Week 3 Assignment: Essay - Developing a Democracy

Savita Raghunadan

[Institutional Affiliation(s)]

Author Note

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Countries all over the world have experimented with different political systems and ideologies. Although democracy became the dominant political ideology after the 20th century, countries have adopted different versions of it based on their needs and influences. In China, democratic reforms have also evolved to create a unique political model that is distinct from the Socialist model of the Soviet Union yet also different from the Western liberal democratic model.

China was first introduced to democracy in the late 19th and early 20th century; however, debate over its application and definition has remained a source of ideological conflict since then. In the late 1980s, China introduced elections at the village level to combat corruption and maintain social order. The nominated candidates belong to the same party but are elected to serve on a 3-year term. Local democratic elections have remained in place since a few decades, while at the top level, a single party ‘political meritocracy’ is in place. Officials at the higher levels are promoted and selected based on their virtue and ability. This system was inspired by the Sui dynasty in the 6th century who introduced an exam for the purpose. Today, public officials are also required to pass public-service exams and are expected to give a good performance at the lower level before climbing up the political chain of command. The constitution of China legally guarantees power for the communist party to have supreme political authority within the system.

In China, just like other countries, there are have been four main challenges or barriers to democratic developments: state-building, nation-building, distribution and participation (Magstadt, 2017). To ensure nation-building, Chinese society and culture are protected from globalization while marketing certain aspects of Chinese civilization to the global world to attract business, capital, and tourism (Sutherland, 2012). Although the government recognizes ethnic diversity, Chinese nation-building is in a decentralized form, which focusses on the Chinese homeland’s fortunes, and is aimed at creating loyalty and a sense of national belonging. Soft power is used to further project this communal identity to emphasize a positive image which represents ‘a peaceful political rise’ and reflects Confucius’ legacy. Official patriotism in constructing a national identity paints Japan as the ‘other’ imperialist side. Furthermore, political participation within China is achieved through the process of recruiting senior party members by means of the local vote. In the case of distribution, income inequality still exists in China; however, it is less than other parts of the world due to its socialist policies. It still is higher than the median because of regional resources and wealth inequalities, such as between low-income regions and cities like Shanghai.

Owing to China's unique needs and circumstances, the western liberal democratic model may not be a suitable choice for China. Current Chinese leaders instead stress more on economic growth and maintaining social order. However, the Taiwanese democratic model has certain unique elements which can help democratize China practically in ways that other models cannot. In Taiwan, political debates and criticism of leaders are common, along with freedom of association, speech, religion, and competition among political parties besides economic growth and prosperity. A majority of Taiwanese belong to the same ethnic majority group as the Chinese population and are similarly inspired by Confucian values; however, they do not see democratic liberties conflicting with their cultural identity. The model can allow China to maintain its stability and growth while becoming more politically pluralistic. In the 1990s when Taiwan transitioned to democracy, there were fears of polarization and political stability, yet with time, the political climate stabilized and replaced the one-party system with a diverse multi-party political system which contest public elections (Fell, 2006). The democratic ideology of Taiwan, thus, is more suited to China as it stems from the same origin. It will not only help China democratize further, but ensure that economic growth continues unabated.

# References

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