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T068｜Can Citizens Organize Associations Not Controlled by the Ruling Party?

Myths T068 · v1.0 ｜ 2026-11-22

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https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/en-myths-t068-can-citizens-organize-associations-not-controlled-by-the-ruling-party/

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The claim

The official case is simple. In the People's Republic of China (Mainland), citizens enjoy freedom of association, and the proof is in the numbers: the State Council's 2021 white paper *China: Democracy That Works* reports that by November 2021 more than 900,000 social organizations had been registered with civil affairs departments, including 2,284 national ones. These groups draw up their own charters, manage their members, and "自主开展活动" — carry out activities on their own initiative — channelling members' views into public affairs, with a named channel among the paper's seven channels of consultative democracy. The conclusion: citizens in the PRC can organize freely, and these associations are genuine, self-governing parts of democratic life, not arms of the ruling party.

What the record actually says

Section III(4), on democratic management, reads: "社会团体、基金会、社会服务机构等社会组织，普遍制定章程，加强组织成员管理，自主开展活动……截至2021年11月，各级民政部门共登记社会组织超过90万家，其中全国性社会组织2284家。" In translation: social organizations "generally formulate charters, strengthen the management of their members, and independently carry out activities." As of November 2021, civil affairs departments had registered over 900,000 social organizations, including 2,284 national ones.

That is a real record of scale. But the same official record holds the other half of the picture. Under the State Council's *Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations* (Order No. 250, 25 October 1998), "social organizations should receive the approval and examination of a sponsor organization, and register according to the stipulations in these regulations, in order to be founded." No sponsor, no legal existence. A 1996 joint Party–State Council circular spells out what sponsorship means: sponsor organizations are responsible for the

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association's "registration application, ideological and political thought, establishment of party organizations, financial and personnel administration, research and discussion activities, foreign ties, and financial aid." The regulations list protecting citizens' freedom of association among their purposes — supervision presented as the way freedom is protected.

The pattern holds one level up. The white paper states: "在中国，没有反对党，也没有在野党" — "In China, there are no opposition parties, and no parties out of power." The eight democratic parties are "接受中国共产党领导、同中国共产党亲密合作的参政党" — participating parties that accept the Communist Party's leadership and cooperate closely with it. Pluralism of organizations is affirmed; independence from the ruling party is not.

The rebuttal

The claim confuses three things, and the argument turns on keeping them apart. First, *freedom of association*: the right to form a group of one's own choosing. Second, *transparent rules*: published, predictable conditions for registration, applied equally, with reasons given and decisions open to challenge. Third, *organizational autonomy*: the power to choose one's own leaders, agenda, and funding, and to take positions the authorities dislike, without anyone's permission.

On this record, the PRC system delivers a version of the first and fails the third. Hundreds of thousands of registered organizations exist, and many do useful work in charity, professional standards, and service delivery. But none may legally exist without first winning a sponsoring unit's approval, and that sponsor — a government department or state-authorized body — supervises its ideology, internal party organization, personnel, finances, and foreign contacts. That is not a neutral registration desk but a standing veto, held from before the group's birth and for as long as it lives, by an organ of the party-state. The white paper's "自主开展活动" describes activity inside that frame: a group may

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run its own meetings and projects, but it may not choose to exist outside the sponsor's gaze.

The headline number cannot rescue the claim: it counts precisely the organizations that passed through the gate. A registry listing only the approved cannot show the unapproved were free to organize; it shows legality is conditional on approval. The white paper's own comparison with the eight democratic parties points the same way: organizations may multiply, but only as participants under the ruling party's leadership, never as independent challengers.

The contrast with ROC (Taiwan) is structural, not numerical. Under Taiwan's Civil Associations Act, thirty or more adult initiators apply directly to a single competent authority — the Ministry of the Interior or the local government — with an application form, a draft constitution, and a list of initiators, and file their constitution and officers' details for accreditation. The authority may supervise the association's field of business, but no sponsoring unit's prior approval is the price of existence, and no party organization need be hosted inside it. Registration is required; the difference is what stands between citizen and association: one filing in Taiwan, a state sponsor with ideological and personnel powers in the PRC.

The test

Four questions settle whether a country's associations are free in the sense asked here. First, can a group form without first winning approval from a state sponsor? Second, can it choose its own leaders and positions — including ones the authorities dislike — without losing registration? Third, are the rules for approval and deregistration published, with reasons given and a route to challenge a refusal? Fourth, can it take foreign funding and maintain foreign contacts without a sponsor's permission? If the answer to the first is no, the rest are permissions from the gatekeeper, not rights of the citizen.

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The white paper itself supplies the standard: its preface says a political system should be judged by whether "社会各方面能否有效参与国家政治生活" — whether all sectors of society can effectively participate in political life. Participation is effective only when the channel is not owned by the power it is meant to check. By that test, a country can have 900,000 associations and still fail the question — which was never how many groups exist, but whether any of them is free of the ruling party's control.

Source note

- Primary source, verified live 2026-11-19 by direct fetch: State Council Information Office, 《中国的民主》 (*China: Democracy That Works*), December 2021, section III(4) 社会组织民主管理 and section III(2) 社会组织协商; section II(3) on the party system; preface. https://bb.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/xwdt/202112/t20211207_10463217.htm — all quotations above checked verbatim against this text; translations are the drafter's.
- *Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations* (State Council Order No. 250, 25 October 1998), Art. 1 and Art. 3, and the 1996 General Offices circular on strengthening management of social organizations — verified via the Congressional-Executive Commission on China's full translations, https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/regulations-on-the-registration-and-management-of-social-organizations and https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/circular-of-the-general-offices-of-the-communist-party-central-committe-0 (search results retrieved 2026-11-19). The 1998 Regulations remain the governing framework cited here; later amendments (notably 2016) did not remove the sponsor-approval requirement.
- ROC (Taiwan) *Civil Associations Act*, Arts. 3, 8, 10 — verified via the Laws & Regulations Database of the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the Judicial Yuan English text,

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https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAllPara.aspx?pcode=D0050091 (search results retrieved 2026-11-19).

- The opposing position ("citizens can organize associations not controlled by the ruling party") is a reconstructed inference from the white paper's figures and its "自主开展活动" language, not a verbatim official statement; the claim has been narrowed to what the sources support.
- CCE123 link-back: OMITTED. Final 118 (inventory draft CCE-098) could not be verified live: a direct fetch of the EN hub https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/ failed (upstream fetch error), and targeted searches for "CCE-098" and "final 118" on freechina.live returned no matching live page. No canonical URL was therefore cited; no URL was guessed. The link may be added at Gate 1 / Gate 2 prep once the final 118 EN edition is confirmed live.
- Historical-response setting: no earlier than 1998 (the 1998 Regulations are the earliest source relied on). Naming: ROC (Taiwan) / PRC (Mainland).

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