practiced. That might not be the case in the many villages we were not able to visit, and an important challenge for the Ministry of Civil Affairs is to bring those villages up to the level of the ones we visited. With regard to the second tier of issues -- technical procedures -- we offer the following suggestions:

1. Improve Civic Education Programs, Standardize and Synchronize Voting Dates Among Villages in the County or Province. We believe that sufficient progress has been made on village elections that the Ministry of Civil Affairs can begin standardizing the electoral procedures between villages in a county and eventually in a province. (Fujian has already published a manual to standardize its elections, but according to the person responsible for the manual, many of the villages still have a long way to go before the Ministry could consider the manual's provisions fully implemented). Standardization would permit more effective and uniform civic education and training programs. Such programs would have an even greater effect if all the villages in a county or province were to hold elections on the same day. We were told by some that elections are synchronized for deputies to the County and Provincial People's Congresses, but this has not yet been done for village elections. If it were, the county or province could conduct a comprehensive civic education campaign that would give citizens in a village a deeper understanding of how the elections would be conducted and the nature of their civic

responsibility.

2. Nomination Process: First Stage. The goal of the nomination process is to encourage citizens to put forward nominees, and therefore, we recommend that as many channels as possible be used, including 10 signatures, the Representative Assembly, and village groups. In addition, we note that women's associations have played an important role in putting forth candidates, and we suggest that the Ministry of Civil Affairs encourage efforts by other nongovernmental groups to propose candidates for office.

3. Nomination Process: Second Stage. We believe that the direct primary system, used in Hebei, is far better in giving people a chance to participate in the selection of their candidates than the indirect system used in Fujian. We heard concerns in Fujian that farmers might not want to take the time to participate in direct primaries, but they did so in Hebei, and we believe that farmers ought to be given the opportunity to choose.

4. Impartiality of Election Machinery. It is very important that all steps are taken to ensure that Election Officials are not candidates and are perceived as completely fair and impartial. Specifically, we suggest that a person who joins the Election Committee should be ineligible to stand for election.

5. Enforcement of Election Law. There is an administrative law against electoral offenses in elections for people's congresses, but not for village elections. MOCA has proposed to include village elections in the law, and we agree that it's necessary.

6. Mass Voting: Secret Ballot. As we indicated, mass voting has certain advantages, but special precautions are needed to ensure that the ballot is secret and secure. First, we suggest more space between each voting booth. Second, at the moment that voting begins, the Election Chair should announce that the dignitaries sitting behind the booths will move in order to underscore their respect for the secrecy of the ballot.

7. Absentee Ballots. While they were a good idea in principle, absentee ballots were sent before the candidates were identified, and therefore, we believe that more experimentation is needed before this method should be widely accepted.

8. Proxy Ballots. Proxy ballots have been used in place of absentee ballots; however, they have also been used by heads of households to vote for their family members. Sometimes, they were used as a method of convenience. Regardless of the reason, we think that Fujian was right to ban them and encourage people to vote by themselves. (However, as long as proxies are used, as in Hebei, we recommend that their numbers should be clearly identified on election day in the voting report.)

9. Roving Boxes. We are concerned that this method easily could be abused, particularly as the ballots do not seem to be very secure. Moreover, they are mixed with the other ballots before their numbers are verified. Other means might be as effective to allow the genuinely house-bound to vote while safeguarding the ballot box, for example, by a double-sealed envelope similar to an absentee ballot.

10. Registration List. Sometimes, the voter identification card was checked against the registration list, and sometimes it wasn't. We think it should be checked.

11. Campaigning. The speeches by the candidates to the entire village in Hebei were very useful. It also would be good if the villagers were permitted and encouraged to ask questions.

12. Illiterate Voting. We propose the use of booths that include photos and numbers for each candidate. This would help illiterate voters as well as others.

13. Runoff Rules. Runoff elections that are required under the 50 percent rule take a lot of time and money. We suggest that people should be able to win the final election with a plurality of 40 percent, and the top individuals for Committee Members should be declared winners.

14. Research. The Ministry of Civil Affairs has experimented with a number of procedures to see which ones are most effective in elections. We suggest they consider cooperative research projects to generate more information on village elections. They might conduct surveys of villagers' views of the best procedures for conducting elections and of the effect of elections on people's lives.

VI. Conclusions and Next Steps

We view this election-monitoring mission as the first step in a longer term cooperative project with the Ministry of Civil Affairs aimed at improving the process for electing village leaders. We also are interested in expanding our cooperation to other areas, and with that in mind, we met with leaders from the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee to discuss a possible trilateral parliamentary project that would involve current and former parliamentarians from Canada, the United States, and China for a research and exchange program.

China is justifiably proud of the tremendous economic progress that it has achieved in the last two decades and concerned that instability could jeopardize that progress. The village elections demonstrate one way to manage the economic change in a peaceful, stable manner that permits people to assume responsibility for their community. Those who feared instability in the rural areas now can see how economic reforms and the village elections have reinforced each other and helped ensure progress and stability.

Ten years ago, as the experimental village elections law was approved by the National People's Congress (NPC), Deng Xiaoping said that full democratization would take 50 years in China. As a result of this visit, we are much more aware of the daunting nature of the task for a country as populous and large as China. However, we also are encouraged by the rapid progress that already has occurred in China's rural areas and by the sincere commitment by officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs to Deng Xiaoping's goal. One more step toward achieving that goal would be the approval by the NPC of a new, more permanent law on village elections as proposed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs.