

Political Reform in China

Panel: Session I (Cosmos & Violet Room)
Date/Time: December 11, 2012 / 12:45-14:00
Speakers: Barbara Demick, Los Angeles Times (Moderator)
Chen Ping, Global Times
Chung Jongpil, Kyung Hee University
John Delury, Yonsei University
Kim Jae Chol, Catholic University of Korea
Lee Tae Hwan, The Sejong Institute
Rapporteur: Steven Oliver, University of California at San Diego

Panel Short Summary

Barbara Demick of the Los Angeles Times began the panel as moderator by placing the prospects for political reform in China in the context of the recent 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress and leadership transition. Although there has been much discussion of the possibility of political reform, there has yet been little indication from the new party leadership or other authoritative sources as to what shape such political reforms could possibly take.

Kim Jae Cheol of Catholic University of Korea spoke of hopes for meaningful political reform in terms of limitations on government power and protection of political rights generally unfulfilled at the conclusion of the party congress. Despite appeals from intellectuals as well as support for reforms in the party press, the authoritative political report delivered by newly anointed General Secretary Xi Jinping was similar to those issued at previous party congresses. Though the report mentions reform, the report nonetheless places much greater emphasis on following the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

John Delury of Yonsei University sought to place discussion of political reform into a broader historical context. Delury argued that observers of contemporary Chinese politics often fail to appreciate the meaning of political reform as used by Chinese leaders. Whereas observers often understand reform to entail change *of* the political system, Delury argues that

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leaders since the late Qing have generally understood reform to entail change *within* the system. Concretely, change within the system has often meant administrative reforms.

Lee Tai Hwan of The Sejong Institute echoed Delury's argument by pointing out repeated and explicit rejection of a competitive, multiparty political system by Chinese leaders. However, Lee also broached the important question of the Party's legitimacy and what sort of political reforms would be necessary to support continued one-party rule. Lee argued that although reforms such as the separation of party and government is currently unthinkable, China's leaders may be willing to loosen the relationship and allow a much more consultative approach to government that would help solve growing conflict between state and society.

Chen Ping of Global Times continued in this vein by posing the question, "what kind of reform does China need?" Given China's distinct conditions and history, political models developed in other contexts may not be appropriate for China. Chen argued instead that reforms will likely take the shape of trying to realize principles of intraparty democracy and greater separation of party and government. Furthermore, Chen argued that Xi Jinping's recently publicized tour of Shenzhen was a signal of coming political rather than economic reforms as reported by foreign press such as the Wall Street Journal.

Chung Jongpil of Kyung Hee University rounded out the panel by discussing the role of the Internet in political reform. Chung described the relationship between the state and society online as one of a cat and mouse game. However, Chung argued that who is the cat and who is the mouse is not always clear – whereas the state operates a formidable online censorship apparatus, it still affords substantial freedom to users. Many users have in turn used this freedom to ferret out malfeasance by local officials with positive consequences in terms of constraining corruption and creating greater accountability.

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