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CCE-114 | What Does the Existence of Opposition Parties Mean for Political Health?

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Abstract: “Opposition party” means very different things in different political vocabularies. In some countries it is a formal parliamentary role: legally challenging the government and seeking to govern after the next election. Elsewhere it is understood as an “opposing side” or even a “dangerous force.” This article first distinguishes three often-confused Chinese terms: opposition party, party out of power, and participating party. It then asks what effect the presence of a legal opposition party able to compete for governing power has on a political system’s “health.” It proposes four functions—offering alternatives, oversight and information disclosure, channeling discontent, and enabling peaceful transfers of power—and tests them against three verifiable cases: developments after the Democratic Progressive Party was founded in the Republic of China (Taiwan) in 1986; the PRC government’s official description of “democratic parties” in its 2021 white paper; and the 1998 attempt to register the China Democracy Party in mainland China and its consequences. The article takes seriously two counterarguments: multiparty competition can create division and inefficiency; and having opposition parties does not necessarily mean having democracy. It closes with five questions readers can apply themselves and an explanation of its limitations. It describes institutional arrangements and public positions without deciding the answer for readers.

I. Clarifying the terms

Three terms must be distinguished before discussion because they are often used interchangeably.

Opposition party means a party outside the government that seeks to challenge current rulers and become the next governing party through elections and parliament. In the publisher’s description of Robert Dahl’s edited 1966 book *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies*, the right of opponents to organize, appeal to voters in elections and parliament, and oppose the government is described as one of the most important milestones in democratic development [1]. A later review quotes Dahl as calling political parties “one of the most visible, and certainly one of the most effective forms of opposition” in democracies [2].

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Party out of power (zaiye dang) is broadly synonymous with opposition party in Chinese, emphasizing that the party does not currently govern.

Participating party (canzheng dang) is the official PRC government term for its eight "democratic parties." The State Council Information Office's June 2021 white paper *China's New Political Party System* states: "The democratic parties are not parties out of power or opposition parties, nor are they bystanders or outsiders. Rather, they are participating parties that take part in state governance under the leadership of the Communist Party of China" [4]. This is important: it expressly says that, in the mainland Chinese government's institutional design, these parties do not play the role of opposition parties. The white paper characterizes the arrangement as "leadership by the Communist Party and cooperation among multiple parties; governance by the Communist Party and participation by multiple parties" [4].

Thus the meaning of the question "Why do opposition parties matter?" varies between systems. This article uses Dahl's sense: a legally existing party that can compete for governing power. In discussing mainland China, it distinguishes this from the official category of "participating parties."

II. Four possible functions of opposition parties

The following four functions are an analytical framework assembled by this article's author from the literature, not a verbatim formulation by any one scholar. Readers may add or remove items.

First, offering alternatives. Meaningful elections require genuinely different candidates and policies. Where only one proposal exists, an election resembles confirmation rather than choice.

Second, oversight and information disclosure. Parliamentary questions, criticism in the media, and identifying incumbents' mistakes during campaigns may expose problems sooner. Whether this works depends on opposition representation, access to public speech, and legal protection for speaking.

Third, channeling discontent. Every society has grievances. Legal party channels can turn dissatisfaction into votes and legislative

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proposals. If those channels close, discontent may move to streets, online spaces, or more confrontational forms—but the evidence is complicated. A cross-national study of 51 parties in 24 noncompetitive regimes found that more than 60 percent had participated in "contentious actions," including protests or political violence. Using political-process/opportunity theory, its authors found, according to the abstract, not a simple "more repression means more confrontation" relationship: parties engaged in more contentious action where repression of party organization was lower [17]. Only Franklin's 2002 abstract was read. The study shows that parties may engage in contention without competitive elections; it cannot establish that closing channels necessarily causes violent confrontation.

Fourth, enabling peaceful transfers of power. Opposition parties make replacing rulers possible under agreed rules rather than through coups or revolutions. This is the hardest function to verify because an actual transfer must take place. Taiwan provides a test case in the next section.

Yet the presence of opposition parties does not guarantee any of these functions. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's concept of "competitive authoritarianism" describes regimes with genuine elections and opposition parties that seriously contest power, but with a profoundly uneven playing field and overwhelming advantages for incumbents. Such regimes do not qualify as democracies [3]. They therefore add a fifth condition to minimum procedural standards for democracy: a "reasonably level playing field" between incumbent and opposition [3]. Counting parties is not enough; the fairness of their competition matters.

III. Case One: Republic of China (Taiwan)—from the dangwai movement to party formation and repeated alternation

In May 1949, authorities issued implementing rules restricting unlawful assembly, association, demonstrations, petitions, and various strikes during martial law, curbing freedom of association. Educational materials from Taiwan's National Archives describe this as the enforcement of a ban on political parties, and note that a 1960

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effort centered on Lei Chen and *Free China* magazine to establish a "China Democratic Party" failed [11].

On September 28, 1986, activists from the non-Kuomintang *dangwai* movement announced the Democratic Progressive Party's establishment at the Grand Hotel in Taipei. The DPP's official history, the *Taipei Times*, and Taiwanese civic sources agree on the date and location; attendance figures differ: *Taiwan Communiqué* reports 135 and a Chinese Wikipedia party-history entry says 132 attended [8] [12]. A 1987 English-language paper reports that founder Fei Hsi-ping announced at 6:05 p.m. that evening that the "Democratic Progressive Party is established" [15]. Crucially, this act was still prohibited at the time. The DPP says it broke through martial-law restrictions and became Taiwan's first locally founded postwar party [8]. The *Taipei Times* says the KMT authorities arrested no one, and notes that the event was held at the Chiang family's Grand Hotel [8].

The attitude of Chiang Ching-kuo, then Taiwan's highest leader, can presently be cited only indirectly. A 2026 Central News Agency report says that, in an October 1986 interview with *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham, Chiang said that an opposition party was merely a phenomenon of the political process [9]. This is secondhand reporting, not a checked original interview, and is offered only as a lead rather than a verified verbatim quotation.

Martial law ended on July 15, 1987 [10], but full freedom of association did not arrive overnight. National Archives teaching materials state that although the government "lifted the party ban" in 1987, the Period of Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion continued. The Assembly and Parade Act was promulgated in January 1988 and the Civil Associations Act on January 27, 1989, still restricting assembly and association [11]. Another retrospective identifies the Legislative Yuan's amendment of the Civil Associations Act on January 20, 1989 as the point at which political organizations could register [11]. These dates differ—one refers to promulgation and the other possibly to the final legislative reading. This article does not reconcile them; it emphasizes that lifting the party ban was a process, not a single date.

Fourteen years elapsed between founding and taking office. In March 1990 students launched the Wild Lily movement, calling for

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dissolution of the National Assembly and repeal of the Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of Communist Rebellion; these demands were gradually implemented [18]. Taiwan held its first direct presidential election in 1996, with turnout of 76.04 percent according to the Central Election Commission [18]. In 2000 the DPP presidential candidate won; the Chinese Wikipedia DPP-history entry describes this as a peaceful transfer of power "14 years after party formation" [12]. In his 2008 inauguration address, Ma Ying-jeou described the KMT victory as a "second party alternation," saying its significance was "not to celebrate the victory of a party or individual" [13]. In 2016 the DPP won majorities in both presidential and Legislative Yuan elections. In 2024 a different outcome emerged: Lai Ching-te won the presidency with 40.05 percent of the vote, while the 113-seat Legislative Yuan comprised 52 KMT seats, 51 DPP seats, 8 Taiwan People's Party seats, and 2 independents, according to a compilation of Central Election Commission data [14]. The president's party thus lacked a legislative majority.

This case shows concrete indications of all four functions: alternatives (vote shares across presidential contests), oversight (opposition seats in the legislature, especially in 2024), channels for discontent (the DPP's origins in the *dangwai* movement), and peaceful transfers (2000, 2008, 2016). It does not establish the effects of those transfers on public policy or governance quality, nor compare governance outcomes for the same country in periods with and without opposition parties.

IV. Case Two: The PRC government's official position

The 2021 white paper cites the constitutional provision that "the system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation led by the Communist Party of China will exist and develop for a long time to come" [4]. It describes a system including the CPC, eight democratic parties, and people without party affiliation. These include the Revolutionary Committee of the Chinese Kuomintang and the China Democratic League [4].

The white paper's favorable assessment is an official position, reproduced here rather than endorsed. It says the system is based on "cooperation, participation and consultation" and performs functions including political participation, expression of interests, social

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integration, democratic oversight, and maintenance of stability [4]. It claims that the system avoids defects of older party systems in which entrenched partisan, class, regional, and group interests cause stubbornness, exclusion, and social division, and that it advances scientific and democratic decision-making [4]. The principal government criticism of multiparty competition here is that it produces division. An earlier official English-language page also describes the CPC as the “only ruling party,” with eight other parties participating in deliberation and administration of state affairs on condition of accepting CPC leadership [5].

This article has not assessed how much influence the democratic parties exercise in practice or independently verified the functions claimed by the white paper. It compares only institutional roles: under the official design, democratic parties participate in consultation and supervision, while the CPC alone holds governing power. By the definition in Section I, they are not opposition parties; the government itself says so.

V. Case Three: The 1998 attempt to register the China Democracy Party

The third case concerns an attempt to establish an opposition party in mainland China. A 2000 Human Rights Watch report says the China Democracy Party (CDP), which emerged in mid-1998, represented the first effort since the PRC’s establishment in 1949 to obtain formal legal registration for an opposition party. Over the next eighteen months, it was systematically suppressed; at least 34 people were sentenced to terms of up to 13 years for alleged attempts at subversion [6]. A contemporaneous Xinhua report on the verdict against Xu Wenli, reproduced by Amnesty International, presents the prosecution’s position: the court found that Xu secretly organized purported CDP branches in Beijing and Tianjin to overthrow state power, recruited members, and sought and received funding from overseas “hostile organizations” for subversive activities [7].

Multiple sources agree on the principal sentences. On December 21, 1998, Beijing’s First Intermediate People’s Court sentenced Xu Wenli to 13 years’ imprisonment for “plotting to subvert state power” and deprived him of political rights for three years. On the same day, a Hangzhou court sentenced Wang Youcai to 11 years. Qin Yongmin

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was tried in Wuhan and sentenced to 12 years; his sentence was announced on December 22 [7]. The US State Department's 1998 human-rights report says the three were tried for trying to organize and register the CDP as an opposition party and for alleged collusion with foreign forces to overthrow state power. It characterized the closed trials as serious due-process violations [7]. *The New York Times* reported that evidence presented by prosecutors included Xu's receipt of $500 from an overseas dissident [7]. Amnesty International noted that these were the first high-profile dissidents tried after the 1997 revision of the criminal code replaced "counterrevolutionary" offenses with "endangering state security"; the trials followed roughly three weeks of detention, and the defendants lacked lawyers of their own choosing [7].

The limits of the sources must be stated plainly. These details come primarily from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the US State Department, and press reporting. The official account is represented here only by Xinhua's reporting on Xu's verdict as reproduced by Amnesty International. This article did not obtain the full official PRC judgments. Readers evaluating the case should seek published mainland Chinese judgments or official briefings.

VI. Two opposing arguments

Two substantial counterarguments merit separate responses.

First: multiparty competition has costs. It may bring polarization, delayed decisions, short-termism, and escalating campaign promises. The PRC white paper makes this case (Section IV) [4]. The empirical question is whether division is caused by the existence of opposition parties or by other factors, such as economic inequality, identity divisions, and media environments. This article found no comparative study sufficient to settle that question. The academic literature is not unanimous: a review published online in 2022 notes that opposition research now covers many authoritarian and hybrid regimes. It summarizes research suggesting that neither passive avoidance nor active "counter-polarization" offers opposition parties an optimistic prospect in polarized contexts [2]. Another study covering 18 advanced democracies found that opposition parties become more fragmented where parliamentary rules give them greater influence over policy, suggesting a potential trade-off between "deliberative"

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and “competitive” features [16]. Even within democracies, opposition quality varies.

Second: opposition parties do not automatically mean democracy. Levitsky and Way show that genuine opposition exists under competitive authoritarianism, but unfair competition makes victory difficult [3]. This cautions us when considering both Taiwan and the 1998 mainland case: meaningful opposition depends on whether parties may register, compete fairly, and actually assume office after winning.

VII. Five questions readers can apply

These five questions are the author’s own framework and have not undergone effectiveness testing.

1. **Registration:** Can people who wish to found a new party register it legally? What are the requirements and consequences? Compare the 1998 case with Taiwan in 1986–1989. 2. **Competition:** Can opposition parties participate fairly in elections, including access to media, fundraising, and public resources? 3. **Victory:** If an opposition party wins, can it actually take power? Are there previous examples of transfers? 4. **Oversight:** Do opposition parties hold parliamentary seats and powers to question and investigate? 5. **Rules:** Do opposition parties themselves respect the rules, including accepting defeat? This is a responsibility of opposition parties and a concern of many political scientists.

The same questions can be applied to any country, including the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan), without prejudging the answers.

VIII. Limitations

First, most sources used here were search-result excerpts or web snippets, not fully read documents. Dahl’s book and Levitsky and Way’s book were accessed through publisher descriptions or fragments of a conference paper; review articles were used via abstracts. Second, Chiang Ching-kuo’s remark is secondhand; the original interview was not checked. Third, the Taiwan case covers party formation, deregulation, and electoral outcomes, without evaluating their governance effects or comparing governance quality

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over time; the description of the 2000 transfer relies on a DPP history account and electoral vote figures were not individually checked. Fourth, the mainland China sections rely on the official white paper and external human-rights organizations. For the 1998 cases, only a Xinhua account of Xu Wenli's verdict as reproduced by Amnesty International was obtained, not complete official judgments; the actual effectiveness of the democratic parties was not assessed. Fifth, only the abstract of Franklin (2002) on parties in noncompetitive regimes was read, so it provides only a correlational indication. Sixth, the "four functions" and "five questions" are the author's synthesis. Seventh, this article makes no overall judgment ranking political systems.

IX. Conclusion

Opposition parties can contribute to political health in four main ways: offering voters alternatives, exposing governing errors sooner, giving discontent a legal outlet, and allowing power to change hands under rules. Taiwan's experience since 1986 illustrates how all four can operate and how lifting a party ban unfolds over time. The PRC government advances a different institutional design: it explicitly says the democratic parties "are not parties out of power or opposition parties" and argues that competition can produce social division. External accounts of the 1998 China Democracy Party case indicate that attempts to register an opposition party in mainland China ended in criminal sentences; this article lacks the full official reasoning beyond Xinhua's account of Xu Wenli's verdict. Conversely, the mere existence of opposition parties does not establish democracy. Fair competition, actual transfers following victories, and opposition adherence to rules also matter. Readers can apply the five questions above to evaluate any political system for themselves.

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