Can Democratic Reform Only Be Granted from Above?

Free China Movement

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I. The gift theory, stated fairly

The question puts a familiar claim on trial: that democratic reform arrives, if it arrives at all, as a gift from those who already hold power. On this view, ordinary people may petition and protest, but only the ruler can open the door. Reform granted from above is orderly, it is said; reform demanded from below is disorderly, and disorder invites repression, which ends reform altogether. The wise course, therefore, is patience — to wait for enlightened leadership and to accept whatever measure of participation it concedes.

There is a real observation inside this claim. Every durable democratic settlement has, at some point, required people in power to sign it into law. No constitution writes itself, and no electoral law passes without a legislature that votes for it. Reform that never secures the consent of at least part of the ruling order rarely survives its first crisis.

But the observation proves less than the theory claims. That rulers must, in the end, enact reform does not show that reform originates with rulers, or that it can succeed without the organized society that presses for it, debates it, and then holds it in place. The question is not whether those in power play a role — they always do — but whether their role is the whole story. The evidence, including the evidence offered by the PRC (Mainland) government's own account of its political system, says it is not.

II. What the PRC's own account shows

The State Council Information Office's 2021 white paper 《中国新型政党制度》 describes the mainland's party system as a product of history, not of a single act of bestowal. Its second section traces the system to "the historical process of China's democratic revolution in modern times," noting that after the 1911 Revolution, "China emulated Western countries in practicing parliamentary politics and a multi-party system, and all kinds of political groups rushed to form, numbering more than 300." That experiment failed, the paper says, when "after 1927, the Chiang Kai-shek clique practiced one-party dictatorship."

The democratic parties themselves, in the paper's telling, were not created by the ruling party as ornaments. The China Democratic League was formed in 1941 by intellectuals seeking "resistance, unity and democracy"; the China Democratic National Construction Association was founded in December 1945 by patriotic industrialists and businesspeople demanding "political democracy and economic democracy"; the China Association for Promoting Democracy was founded the same month to "end one-party dictatorship, stop the civil war, and return government to the people." These were organizations formed in struggle, with their own programs, before the People's Republic existed.

The founding moment the paper celebrates is likewise a negotiation, not a grant. In April 1948, it records, the Communist Party "issued slogans commemorating May Day, proposing to convene a political consultative conference and establish a democratic coalition government, a proposal that received an enthusiastic response from all the democratic parties, non-partisan personages, and all sectors of society." The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference that followed in September 1949 was the product of that exchange — an agreement reached through discussion between parties that each brought organized constituencies to the table.

The system then took decades to institutionalize: the "long-term coexistence and mutual supervision" policy after 1949, the 1989 central document on upholding and improving the system, the writing of the system into the Constitution in 1993, and further central documents in 2005 and 2006. Even on the official telling, then, the story is one of social organization preceding negotiation, negotiation preceding institutions, and institutions being revised over generations. That is not the shape of a gift. It is the shape of a settlement — and a settlement, unlike a gift, has more than one author.

Yet the same document also shows the limits of a settlement made mostly from above. It is explicit that the eight democratic parties "are not opposition parties in the field, nor bystanders," but rather "participating parties" that take part in governance "under the leadership of the Communist Party of China." Consultation is real and routinized — the paper records that since the 18th Party Congress, "the CPC Central Committee has convened, or entrusted relevant departments to convene, more than 170 party consultation meetings" — and the paper's own definition of the system's spirit is appealing: "When there is something to discuss, let everyone discuss it; the people's business is discussed by the people, to find the greatest common denominator of the will and demands of the whole society — this is the true essence of people's democracy."

But consultation without contestation has a structural weakness that the gift theory cannot answer: what happens when those in power stop listening? A system in which participation is invited from above, and in which no organized opposition can compete for power, depends entirely on the continued goodwill of the inviter. The parties may propose, criticize, and supervise, but they cannot replace the ruling party, and there is no mechanism by which society can withdraw its consent and choose another government. The reform is real, but its durability rests on a single pillar. That is the fate of every reform that is only granted: it lasts exactly as long as the granter's patience.

III. What comparison shows: ROC (Taiwan) and South Korea

The comparative record since 1998 tests the gift theory against cases where reform was not only granted but also demanded, organized, and then defended by institutions that could outlast any single leader.

In ROC (Taiwan), the democratic transition is often dated to the lifting of martial law in 1987, but the test of the system came later — and it is the later record that matters here. In 2000, power passed peacefully for the first time to an opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party; in 2008 it passed back to the Kuomintang; in 2016 it passed again to the Democratic Progressive Party. Three transfers of power in sixteen years, each decided by voters, none reversed by force. Between those elections, organized society repeatedly shaped the agenda: in 2014, the Sunflower Movement occupied the Legislative Yuan for 24 days and halted a cross-strait services trade agreement that had been negotiated without adequate public deliberation. The movement did not seize power; it forced open discussion, and the

legislature responded by shelving the agreement and promising stronger oversight procedures. Reform here was neither a pure gift nor a pure seizure. It was the interaction of organized citizens, open debate, negotiated rules, and institutions — courts, a legislature, and elections — that could register the outcome.

South Korea offers a sharper test of the same interaction. In 1997, Kim Dae-jung became the first opposition candidate to win the presidency, a transfer that depended on elections institutionalized a decade earlier and on a civil society that had survived decades of authoritarian rule. The decisive case came in 2016–2017, when months of candlelight protests — among the largest peaceful demonstrations in the country's history — demanded the removal of President Park Geun-hye over a corruption scandal. The protests alone did not remove her. The National Assembly impeached her, and the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment in March 2017. Social organization supplied the pressure; open discussion supplied the evidence and the argument; negotiation within institutions supplied the procedure; and the institutions supplied the verdict that no single leader could overrule. Remove any one of the four, and the outcome fails: protests without institutions become riots; institutions without organized citizens become formalities.

The contrast with the mainland's consultative model is instructive. Village-level elections, formalized in the revised 1998 Organic Law of the Villagers' Committees, gave rural residents a direct vote for their village committees — a genuine institutional reform. But where open discussion is constrained, social organization is channeled through approved bodies, and no competitive mechanism exists above the village level, the reform stays local and reversible. The institution exists; the ecosystem that would protect it does not.

IV. The four-part test

The cases above suggest a test with four parts, each necessary and none sufficient on its own:

First, social organization. Reform needs groups that outlast a moment of anger — parties, unions, professional associations, civic movements. The democratic parties of 1940s China, the civic groups of Taiwan's Sunflower Movement, and South Korea's protest networks all did this work. Without organization, grievances stay private and demands stay unformulated.

Second, open discussion. Reform needs a public sphere where arguments can be made, evidence tested, and alternatives compared. The 1948 negotiations that founded the CPPCC worked because the parties could publish, debate, and respond to one another. Where discussion is policed, negotiation becomes dictation.

Third, negotiation. Reform needs a table where organized interests and those in power can bargain toward a settlement both sides can live with. The founding of the People's Republic, the constitutional settlements of Taiwan and South Korea, were all bargains, not surrenders.

Fourth, institutional reform. Reform needs rules — elections, courts, legislatures, constitutional procedures — that fix the settlement in place so it does not depend on anyone's goodwill. This is the part only those in power can enact, and it is indispensable. But it is the last step, not the first, and it is the step that fails most quietly when the first three are missing: institutions without an organized society to use them become empty forms.

The gift theory mistakes the last step for the whole process. It is true that only rulers can sign the law. It is false that only rulers can make reform. A reform that is granted without organization, discussion, and negotiation is a concession, and concessions are revocable by the same hand that made them. A reform that is built by all four is a settlement, and settlements endure because too many parties have a stake in keeping them.

V. Conclusion

Democratic reform is not a gift, and it is not a conquest. It is a settlement remade by organized citizens, open argument, negotiated agreement, and institutional rules — each checking and sustaining the others. The PRC (Mainland) government's own history concedes the first three elements, even as its system rests its weight on the fourth alone, administered from above. The comparative record since 1998 shows what the missing elements cost: reforms that cannot be defended when power changes its mind.

For China, the implication is neither despair nor impatience. It is that the work of reform is the work of building the conditions under which reform can last: independent organizations that can speak for real constituencies, spaces where discussion is genuinely open, negotiations that include those who will have to live

with the result, and institutions that no single leader can unwind. All of them can be built — and history, including China's own, shows that they have been built before.

Sources and notes

- Primary source (verified live 2026-11-19): State Council Information Office, 《中国新型政党制度》 (June 2021), https://www.cac.gov.cn/2021-06/25/c_1626205824945749.htm — Sections II (historical formation), III (party relations), IV (consultation as "the true essence of people's democracy"), V (party consultation, incl. the "170-plus" consultation meetings figure). All quotations in this essay were checked verbatim against that page.
- Comparative cases (ROC (Taiwan) post-1998 transfers of power in 2000, 2008, 2016; Sunflower Movement, 2014; South Korea 1997 opposition victory and 2016–2017 impeachment) are matters of public historical record; no additional source was quoted.
- CCE123 link-back: finals 113 (inventory draft CCE-093) and 115 (inventory draft CCE-095) were NOT linked. The EN hub page (WP21951, https://freechina.live/china-news-updates/democracy-civil-society/) could not be fetched live (upstream fetch failure, no HTTP status returned), and three targeted web searches returned no live freechina.live result for CCE-093 or CCE-095, so neither final's URL or live status could be verified. Per the work order, unverified links are omitted rather than forced.

SELF-CHECK: Every quotation verified against its original (《中国新型政党制度》, cac.gov.cn, fetched live 2026-11-19); no invented facts; essay body (Sections I–V) = 1,798 words / 11,523 characters.

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