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What is the Most Significant Political Legacy of Deng Xiaoping: Thoughts in the 20th Year Since Deng Xiaoping's Death

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What is the Most Significant Political Legacy of Deng Xiaoping: Thoughts in the 20th Year Since Deng Xiaoping's Death

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Abstract- The policy of reform and opening up is Deng Xiaoping's political legacy, of which the most significant part is the fixed term system of cadres on different levels and of different categories, especially the fixed term of national leaders stipulated by the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. The fixed term system of cadres has played a critical role in the reform and opening up, China's rise, and the development of China's political system. This system under the single-party leadership is a political system that is adapted to China's transition from traditional society to modern society. It is also adjustable with the process of modernization. Its successful implementation lies in that it is what the Communist Party of China, the People's Liberation Army of China, and the Chinese people expect. Its improvement and optimization rely on enhancing the people's right to speak and influence in the election of cadres, i.e., letting the people decide the cadres.

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I. OBSERVATION AND ASSESSMENT

By February 19, 2017, Deng Xiaoping has been away from us for 20 years. Confucius used to say, "The governance of King Wen of Zhou and King Wu of Zhou is written on the tablets of wood and bamboo. When they were alive, their policies flourished; but when they died, their policies declined." [1] Yet for Deng Xiaoping, "his policies thrived when he was alive and continued to prosper even after his death." The reform and opening up initiated by him has been handed down by three successive generations of national leaders with substantial accomplishments and forming an irreversible trend, which is an extremely rare.

Undoubtedly, the reason why the policy of reform and opening up has kept thriving instead of decaying since Deng Xiaoping died is that it has brought incomparable benefits to Chinese people, and it conforms to the basic interests of the Chinese nation as well as the major trend of peace and development in the world. This is what people want and where the global trend goes. In other terms, the policy of reform and opening up is Deng Xiaoping's political legacy, which has appreciated in value increasingly and produced great profits for the last two decades.

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Then, of the political legacy, what is the most important part? It is the fixed term system of government officials of different categories on all levels, especially the constitutional term system of national leaders.

In the Chinese history, the alternation of power remained a critical issue that could unsettle or impede the social development. For the alternation of the supreme power, only three solutions were possible. One is that the incumbent handed over the crown to another person voluntarily. Another is that a successor grabbed power from the incumbent through violence. And the third is that after the incumbent died a successor took his/her place. Abdication, as a peaceful power hand-over, took place when the ruler on the throne was still alive. However, since it relied on the shared willingness of both the abdicating person on the throne and the successor, there was little probability that it would happen and thus it was not an established and constantly observed system. Violent power-seizing sometimes occurred in the same dynasty, and it was more of a major approach to changing dynasties. The successor was eager to rule, while the incumbent was not ready to give up the power. Hence, this way came with a high political cost and social price. Therefore, the alternation of power with the natural death of the incumbent ruler was the most common, and it became an established system in which the incumbent would decide on his/her successor, and the hand-over timing was of natural contingency. Up to the reform and opening up, China's supreme power had been handed down mainly through these three methods for several thousand years.

Deng Xiaoping's remarkable contribution to China is not only the reform and opening up - a right way into which he led China, but also the critical reform he carried out in a key system at the very beginning of the reform and opening up. It is the critical reform that guarantees successors can continue to go in the right way. In the reform, the lifelong tenure of cadres was abolished under his leadership and exemplified by him. Instead a fixed term system of government officials was implemented on a comprehensive scale. In particular, the Constitution stipulates the term of office of national leaders, thus solving the predicament of power alternation that had perplexed Chinese politics for thousands of years.

Early in 1980, Deng Xiaoping explained the reform initiative concerning the Party and the leadership system. His targets were the over-centralization of power and the life tenure of cadres. With regard to the cadre tenure, he said,

The formation of the life tenure of cadres is affected by the feudalism to a certain degree. Meanwhile, it is also related to the absence of proper retirement and dismissal system of our Party. During the period of revolution and wars, people were young. In the 1950's, they were still strong and retirement was not a problem. However, it is unwise that the issue was not addressed in time later. It should be admitted, nevertheless, that under the historical conditions then, it could hardly be resolved completely. The Fifth Plenary Session of the Communist Party of China discussed the draft of the Party Constitution and proposed the abolishment of the life tenure of cadres. Yet that proposal needs further revision and supplementation. The key is to improve the system about election, recruitment, appointment, assessment, impeachment, rotation, etc. of cadres and set proper and clear rules about the tenure of cadres (elected, appointed, or recruited) on various levels and their lixiu, retirement in accordance with different situations. The tenure of any official should not be infinite.

Deng Xiaoping's such ideas and measures were finally written into the 1982 Constitution of People's Republic of China, which is still effective now, and became the official national system. Relevant articles are as follows:

Article 66: The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress... The Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of the Standing Committee shall serve no more than two consecutive terms.

Article 79: The term of office of the President and Vice-President of the People's Republic of China... they shall serve no more than two consecutive terms.

Article 87: The term of office of the State Council... The Premier, Vice-Premiers and State Councillors shall serve no more than two consecutive terms.

Article 124: The term of office of the President of the Supreme People's Court... The President shall serve no more than two consecutive terms.

Article 130: The term of office of the Procurator-General of the Supreme People's Procuratorate... the Procurator-General shall serve no more than two consecutive terms. [3]

In 1989, Deng Xiaoping still emphasized "it is unhealthy and dangerous for the destiny of a nation to rely on one or two persons' reputation. If the person is reliable, that is fine. Otherwise, the situation will become uncontrollable." [4]

From the publication of the 1982 Constitution to now, no cadres as mentioned in the articles above have

served for over two consecutive terms. Namely, no violation of the Constitution has ever occurred. After the publication, Deng Xiaoping did not occupy any post as mentioned above, and he resigned from all his other posts 7 years before he died. Since the 14th National Congress of the CPC in 1992, the alternation of people in these posts as well as the change of national supreme leaders has been conforming to the Constitution in reality. Also, the Constitution has been observed voluntarily. The following three generations of national leaders have handed over the national supreme power peacefully according to the Constitution. This is unprecedented on the national level in China, and it is a substantial reform of the power alternation system that used to last for thousands of years in China.

Although the tenure of Chairman of the State Military Commission is not stipulated in the Constitution, and the tenure of the supreme leader of the Party is not mentioned in the Constitution of the CPC either, there exists a fixed term system in fact for the two posts due to the facts that the Communist Party of China is the only ruling party and the supreme leader of both the Party and the People's Liberation Army of China is either the national supreme leader himself or when they are different persons they serve the same term(s).

Since the 1982 Constitution was first implemented, the fixed term system of cadres has been promoted and generalized on the Central level, on the local level, in power institutions, and in military and official organizations and other enterprises and institutions. Power transition is a norm, resignation or retirement upon finishing the fixed term is accepted by cadres, and common people are accustomed to it, forming a new form of political culture. While the alternation of power on the national level is macro and common people cannot be exposed to its immediate influence, the operation on the local level and in common enterprises and institutions is median or micro and closely related to people's interests. Therefore, it can be concluded that the implementation of the fixed term system of cadres on the median and micro levels for around 30 years is of unique significance in shaping common Chinese people's collective awareness of power alternation.

Throughout China, orderly and peaceful alternation of power according to the Constitution systematically from top down is something that has never happened in history. It is the most important political legacy that Deng Xiaoping left to the generations after him.

II. DEBATES AND DISCUSSION

The fixed term system of cadres carried out all over China without exceptions has provided a stable and controllable order of power and unceasing momentum of innovation for the reform and opening up.

However, this point is not fully understood by various sectors.

In various explanations and debates about China's rise by domestic and foreign scholars, the fixed term system of cadres is largely neglected. Liberalism tends to explicate the relationship between market economy and democratic politics, which is more or less regarded the same as the multi-party system with the general election system. From this point, it is unreasonable in terms of that democratic norm and perplexing in terms of the reality that China, with its market economy, has not adopted the multi-party system and the general election system. Interpretation on the opposite side is that China's market economy is socialist, and it is characterized by the leadership of the Communist Party of China or the single-party system. This is a fact as well as the norm in China. In this way, the inevitable link between market economy and the multi-party system with the general election system is directly negated, and its inevitable connection with democratic politics becomes indecisive as well. Nonetheless, both the explanations are not complete. They fail to illustrate how the single-party system manages to adapt to and promote the development of market economy. The cause of their failure is that both readings share the same hypothesis that the multi-party system with the general election system and the single-party system are absolutely contradictory.

It is true that the multi-party system with the general election system prevalent in the West and the Communist Party's absolute leadership in China are two distinct political systems. With the fixed term system of cadres, however, the Party's leadership is equipped with another extremely significant function, the orderly renewal of the power system. This function is exactly the key function provided by the multi-party system with the general election system in the West. In other words, despite all the other different functions that the Party's leadership and the multi-party system with the general election system have, their very function concerning the realization of the orderly change of power is the same. If having this function is more democratic than not having it, the single-party system necessarily with the fixed term system of cadres is definitely more democratic than the single-party system without it. Thus, the orderly alternation of power supported by the multi-party system with the general election system and the peaceful alternation of power supported by the Party's leadership are both democratic. The two political systems are no longer totally opposite.

Certainly, the key is not the ideological positions, but the practical effects. In the recent 20 years, people throughout the world have seen that while American people change their national leaders in their way, Chinese people accomplish the same goal through their approach. As regards the current practical effects, while the latter may not be better than the former, the

two are near equals. Thanks to the development in the two decades, China has become the second largest economy only second to America and the largest commodity trade country in the world. Therefore, the orderly alternation of power itself is more significant than the way in which it is realized. In the past, people were obsessed with the way of the power alternation while neglecting the essence - the actual orderly alternation itself. Now, once the essence is grasped, the relationship between market economy and the Party's leadership could be defended in terms of norms and understandable in reality.

In the past, the life tenure of cadres, despite the same Party's leadership, meant that many policy mistakes could only be corrected when the leader died naturally. Hence, the alternation of power was in disorder and evolved into internal rivalry, so the Party's leadership became ineffective and social development was obstructed. Similarly, in a large number of relatively undeveloped countries, though with the multi-party system with the general election system, some parties and politicians were elected for quite a few successive terms or found other ways to take office, or different parties fought with each other unceasingly. Thus, in these countries, the unity was hardly guaranteed, and the orderly alternation of power could not remain the norm. In this case, democracy is just an empty promise, social development was impeded as well.

That is to say, for both the single-party system and the multi-party system with the general election system, whether the orderly change of power can be assured is the key to their success. As for the probability of success, while the single-party system is of low probability, the multi-party system with the general election system is not of high probability. The truth is that, as long as peaceful and orderly alternation of power takes place regularly, politics can function steadily and vigorously and benefit society no matter which political system is in place. Otherwise, when the peaceful and orderly alternation of power cannot be secured, either political system is not able to guarantee the vigorous politics and in the long term, the stability will be undermined, leading to social disasters. In this regard, it is quite uneasy for China to establish the fixed term system within the single-party system, and the effects are conspicuous.

The above analysis shows that the key role of the fixed term system of cadres in the reform and opening up and its innovative significance in the development history of China's political system are greatly underestimated. In fact, all the sectors involved in the debates underestimated them. If Deng Xiaoping occupied his post until his last breath, or the collective shift of central leaders for twice after he died never occurred, will the outcomes of the reform and opening up be as great as can be seen today?



III. REVIEW AND PROSPECTS

The fixed term system of cadres under the single-party leadership is a form of political system that has adapted to China's transition from traditional society to modern society. It is adjustable with the process of modernization.

Before the reform and opening up, China had set up a complete and effective power operation system from the Central to villages, enterprises, institutions, and military companies. This system is different from all those in traditional society based on agricultural civilization. The existence of the life tenure of cadres, however, makes it similar to the approach in traditional society. In the traditional society, the alternation of power, as metabolism of social significance, was determined by metabolism of natural significance. Namely, it was determined by how long the leader could live. In contrast, the modern society employs the law to stipulate the way of power alternation in order to mitigate the negative impact of natural fortuity on politics. The 1982 Constitution defines how long national leaders could occupy their posts, making another breakthrough in the transformation of China's modern power system. Once the limited term is written in the law, China's power operation system has not only become comprehensive and effective, but also gained a stable social metabolic mechanism and source of vitality, thereby forming an institutional guarantee of the reform and opening up.

Since the implementation of the fixed term system of cadres, especially for the recent 20 years, China has developed a healthy political rhythm. A small re-election takes place every 5 years in the Central organs, and a general one occurs every 10 years. Local re-elections and those in enterprises and institutions happen every 3 to 5 years. National leaders do not serve for more than 2 terms, and there is a limit for other cadres' terms. Such a rhythm dominates other political and social rhythms and helps adjust the pace of the reform and opening up. Now Chinese people have become accustomed to it.

Another point is of equal significance. China's political rhythm synchronizes with that in western developed countries and the majority of developing countries and regions in the world. While the ways of election are different, election does occur regularly. Such similarity in political rhythms is undoubtedly of positive significance to mutual recognition between China and the rest of the world in the process of reform and opening up.

The successful implementation of the fixed term system of cadres under the Party's leadership, as other policies and initiatives in the reform and opening up, should be attributed first to Deng Xiaoping's design and promotion and more fundamentally to the fact that it is what the Party, the Army, and the people expect. For around 30 years, the implementation of this system has

affected the political prospects of millions of individuals and families as well as the destiny of more than 1 billion Chinese people. Without the people's understanding, support, and participation or the benefits for the absolute majority, this system cannot be sustained for long. In the political legacy left by Deng Xiaoping, cadres and the people have contributed a precious proportion as well, and all the generations after him are beneficiaries of the legacy.

Nevertheless, compared to the life tenure system of cadres that had existed in China for thousands of years, the fixed term system established for the last 30 years is still too young. In the history of human beings' modernization, the precedents of developing from fixed term system backwards to the life tenure system were in fact too numerous to mention. Even in the West, except the United States, it seems that no other countries have seen smooth implementation of the fixed term system since its creation. One century ago in China, the struggles between the imperial system and the republic, the constitutionalism and restoration, and between peaceful alternation of power and violent usurping killed the first chance with which China might realize its political modernization. Therefore, the more Chinese people learn about the historical experience and lessons, the more they will cherish Deng Xiaoping's political legacy.

Currently, the degree that China's reform and opening up has reached is remarkable. With the accomplishments, more challenges have surfaced. A huge number of problems might be beyond Deng Xiaoping's imagination 20 years ago, and only people who are engaged in the reform and opening up now can feel them. In such a complex situation, in addition to persisting in carrying out the fixed term system of cadres that has been established for more than 30 years, Chinese people should further upgrade it. The primary principle is that the Party's leadership stipulated by the Constitution and people's autonomy should be better combined, and people's right to speak in and impact on the election of cadres should be enhanced.

The preamble of the Constitution specifies that "Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China... the Chinese people of all nationalities will continue to... turn China into a socialist country that is prosperous, powerful, democratic and culturally advanced." [5] The second article writes:

All power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people.

The National People's Congress and the local people's congresses at various levels are the organs through which the people exercise state power.

The people administer State affairs and manage economic and cultural undertakings and social affairs through various channels and in various ways in accordance with the provisions of law. [6]

Thus, it reveals that in the Constitution, the Party's leadership and all power belonging to the people are both indispensable.

In practice, however, the second article has yet to be carried out. Concerning articles on the people's exercising the state power, the right of decision in the selection and appointment of cadres is the most critical. Therefore, how to safeguard the role of People's Congress in the selection and appointment of cadres is the key to whether the people's state power stipulated by the Constitution could be effectively exercised.

Only when the selection, appointment and rotation of cadres are decided by the people according to the Constitution can it be guaranteed that the nation's fundamental policy and cadres' policy implementation do not deviate from the right direction of serving the people, hence observing and realizing the Party's principles and primary objectives. If the success of the reform and opening up by now can be summarized as the right leadership of cadres and the people's subsequent satisfaction, the success in the future shall rely on a new condition - the people's acknowledgement in legal terms in advance.

Specifically, the current system is that the Party dominates cadres. It means the Party does both the governance and the decision making. In the future, the two aspects should be divided institutionally. While the Party manages cadres, the people should be the one to decide the cadres. That is to say, through a gradual process, the people should be engaged more frequently in the decision making of public affairs, particularly exercising their right to decide the cadres on the basis of the Constitution, fully realizing the basic principles of the Constitution. That is to say, the fixed term system of cadres merely under the leadership of the Party is not enough. This system should be placed under the people's constitutional powers, which will provide sustainable guarantee for the cause of the reform and opening up.

In conclusion, what is Deng Xiaoping's most important political legacy? It is the fixed term system of cadres. How can the value of the legacy be sustained and even raised? The answer is that the people should decide the cadres.

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5. http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/node_505.htm.
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