

**EAI
Commentary
No. 19**

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The Arab Spring and Democratization in China

May 26, 2011

Since the fall of Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in early 2011, the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” has reasserted the universality of democracy. The question then of whether a “Jasmine Revolution” would occur in China has drawn the attention of foreign and domestic observers as well as raised the concern of the Chinese government.

Today, even at the official level, the scope of debate on so called “Western-style” democracy is very limited in China regardless of the political standing of any politician whether conservative or progressive. It would be impossible to imagine in this case that there could be any debate over democracy that would lead to sweeping political reforms in the Chinese Communist Party. While on the other end of the political spectrum, a grass roots movement for democracy is also unlikely to develop. Most of the core figures involved in the democratic movement are either in exile overseas, under heavy restrictions at home, or have lost their momentum as time has passed by. Furthermore, possibly the greatest obstacle to any democratization movement in China is the reluctance of the middle-class. While often considered as a powerful driver for democratization in the rest of the world, it would be difficult to expect them to play the same role in China. Simply, the middle-class is the greatest beneficiaries of state-led economic growth and is unlikely to take part in any rapid political transformation. In this regard, the Chinese middle-class is far

more conservative than that of any other country.

To what extent then would a “Jasmine Revolution” be possible? There are four possible scenarios on the prospect for democratization in China. First, continued high economic growth is destined to bring about democratization. From the perspective of functionalism, improved standards of living as well as expansion of higher education, media, and an increasing consciousness of human rights will make democratization feasible within a certain period. However, such a viewpoint has some limits in that it blindly applies the experiences of the West and a few countries in East Asia to China without any consideration for its distinct history and social conditions.

Second, there is the possibility for democratization due to impending social challenges mounting in China. In other words, if a combination of social problems builds up, the Chinese government would be unable to manage them under its current repressive way. In this situation, the government would have to introduce democratic measures, such as freedom of speech and direct elections, to a substantial extent. Such a prospect though is unlikely to happen in the near future since high economic growth, increases in consumer expenditure, and the elevation of China’s international status will continue for a while, unless a major economic crisis were to occur in China or in neighboring countries. Even if such a crisis were to occur and the Chinese government implements measures for politi-

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cal reform, a soft-landing through democratization would not be guaranteed. Rather, it is highly probable that the unresolved problems would weaken the political control of the government and lead to political disorder.

Third, a kind of flexible authoritarianism may be sustained for a long time. China has secured its legitimacy among the population through rapid economic growth, social welfare, administrative efficiency, and an assertive foreign policy. Simultaneously, it has maintained the stability of its system through strict control, systematization, and mass mobilization. Such a flexible authoritarian government is considered a prime alternative to Western-style democracy by the Chinese leadership and pro-government scholars. From such a viewpoint, it would seem unlikely to expect democratization in China for the time being.

Lastly, there is a possibility that China would experience political chaos and division, a scenario that covers neither gradual democratization nor flexible authoritarianism. Authoritarian governments unable to actively promote reforms in the political system often fail to meet the social demands which have accumulated as marketization expands. Continued corruption and incompetence in the government leads to public dissatisfaction and might bring about the collapse of the system as in Eastern Europe. In Eastern Europe, countries had implemented 'shock therapy' solutions to fix the problems of the socialist system. However, such rapid changes, in some cases, caused severe chaos rather than bring about a smooth transition to democracy. This hard landing scenario cannot be excluded in regarding the future of democratization in China.

From a realistic perspective, even though China cannot avert the flow of democratization in the end, top-down democratization or limited democratic reform led by the Chinese Communist Party is more likely as Chinese civil society has yet to fully mature. Nevertheless, as political reforms would weaken the Chinese Communist Party and increase social instability, top-down democratization is likely to be restricted. And this limited reform might even fail to solve social problems ahead. In this case where there is no alternative social force for the Communist Party and its leadership, the direction for the development of Chinese politics will be unpredictable and could bring about unexpected results. China will therefore go through a difficult transition period due to intricate conflicts among domestic political forces.■

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