

THE BALLOT BOX | DAVID BUXBAUM

## Could township elections be the next step?

As a new leadership emerges in China, we are seeing the first throes of representative democracy, driven not by a desire to embrace democracy for its own sake, but by the urgent need to weed out corruption in the Communist Party and state bureaucracy.

One of the first acts of Hu Jintao, having been appointed general secretary of the Communist Party, was to stress the primacy of the constitution. While that was consistent with the support shown by the government and the party in recent years to strengthen the rule of law, Mr Hu's remarks were significant because the implication was clearly to move away from the traditional supremacy of the party. At a Politburo meeting in mid-December, Mr Hu continued in the same vein, criticising a number of officials for abusing their authority and acts of oppression. On that occasion, he is said to have emphasised the need for political reform and the importance of the party being in closer touch with the needs of the people.

The Fourth Generation clearly recognises that corruption is undermining the legitimacy of the Chinese state, and that one way to combat it is to break up the monolithic appointments system that underpins both the party and the bureaucracy. Mr Hu, Wen Jiabao – tipped to be the next prime minister – and other senior leaders in the new team are reportedly considering elections for key party positions, to unseat corrupt officials.

At the village level, China has had direct elections of village heads for some time. Those who favour an expansion to China's 45,000 townships are motivated, in large part, by a desire to end corruption.

Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference chairman Li Ruihuan, who is

retiring, is said to advocate extending elections to the level of towns and townships, and even districts, cities and provinces, as part of the fight against corruption.

Mr Hu's position is less clear, although he is concerned both with the party's loss of touch with the people, and the quality of employees.

President Jiang Zemin has apparently changed his views at least once on whether to extend elections to the township level.

Even so, there are many advocates and there have been successful experiments in towns in Sichuan and Guangdong. In 1998, Nanchang county, in Sichuan, held direct elections for township officials. The Buyun townships followed suit. There have also been several open selections of township heads, so-called "recommendation votes", in places such as Dapeng town in Shenzhen, Zhuoli town in Shanxi province, and in Henan. Shenzhen is now experimenting with the separation of the party from the government, curtailing some of the party's powers. In addition, local congresses have begun to examine the activities of local administrations. In several locations, local governments have been asking local – and even foreign – residents to rate their performance.

In theory, each level of power is chosen through a parliamentary system, with the local or national congress responsible for selecting the government. But in reality, members of the government are appointed by the party.

This has changed in the past few years, following the rejection by provisional congresses of party appointments for government administrative positions. Local congresses have become more active in supervising law enforcement and in rating the

work of officials and organisations. While at the national level, the National People's Congress concerns itself primarily with legislation and the acceptance or rejection of reports of government bureaus, the local party congresses have employed their supervisory role to enhance their authority.

In the last decade, the party has found the congresses useful tools to investigate corruption. In addition, the congresses, by having additional authority to establish the rule of law, have developed more autonomy to initiate action.

If local congresses were properly funded, and reforms implemented to separate party functions for those of government – and if Mr Hu's emphasis on the constitution was to affect the workings of government – then China would take important steps towards a system of checks and balances.

Finally, many party congress personnel are in favour of direct elections.

While Mr Hu is in favour of the election of party officials and strengthening the rule of law, he has not committed himself to direct townships elections. The battle is between those influenced by the Singapore model and those who favour the Taiwan model, which could also be described as a South Korean, or pre-1997 Hong Kong, model.

Under the Singaporean model, high government salaries and strict laws are used to reduce corruption, while democracy, an independent press, independent judiciary, freedom of speech and assembly remain facades. A great portion of state wealth is siphoned off in investments around the world, with no accountability.

Taiwan, South Korea and pre-handover Hong Kong, on the other hand, have used

elections to promote democracy, legitimise the government and – in the first two cases – reduce corruption.

While former Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui encouraged the participation of criminal elements in politics, thereby increasing corruption, elections have since helped reduce corruption. From the late 1980s to the time of the handover, Hong Kong justifiably enjoyed a reputation for integrity, but post-1997 there have been serious lapses. The government has undermined the rule of law by according special favours to its friends, undermined the judiciary by sending a case to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress to overturn a decision of the highest court, and undermined the Basic Law by failing to support elections and by introducing onerous laws against subversion. Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa is a devotee of the Singapore model.

There is a range of views among Fourth Generation leaders about elections in the townships, but they have united against corruption, in support of political reform and enhancing the rule of law. Eventually, they could support direct elections in townships, in view of the many failures of the Singaporean model. Singapore's example of social discontent, misuse of state funds for foreign investments and harassment of the political opposition through the courts are all signs of its deficiencies. China is likely to take note.

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