Why Did Song Jiaoren Believe Parliamentary Politics Could Change China?

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Late at night on March 20, 1913, at the Shanghai railway station, Song Jiaoren, acting chairman of the Kuomintang, was shot while on his way north to Beijing. He died two days later, aged only thirty-one. Before his death, he was engaged in an ambitious undertaking: leading the Kuomintang to victory in the first National Assembly election, and then, in its capacity as the parliamentary majority party, organizing a responsible cabinet that would reduce Yuan Shikai to a figurehead president. This was the first time in Chinese history that anyone had tried to use parliamentary politics, rather than military force, to constrain the supreme ruler.

Why did Song Jiaoren believe parliamentary politics could change China? The answer does not lie in books, but in the brief political window of 1912–1913: there was a Provisional Constitution, there was a nationwide National Assembly election, and there was a party that had won the election. Song Jiaoren's judgment was that, so long as these three things were in place, the president would have no choice but to bow to the parliamentary majority.

I. Song Jiaoren's Plan: Using a Party Cabinet to Tame the President

Song Jiaoren's political design was very simple, and very bold. As one of the most important organizers of the Tongmenghui, he knew well that revolutionaries were good at destruction but not at construction — overthrowing the Qing had depended on military force, but building a republic could only depend on institutions. In August 1912, he reorganized the Tongmenghui into an open political party — the Kuomintang — with its sights set directly on the National Assembly election. Under the cabinet-system spirit of the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China, the president's nomination of a premier had to secure the Senate's consent, and the cabinet was responsible to parliament. If the Kuomintang won a parliamentary majority, it could put forward its own cabinet premier and hold real executive power; Yuan Shikai, though occupying the presidency, could only serve as a figurehead head of state.

The crux of this plan lay in "seizing power lawfully": not by assassination, not by a coup, but by the ballot. In speeches all over the country, Song Jiaoren repeatedly promoted the case for a party cabinet, shaping the Kuomintang into a modern party whose battlefield was parliament. In the National Assembly election of late 1912 to early 1913, the Kuomintang did indeed win a sweeping victory, taking the most seats in both houses. Song Jiaoren was only one step away from forming a cabinet.

II. Why He Believed a Parliamentary Majority Could Constrain Yuan Shikai

Song Jiaoren's confidence came from three realities. First, there was a legal basis: the Provisional Constitution had established the framework of a responsible cabinet system, and presidential power was checked by the Senate. Second, there was electoral capital: the Kuomintang was then the only party with a nationwide organizational network, and its electoral victory proved its capacity for mobilization. Third, there was international precedent: parliamentary politics in Britain and Japan both showed that, so long as the cabinet was responsible to parliament, even strongmen could be tamed by the system.

At a deeper level, Song Jiaoren saw through Yuan Shikai's weak point. Yuan Shikai's power came from the loyalty of the Beiyang Army, but on "legitimacy" he had a shortcoming — the Republic of China needed a constitution and an election to prove itself a republic, and the powers' recognition was also tied to whether China really looked like a republic. Song Jiaoren's strategy was to force Yuan Shikai into this legitimacy framework: if you recognize the republic, you must accept a parliamentary majority forming a cabinet; if you do not accept it, you are tantamount to admitting that you are a restorer of monarchy, and you will stand nowhere, at home or abroad.

III. A Gunshot and the Abortion of the Parliamentary Experiment

On March 20, 1913, Song Jiaoren was assassinated in Shanghai. The mastermind behind the assassination remains without a settled conclusion to this day, but public opinion at the time generally pointed to Yuan Shikai. After the Song case broke, the moderate faction within the Kuomintang lost its leader, and Sun Yat-sen turned to launching the "Second Revolution," using force to oppose Yuan. The Second Revolution quickly failed. Yuan Shikai was elected formal president in October 1913 and dissolved parliament in 1914, and the first experiment in parliamentary politics thus came to an end.

What is worth noting is this: parliamentary politics did not "fail"; rather, it "had no chance to succeed." Song Jiaoren's plan never received a single complete opportunity to be implemented — the Kuomintang won the election, but did not get to form a cabinet; the constitution wrote in the cabinet system, but did not get to see it operate. It was violence that first ended the experiment, not the experiment itself being proven unworkable.

IV. Song Jiaoren's Political Legacy

Song Jiaoren's death left two lessons for posterity. First, parliamentary politics needs not only elections and political parties, but also a political culture of being able to "afford to lose" and the nationalization of the military — when the person who controls the army can answer ballots with a gun, parliament is only an empty house. After Yuan Shikai, the mainland never again saw the kind of parliamentary politics Song Jiaoren had envisioned, until decades later it blossomed and bore fruit elsewhere.

Second, Song Jiaoren proved that another political imagination was possible: the transfer of power can be bloodless. The reason the "dynastic-change cycle" of modern Chinese history (see the conclusion of the first question in this series) kept recurring was precisely that every transfer of power depended on military force to be completed. Song Jiaoren wanted to use ballots to break this cycle. He failed, but this question — how to let power be handed over peacefully — remains to this day a core topic of China's political transition.

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- Index of the Forty Questions on the History of the Republic of China
- Question 1, "From the Xinhai Revolution to Today: Why Has China Repeatedly Fallen into the Political Cycle of Dynastic Change?" — the conclusion on the "dynastic-change cycle," cited in this question
- Question 4, "Why Was Yuan Shikai Able to Destroy the Early Republican System?" — the conclusion on Yuan Shikai destroying the constitution and parliament, cited in this question
- Public historical materials: biography of Song Jiaoren (1882–1913); the March 20, 1913 Shanghai

assassination; his death on March 22; his advocacy of the responsible cabinet system

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