LOCAL ELECTIONS IN CHINA

OSCAR ALMÉN

Although elections in authoritarian states have a different meaning from elections in democracies, they nonetheless have important political functions. They serve as a means of communicating with and educating the ‘masses’, creating a feeling of participation in governmental affairs, and enhancing the legitimacy of the regime (Hermet 1978: 13). Furthermore, elections provide a lens through which it is possible to analyse governments.

Since 1979, the Chinese regime has step by step expanded the system of local elections to the extent that today, at least in some areas, elections are contested and increasingly meaningful.

Though there have probably been leaders within the reformist camp who genuinely believe in democracy as a value, the mainstream of the party leadership have promoted the election reforms because they have been instrumental in solving other social and political problems. Deng Xiaoping first used local people’s congress elections as a way to balance the power of local party committees, but had to roll back parts of the reform when the elections resulted in open debates about the political system. Leaders within the National People’s Congress system have promoted elections as a way to expand their own power base. Jiang Zemin, Li Peng and Zhu Rongji have all officially endorsed the system of local elections, yet none of them have used their political powers to introduce democratic reforms. So far, the new generation of leaders has not shown any signs of deviating from this political strategy. Instead, elections have been used to strengthen domestic as well as international legitimacy of the regime, creating stability in the rural areas by getting rid of some corrupt and incompetent local cadres, and solving local administrative problems.

Hence the intention of the leaders has seldom been to expand elections and promote democracy as a value in itself, but to use elections as a way to attain other means. Yet, by institutionalising elections, the regime might be unintentionally facilitating more dramatic political change.

Scholars within the field of historical institutionalism have argued that previously latent institutions can become salient as a result of changes in the socio-economic or political context, of new actors coming into play, or through exogenous changes that changes the strategies of actors within existing institutions (Thelen and Steinmo 1992:16-17). The socio-political development that China has undergone during the past 25 years has changed the roles of elections as well as the roles of the elected assemblies. By institutionalising and legitimising the electoral mechanism and providing a platform for civil society to emerge,
local elections can, like in the case of Taiwan, facilitate change towards democracy (Chao and Myers 2000; Tian 1997: 141).

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Elections do not in themselves constitute democracy, but they are a necessary part of democracy, neither are elections in themselves a cause for democracy, but they can, together with other factors, facilitate a change towards democracy. This article does not argue that China is heading towards democracy (although it might) since the factors affecting the future of China are many and complex which makes it impossible to make such predictions. The article does, however, argue that the political changes which have already taken place, in the form of local elections, have created a situation which could make a transformation towards a more democratic political system smoother than had they not taken place. In any case, many obstacles would have to be overcome for such a transformation to take place. For the Chinese regime, the instrumental benefits of local elections have to be balanced against the risk of elections leading to undesirable political change that could threaten the political power monopoly of the Communist Party.

In order to sort out of the system of local elections in China, a few words on the administrative system are in place. In general, larger cities are divided into either urban districts or rural counties. Urban districts are in turn divided into street offices, which are the lowest level of the state administration in urban areas. Below these are the communities or neighbourhoods. At this level resident committees are formed which are grass root units and not a formal part of the state administration. In rural areas, counties are divided into the lowest level of state administration, namely towns or townships, and below these are the villages.

At district and county level as well as in towns and townships the citizens in direct elections elect people’s congresses. In villages, the villagers elect villagers committees and in some urban communities, the residents can now elect residents committees.

One difference between these assemblies, which is important to note, is the one between the election of decision-making body and of executive body. The people’s congress system is the legislative system in China. Local people’s congresses at county level and below have no legislative authority but they are the still the highest legal decision-making authorities. In contrast, both villagers committees and residents committees have executive functions. As will be described below, experiments of the direct election of executive power in townships have been tried in some areas.

Village Elections
Since the late 1980’s, a system of electing the executive authority at village level has been institutionalised and spread all over China. The elections have come about as a response to the threatening instability in the countryside. In some areas, the villages have had several rounds of competitive elections, while in other areas the elections have just started and in many places the elections are still constrained and non-democratic. The central authorities promote the village elections but meet resistance from local authorities who see their power being undermined. In several of the villages where local authorities have not interfered, the election system has enabled villagers to get rid of corrupt, incompetent and unpopular village heads.

In the early 1980’s, China embarked on reforming its agricultural sector. The collective system of communes and brigades was abolished and replaced by township governments and villages. Through the new household responsibility system farmers were allowed to farm their own plots and decide themselves what to do with the surplus. The household responsibility system fundamentally changed the relationship between state and society in the countryside and created an authority vacuum at the village level. In the previous collective system, the local authorities collected all that was produced and then divided between villagers. The authorities controlled the resources and the farmers were dependent on the authorities. In the new system, the farmers are basically left to themselves. The authori-
ties still collect tax but do not give many tangible resources back to the farmers. This situation changed the relationship between the farmers and the state from one where the state was the provider and the employer, both giving and taking resources, to one where the state is only taking. The farmers became less dependent on the state and more assertive in demanding their rights since they knew how much they gave away to the state.

In some villages a system of village councils appeared in order to handle the common affairs of the village. The central government did not give this development much attention in the beginning, although villagers committees (cunmin weiyuanhui) are mentioned in the constitution of 1982 as the administrative organ at village level that should be elected by the villagers in public elections. After a while the need for a new administrative system at the grass root level became all the more apparent and the ministry of civil affairs started the work of developing a suitable form of governance for villages. In 1987, the National People’s Congress approved ‘The Organisation Law on Villagers Committees’. The law was a way to spread the system of village elections throughout China. Officially about one million of China’s villages have conducted elections of villagers committees and some of them are about to elect their 6th villagers committee. In November 1998, a revised version of the organisation law was approved that further specifies the election procedures and the functions of the committees.

The organisation law states that all of China’s villages shall elect a villagers committee of 3-7 members, including a village chief and vice chief, which shall run the administration of the village. The committee is elected for a three-year period, and a villagers assembly, consisting of the villagers and representatives from the households in the village, is to supervise the work of the villagers committee. Villagers themselves shall nominate the candidates to the villagers committee and the number of candidates must exceed the number of positions in the villagers committee. Furthermore, the villagers committee is to be independent in relation to the state administration. Township or county governments are allowed to offer support and advice but they are not supposed to interfere in issues that are considered to be within the scope of the village self-government. However, similarly to the constitution, the village election law also includes the principle of the leading role of the party, which in practice means that the party secretary has the ultimate authority in important political matters. Contradictions between the elected village head and the appointed party secretary has proven to be one of the main problems of the village self-administration system.

Some saw the elections as a beginning to the democratisation of China while others were sceptics and saw it as purely symbolic gestures by the regime. Nevertheless, the reform has been supported morally and financially by the EU, and bilaterally through for example Danida and Sida, as well as by international organisations such as the Ford Foundation and the Republican Institute.

Though the organisation law is relatively explicit on the status of the villagers committee it is also intentionally general in order to open up for regional differences for the detailed implementation of the law. For example, the regulations of elections of village committees in Fujian province states that the number of final candidates for village committee chair and vice chair respectively shall be one more than the number of persons to be elected. Similarly, the number of candidates for the ordinary committee members shall be one to three more than the number of persons to be elected. In case there are more nominees than allowed, a primary election is to be held in order to decide the official candidates.

Beginning in the 1990’s, the village elections got the attention of Western academics, media and organisations. Some saw the elections as a beginning to the democratisation of China, while others...
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How could a system of direct elections of village heads evolve in an authoritarian system like China’s? According to some researchers, this has been a long process driven by certain individuals in the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA), some top politicians, notably the then National People’s Congress chairman Peng Zhen, and by middle level bureaucrats that have been persuaded by the reformists within MOCA to see the advantages of village elections. Furthermore, the process has been incremental and the reformers have used the institutions of the regime in order to push their own agenda of democratic reforms (Kelliher 1997; Shi 1999). Once the village elections have proven successful, conservative opposition to them has been neutralised and it has been easier to argue for further democratic reforms.

A key problem in village politics is the relationship between the elected village head and the village party secretary. Despite the legal authority of the villagers committee and the village head, the party secretary is still the most powerful person in most villages.

But are the elections free and competitive in reality? Of course, in the Chinese context, ‘free and competitive election’ is limited to the selection between different individuals, not between organisations. Yet, within the constraints of the authoritarian system, the law gives the villagers extensive authority to elect and supervise their own executive power organ. However, implementation of the law is a different matter. There are big differences between regions and also between villages within regions in the actual conduct of elections and the work of the villagers committees. In some areas, the nomination process, the number of candidates, and the voting procedure have been seriously flawed and these elections are not even close to being competitive. In many villages, the village party secretary continues to exercise unrestricted authority independent of the elected village chief and villagers committee. Yet, in other villages, the villagers committee and the village chief are elected according to the principles of competition and secrecy and the villagers committee exercises real authority. Several surveys have been conducted in order to find out the actual implementation of the village elections. Figures for the number of villages who have held elections vary between 45 to 80 percent, partly depending on how the question is posed.

A majority of village heads are party members and a large part of those have been recruited after they have been elected as village leaders. This way, the party maintains control of grass root politics and simultaneously rejuvenates the party with competent members that have popular support. Being a party member does not automatically mean that the person is loyal towards the township government rather than the villagers. However, the situation for the village party secretary is different since the township and county party committees appoint the village party secretary and control her/his future career path. Sometimes the village party secretary doubles as village head, but this is not the situation in the majority of villages. Instead a key problem in village politics is the relationship between the elected village head and the village party secretary. Despite the legal authority of the villagers committee and the village head, the party secretary is still the most powerful person in most villages.

As a response to this problem, in some villages the so-called ‘two-ballot system’ evolved, in which all villagers participate in the nomination to the position of party secretary. The final decision is still made by the party members, but they can only elect candidates that have received at least 50 percent of the confidence votes of the villagers. In this way, villagers can make sure that some unpopular individuals will not become village party secretaries (Li 1999: 109). In a similar vein, a circular from the central committee and the state council in June 2002 recommends that party secretaries should run for village committee election first, after which they can run for party secretary if the village committee election was successful. This way the party ensures that their party secretaries have the popular support of the villagers.

The village election system is sanctioned and accepted in large parts of official China today. The elections have been beneficial in some cases
for rural stability by solving local conflicts and in removing despotic and corrupt village leaders. Importantly, they have not created the chaos predicted by the opponents to the elections and thereby one argument against further democratic reform has been removed.

From the perspective of the Communist Party, villagers’ increasing influence and participation is a good thing as long as the party maintains its presence and control. The villages however, are not directly a part of the state administration; hence the village elections effect on the state institutions is limited. It should be noted, that in some villages elected village heads have used their authority as village leaders to put pressure on the township government and even sometimes lead the villagers in protest against the township leaders. This has put pressure for the expansion of elections to higher levels (Li 2001: 4, 15, 19). As the village elections become institutionalised, villagers learn that they can use law to fight for their political rights (O’Brien 1996). This democratic awareness puts pressure on the political system to become more open and accountable to the citizens. In order to handle this dilemma, the party has to strike a balance between the benefits of getting popularly elected grass root cadres and the threats of increasingly assertive villagers and village leaders.

Urban community elections
The urban equivalent of the village is the neighbourhood or the community. Residents committees (jumin weiyuanhui) were mentioned together with the villagers committees in the constitution of 1982 as one grass root self-governance institution. However, community elections have not been as developed as their rural counterparts. One reason for this is that the problematique has been different between urban and rural areas. The threat of chaos and power vacuum in the countryside that paved the way for village elections did not exist to the same extent in the urban areas. Instead, although the residents committees have been in place for a long time, the street committee has strictly controlled the election of them, or higher-level governments have simply appointed them.

Urban residents were previously almost exclusively a part of the state work unit (danwei) system. The work unit provided social welfare and was responsible for political control and mobilisation. The economic and social reforms have created a more heterogeneous social situation in the form of private companies, unemployment, and immigrants from other parts of China. People in these categories are not included in the work unit system. Instead, the basic units responsible for social welfare for these people are the community organisations. Also the responsibility for care of elderly and children has in many areas been taken over by the community organisations. Decentralisation reform has further increased the administrative functions of community organisations that were previously handled by higher-level departments. In the late 1980’s, some residents committees started to offer services to residents through small business activities and thereby gained some revenue. At the same time, many residents committee leaders started to embezzle money from the residents committee and spend them on expensive projects. The government turned a blind eye but residents reacted and complained (Wang 2002: 399; Peng 2001).

As a response to the problems, the government introduced reforms of the community organisations. In a similar vein as for the rural villagers committees, Chinese authorities wanted to revitalise the residents committees by making them more autonomous from the local government. One of the reforms was to make the elections of residents committees more free and competitive and to increase transparency of the residents committee.

In 1999, the authorities embarked on a set of experimental elections to residence committees in 26 urban districts in 12 different cities. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the elections are expected to have spread nation wide by 2007. The exact method for the elections will depend on the result of the experimental elections. One difference between areas has been the one between direct and indirect elections. In some urban communities, all residents participate in the election of the residents committee. In some other places, the residents appoint representatives who in turn elect the residents committee. In a study of four Shanghai districts, the residents were asked in an opinion poll whether they wanted to have direct or indirect elections. Apparently, the residents preferred the indirect system before direct elections (Lin 2003: 74).

The community elections have so far not been hailed in the same way as the village elections. One reason is that many urban residents do not have much interest in the residents committees since the community has little influence on the daily life of many urban residents and they are not dependent on the community for work and resources in
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the way that most villagers are dependent on the village. There is a conflict between the autonomy of residence committees and the authorities’ scepticism towards loosening the control of the grass roots unit. The critical point is whether the leader of the residents committee should be an appointed (from above) cadre or elected by the residents. In an effort to keep party control but also legitimacy, the authorities try to get the party secretary elected as residents committee head. Moreover, as in the villages, there is a conflict of power and status between the party secretary and the residents committee head. According to one observer, the positive effect of residents committees is that they have become a meeting ground for the community that is not controlled by the state and this can potentially alter the base for the party-state (Peng 2001).

Direct elections to local people’s congresses
In the 1998 county level elections, the politically engaged citizen Yao Lifa was elected to the Qianjiang county people’s congress in Hubei province after 12 years of intensive efforts. Yao, whose name incidentally sounds like the Chinese word for ‘want to legislate’, had participated in three rounds of elections but was never accepted as an official candidate by the local election committee. As unofficial candidate there were no voting ballots with his name printed on them, instead he had to depend on the active act of voters writing his name on the ballot. The number of votes he received increased by every election he participated in starting with 30 votes in 1987 and finally, after intense campaigning through sending letters and visiting voters’ homes, he managed to get 1706 of the votes, finished second in his election district and got elected as a people’s deputy.

The above case is a telling example of the complexities of the Chinese election system. On the one hand, it shows how a citizen, if sufficiently engaged, can succeed in being elected as people’s deputy. On the other hand, the constraints of the system and the extent to which the authorities control the election process are all too apparent. The Yao Lifa case, though probably not unique in China, is nonetheless very unusual and got a lot of attention after it had been published in the nan feng chuang magazine.

The Chinese regime early institutionalised a system of local elections inspired by the Soviet Union. Similarly to the USSR, the elections were a way to mobilise the masses for the policies of the government. During the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), no elections were held and it was not until after the death of Mao Zedong and the coming to power of Deng Xiaoping that things were about to change. In 1979, the National People’s Congress passed a new election law and organisation law for people’s congresses at all levels. The law stated that direct elections of people’s congress deputies should be extended to include counties and not only as previously townships and urban districts. Furthermore, every people’s congress seat was to be contested with 50-100 percent more candidates for every deputy position. Thus, for example, in an election district with two seats there had to be three or four candidates competing for those seats.

The first round of county people’s congress elections resulted in heated debates and much public campaigning in a few localities. At some universities, the candidates campaigned and even got elected on programs such as freedom of speech and human rights. The election reforms were pushed through amid strong resistance from many local officials who saw their power positions threatened. In many cases the local party committees intervened in the election procedure and controlled the whole election making them no more democratic than they had been before the reforms (McCormick 1990: 135; Chen 1999: 67). Despite the massive intervention and control by local authorities in the elections, the instances of public campaigning and free discussions made the authorities nervous and the election laws were revised in 1982. The revision made some important changes, in particular severely limiting the rights for campaigning. It became the job of the election committee to distribute information on all official candidates and no open campaigning was allowed. The revisions of the election law had the effects the authorities wanted, according to Nathan: »The 1984 elections did not report any single incident of dissent or disruption« (1985: 223).
Further revisions of the election laws followed in 1986 and 1995. In recent years, more intense election campaigning has resumed in some areas. According to researchers at the National People’s Congress research office, some places have had lively campaigns in local television and other media (author’s interview). These kinds of activities are still rare, yet, the authorities allow for and in some places even encourage the candidates to hold speeches and meet with the voters before the election.

In fact, several factors differentiate the people’s congress elections from purely symbolic election systems. First, secret ballot voting is a fundamental principle for democratic elections. It ensures that the voter can vote for the preferred candidate and most importantly can chose not to vote for the non-preferred candidate. Secret ballot elections also limits the opportunities for vote buying since the buyer cannot be sure that the seller votes according to the wishes of the buyer. Secret ballot voting was guaranteed in the 1979 election laws though this is not always respected in practice.

Second, the first stage of nomination is a relatively open and free affair. As a consequence, nominations from voters often number in the thousands for the election of a few hundred people’s deputies. Even though the following consultation process prevents the final list of candidates from including any great surprises, the free nomination stage allows for the possibility of some voter influence in deciding the candidates. Turning down a nominee with great voter support can be costly for the authorities. In some areas, for instance in the Beijing district elections or at universities, studies has shown that many voters are aware of their rights and do not accept pressure in the nomination process (author’s interview 2001; Jacobs 1992, pp 171-199). One district people’s deputy who had served in several rounds as people’s deputy said that the first time she was elected, the party nominated her. After acting as people’s deputy for one term and pointing to many problems in the society, the authorities found her a troublemaker and did not nominate her for a second term. Instead, her voters stepped in and nominated her, after which she once again was elected (author’s interview 1998).

Third, a fundamental principle for democratic elections is that the positions to be filled are contested. The people’s congress competition does not allow for complete free competition for people’s deputy seats because of the aforementioned consultation process. However, the law also guarantees that every deputy position is contested. Theoretically any people’s deputy candidate runs the risk of not being elected. In practice the risk is small for party endorsed candidates to lose since candidates in many cases can finish second or third in their election district and still get elected. Nevertheless, it puts some pressure on the candidate not to annoy voters.

Yet, the elections are far from being free and competitive. Factors emanating from the political structure as well as the election laws, rules, and procedures severely constrain the freedom of elections. Restrictions of political rights in China directly affect the elections in several ways. First, the limit on campaigning is essentially a restriction on the freedom of speech. Although the freedom of speech in practice has been expanded these last few years and political discussions are frequent in for example academic writings, this freedom is more strictly restricted in elections.

Second, the freedom of organisation is even more restrained. Only the Communist Party or organisations that are controlled by the Communist Party are allowed to form. People’s deputies are elected as individuals representing their constituency. Together with the other deputies that represent the same locality they can sometimes put forward the interests of the locality. There are little or no opportunities to organise groups within the people’s congress based on structural issues. In the same way, voters cannot group together in organised ways in order to support certain candidates. This restricts the voters’ chances of building alliances across their work units. Instead the voters usually vote for the candidates of their own work unit or village in competition with candidates for other work units or villages.

Third, as if the above restrictions on the political rights were not enough for the authorities to control the elections, the whole election procedure is controlled in order to produce results that are satisfactory for the authorities. The election is administered and controlled by the election committee consisting of members of the local party committee as well as the people’s congress standing committee. The election committee must make sure that the important cadres are elected to the people’s congress, that no troublemakers are elected, and that the result represents a suitable distribution of social categories. The Chinese authorities’ idea of people’s deputies being the representatives of the people is that different social categories among the voters should be represented by a certain amount of people’s deputies.
from the same social categories. Higher-level party committees send instructions to the election committee on the recommended distribution of social categories for the congress. These categories include sex, age, occupation, party affiliation, ethnicity, and education. Also, important organisations such as trade union and military have to be represented with a certain number of deputies in the congress. Based on the recommendations, the election committee will make considerable efforts to direct the election procedure in a way that the recommended quotas can be filled. There is, however, no guarantee that they will be able to do this. In some areas, the distribution between social categories will deviate quite a lot from the recommended distribution (author’s interview with election committee member 2001).

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Based on a survey of voters in China, Shi Tianjian (1999) finds that in a comparison between non-competitive elections to work units and semi-competitive elections to both work units and local people’s congress, the voting behaviour changes. Shi finds that people interested in politics and with high education voted in the semi-competitive elections but not in the non-competitive elections. People who were not interested had a much higher turnout in the non-competitive elections which leads him to conclude that: “Even a little democracy, that is, altered people’s cost-benefit calculations, and that, in turn, altered their voting behaviour” (Shi 1999: 1136). One example of the increasing interest in the elections is the phenomenon of vote buying. This has been reported in the press several times as a problem. While the authorities regard this as a problem, one leading Chinese election researcher argued that vote buying is a promising example of the increasing status of people’s deputies (author’s interview 2001).

At all levels of the state administration, the highest legal decision-making authority lies with the people’s congresses. However, the constitution also states that the Communist Party has a leading role in China. Since the exact definition of the leading role is absent, it is mostly up to the local party committees to define that role. This fact, together with constraints inherent in the political system such as the weak legal system and lack of resources for the people’s congresses ensures that the local party committee in most cases is the de facto decision making authority.

Nevertheless, in tandem with the strengthening of the legal system, the people’s congresses at all levels have stepped up their political authority. Through increasing supervisory functions, more financial resources, younger and more highly educated staff and people’s deputies, and an increasing status as the legal watchdog, the people’s congresses have changed their status as ‘rubber stamps’ to institutions with real political clout.

Previously the people’s congresses were places for model farmers and workers, and retired cadres. Now many people’s deputies are highly educated professionals. More and more deputies, especially intellectuals and entrepreneurs, are taking their roles as people’s representatives seriously and contest the official candidates in elections for government positions. In some areas, people’s congress standing committees are becoming involved in the decision-making process and in their role as monitoring organs many people’s congresses have started to put pressure on the local governments and party committees. As many local people’s congresses are becoming assertive, the political significance of people’s congress elections in turn increases.

Experiments with town and township elections
In December 1998, the township of Buyun in Sichuan province held the first ever direct election of a township mayor in China. A total of 6236 voters elected the township vice party secretary Tan Xiaojun with 50.19 percent of the votes. Tang won before a village chief and a teacher. The election was first reported in outspoken official newspaper Nanfang Zhoumo (15/1 1999). Later the international press got hold of the news and it has since then been mentioned many times in articles concerning the possibilities of local democracy in China.

The first official reaction was an article in Fazhi Ribao, which, although in soft wording, criticised the election as unconstitutional. The constitution states that the heads of the township government should be elected by the township people’s congress. In Buyun, the township people’s congress had been completely ignored. However, the result of the election was
accepted – possibly because the winner was the vice party secretary – and Tang stood for re-election in 2001 and once again won the election, this time with 52 percent of the votes. In the second election, the local authorities made sure to follow the constitution by having the township people’s congress formally approving the result of the election.7

Another widely publicised case is the election in 1999 of town mayor in Dapeng town, Shenzhen special economic zone. The Dapeng election used a system of open nomination of candidates inspired by similar methods used in some village elections. The voters nominated a total of 76 candidates, and the six candidates with most votes, all of them communist cadres, were decided by the Dapeng party committee to become official candidates. One fifth of the voters participated in the final stage where the incumbent town mayor, Li Weiwen, was elected by an overwhelming majority of the voters. Li was then nominated for town mayor by the Dapeng party committee and elected by the Dapeng people’s congress (Cheng 2001).

A system of opinion polls has been applied in several cases. In Linyi county, Shanxi province, the voters in a selected township were asked to give marks on the township party secretary, the township mayor and the township people’s congress chair. In order for them to remain in their positions, they needed at least 50 percent confidence from the voters. In the end, they received between 88-90 percent confidence votes (Shi Weimin 2000: 350-63).

Several similar experiments have appeared in different parts of China, especially in Sichuan province. However, it should be remembered that the towns and townships where these experiments take place only constitute a fraction of China’s more than 40,000 towns and townships. Except for the Buyun case, all election experiments have first ensured approval from the central or at least provincial level authorities.8 The main issue has been to follow the constitution, which states that the local people’s congress should elect the executive leaders. In practice however, the elections have had the function of primary elections and the role of the local people’s congress chair has been reduced to approve the result already decided by the ‘opinion polls’.

Thus one question regarding the expansion of elections is whether the elections should concern legislative or executive power. By expanding the extent to which voters elect the local executive leaders, the authority of the local people’s congress is reduced to approving the result. This would further weaken the authority of the people’s congress and consequently make the people’s congress elections even less significant. The advantage, from the perspective of the regime, of instead reforming the people’s congress elections, by for example opening up the nomination process and allowing for open campaigning, is that it could increase voters engagement in elections while still maintaining the authorities control of the executive power. On the other hand, local authorities might find the election of executive leaders more manageable than the election of several people’s deputies since it only involves one position, albeit a very powerful position. Moreover, one objective of these election experiments has been to improve the recruitment of cadres (Cheng 2001: 132), and this objective is better served by reforming the election of cadres rather than that of people’s deputies.

Consequences of local elections
Local elections concern local issues. When two villagers compete for the position as village head it is a question of who shall lead the village in deciding collective projects such as the building of a road or a school. When electing county people’s congress deputies the issues involved are to what extent the candidate can speak for the locality and forward problems such as the local sanitation situation to the local government. Even when the election concerns the executive leaders in townships, their authority only regard that particular township.

The Chinese regime’s instrumental view of elections is typical of the pragmatism of the regime since Deng Xiaoping took over the leadership from Mao Zedong and that trend has continued during the reign of Jiang Zemin. The goal of the reforms has always been to make China rich and strong but also to maintain social and political stability. Since local elections can be a means to achieve these goals, they formed a part of the reform package.
Direct elections in China have little to do with the national or even provincial policies. Yet, local matters are those that concern the daily life of many citizens. As the voters realise that contacting the local people’s deputy can improve the social services of the neighbourhood, the elections also become more important. The elections are legal procedures through which small but real changes can be attained. As the legal system gets strengthened, the popularly elected assemblies step up their powers in relation to the local government or the local party committee. This process leads to the institutionalisation of legal procedures for political decision-making and to increasing accountability of decision-makers towards the voters.

The Chinese regime has not developed a system of local elections in order for China to become a democracy with a multiparty system. Instead, the election reforms have come about in response to problems in society. Villagers committees were given the role of handling the social problems in rural areas and diverting the protests from the township and county governments to the village leadership. The residents committees have evolved in order to handle the increasing social services as the state work unit system dismantles. The strengthening of the local people’s congresses is a part of the general build up of a legal governance system, to rule China by law. Furthermore, the authorities have acknowledged that the elections are important means for fighting local corruption.

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NOTES
1 This article is partly based on fieldwork during 2000-2001. The research project was funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for comments on an earlier draft.
3 According to a survey by O’Brien and Li (1997: 486), villagers in 45% of the villages surveyed said that their village heads had been elected. In other surveys the figures for villages that had held elections were 75% (Shi 1999) and 80% (Kennedy 2002:482). Another survey by Li (1999) found that 15% of the elections could be called competitive.
5 In 1986, the required number of candidates per seat was lowered from between 50 – 100 percent to between 30-100 percent more candidates per seat. The required number of voters needed for a nomination was also increased from three voters to ten and the system of primary election that was allowed as a nomination method in the 1979 election law was no longer permitted in the1986 version. However, this right was restored in the 1995 revision of the election laws and it is currently used in some localities as a method of nomination. Primary elections have been used as a nomination method for elections in the 1998 county level elections in Beijing, Tianjin and Yunnan (Shi Weimin 1999: 410) and township elections in Chongqing (Manion 2000: 764 – 782).
6 The increasing powers of people’s congresses at local level have been documented by O’Brien and Luehrmann 1998; Chen 1999; Cai and Wang 2000; Xia 2000a; 2000b; Cho 2002; Almén 2003.
7 Huang and Zou 2002: 218. The Buyun election has also been studied in detail by Cheng 2001, Liu 2001 and Li 2002.
8 Lianjiang Li 2002 has recently argued that the Buyun elections were, if not directly approved by the superior level authorities, at least silently accepted.

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