

I. Introduction:

At the invitation of China's Intercontinental Communication Center and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, The Carter Center sent a seven-person, international team led by Dr

conducting direct elections by secret ballot with multiple candidates for the Village Committee.

Evaluating an electoral process is not as difficult as conducting an election, but it does require a systematic

There were also some differences regarding proxy votes. Fujian did not allow proxies; Hebei did. Fujian used absentee ballots, but because of the short time between the primary and the elections, ballots were mailed before the final candidates were chosen. Roving ballot boxes were used in some villages in both provinces, but differently and with problems in implementation.

Aside from these differences, there were many similarities between the elections in the two provinces, including the fact that elections generally went well. In the villages we visited, the Election Leadership Committees were chaired by the village party secretaries. In Fujian, the Election Committees were proposed by the sitting Village Committee members and approved by the Village Representative Assemblies. Also in Fujian, there were instances of primary candidates occupying seats on the Election Committee, and resigning these positions only after winning the primary, just 2 days before the final Village Committee election.

All the villages posted registration lists, and followed the procedures for announcing and publicizing candidates. Villages in both provinces utilized local cable or closed circuit radio systems to give Village Committee candidates a chance to air their views and positions. In Hebei, at the large village meetings, candidates also gave speeches to the gathered villagers.

In all the villages we visited, election officials were well-trained and seemed to understand both the technical details of the process as well as the underlying rationale (e.g., secret ballot). The party secretary and members played important roles in all of the villages, both on the Election Committee, and in overall guidance of village affairs. In all but one of the elections we observed, there were multiple candidates for the contested positions. A good number of people used the space provided on the ballots for write-ins. Voter participation in all the villages was, on average, above 90 percent of registered voters.

In five of the six villages that we examined most closely in the two provinces, the elections offered the villagers a choice, and three villages voted the incumbent chairs out of office. In Fuo Ying Zi Village in Hebei, the Village Chair lost the primary and tried a write-in comeback for the general election, but he lost that as well. The new leader was an entrepreneur. In Yan Ying Zi village in Hebei, although the party appeared very strong, the campaign for Village Chair was very competitive, and the incumbent, who also was the party secretary, lost. The final election pitted a former party secretary against a young entrepreneur. When we asked the young candidate whether he felt at a disadvantage because of the party's influence in the village, he said that he believed he had the support of the masses. He was correct, although it took two rounds of elections for him to be declared winner. (The election was very close, and in the first round, write-ins prevented either from getting 50 percent.)

In the one village that did not have a secret ballot, there was no primary and little competition in the final election. A party leader won by a margin of 1,037 to 3.

In Fujian's Guanjiang village, the final election was a contest between the incumbent, who claimed credit for a 30 percent increase in per capita income during his tenure and was also a member of the dominant Chen clan, and a younger candidate who made little attempt to mount a credible campaign and was a member of the minority Wei clan. The party secretary, also a Chen, had been nominated during the primary but explained that he already was too busy and wanted to give younger villagers a chance. The incumbent won by a landslide--787 votes to 172.

In Fujian's Laichu village, the incumbent, who was running for a third term, lost to an electrician three years his senior who promised to lead the poorer villagers to become rich as soon as possible. Competition in this village was lively, and one of the candidates for the Village Committee, who had lost the previous election by a single vote, had spent three years campaigning to win the villagers trust and support. While he won the highest number of votes in the primary, he came in second in the final election. Because none of the candidates for village committee won a majority, however, a runoff will be held.

IV. The Significance of the Elections

In seeking to assess China's village elections, much depends on one's criteria. If one judges by the standards of

improve the process. In a decade, the program has made real progress.

-- First, the Organic Law of 1987 established the central norms that permit meaningful elections: that leaders should be chosen by the people in a direct election by secret ballot with multiple choices. The three-year term limit allows the people to replace their leaders, thereby establishing a bond of accountability. Those principles are understood in the villages that we observed - even in the one in Hebei where the secrecy of the voting was not adequately protected as people marked their ballots while seated next to each other.

-- Second, the election officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs deserve credit for their openness and interest in exchanging ideas for the best ways to implement the principles of an election. Ministry officials noted that many of their most important innovations - secret ballots, for example -- were learned in exchanges with international observers. More important, the officials were always prepared to acknowledge their mistakes.

-- Third, the elections gave a greater sense of autonomy and empowerment to the villagers. Elections also made possible the return of a genuine sense of community that was lost during decades of turmoil.

We had some concerns with the process. One senior election official conceded that with 1 million villages, about half did not conduct the elections in accordance with the above principles. However, with the exception of the one village in Hebei in which the voting had occurred in the open, we did not see any serious violations of the secret ballot. Questions can be raised about the fact that the Communist Party Branch ran all the Village Election Committees, but one senior official said that if there was any violation of the law, the party official would be removed. The Ministry of Civil Affairs made it very clear that "local party organizations must not select or nominate candidates [and] they must respect the selection made by villagers." [China Rural Villagers Self-Government Research Group, Study on the Election of Villagers Committees, Dec. 1, 1993, p. iv].

On the question of the authority of the Village Chair vis-a-vis the Village Party Secretary, both acknowledged that the Chair is required to follow the line of the party, but we are less certain of what that means in practice both because the Village Chair has real powers over the budget and expenditures, and the relationship between the two leaders seems complementary as they both strive to develop the villagers' economy and manage village affairs.

We conclude that the village elections we saw demonstrate a remarkably high level of technical proficiency, and the elections, according to many of the people whom we met, have improved the lives of villagers in many ways. The leaders are more accountable; we could see that clearly as the voters replaced Village Chairs who had not fulfilled their promises. It was clear in the candidates' speeches when they promised very specific commitments for development and in the questions that were asked of the candidates in the Representative Assemblies.

We also were impressed by the absence of police or security from the polling places and by the mediation skills that have been well-developed in the villages. This is a foundation on which to nurture a spirit of compromise that is so important to a civic culture.

V. Suggestions

We were repeatedly asked by our hosts for our suggestions for improving the electoral process, and we offer them here after having exchanged ideas with key officials in the Ministry of Civil Affairs. We begin with a pivotal distinction -- between core principles and technical procedures for implementing them. In the villages we observed, the core principles of a democratic election -- secret ballot, multiple candidates, direct election, etc. -- are understood and practiced. That might not be the case in the many villages we were not able to visit, and an important challenge for the Ministry of Civil Affairs is to bring those villages up to the level of the ones we visited. With regard to the second tier of issues -- technical procedures -- we offer the following suggestions:

1. Improve Civic Education Programs, Standardize and Synchronize Voting Dates Among Villages in the County or Province. We believe that sufficient progress has been made on village elections that the Ministry of Civil Affairs can begin standardizing the electoral procedures between villages in a county and eventually in a province. (Fujian has already published a manual to standardize its elections, but according to the person responsible for the manual, many of the villages still have a long way to go before the Ministry could consider the manual's provisions fully implemented). Standardization would permit more effective and uniform civic education and training programs. Such programs would have an even greater effect if all the villages in a county or province were to hold elections on the same day. We were told by some that elections are synchronized for deputies to the County and Provincial People's Congresses, but this has not yet been done for village elections. If it were, the county or province could conduct a comprehensive civic education campaign that would give citizens in a village a deeper understanding of how the elections would be conducted and the nature of their civic

responsibility.

2. Nomination Process: First Stage. The goal of the nomination process is to encourage citizens to put forward nominees, and therefore, we recommend that as many channels as possible be used, including 10 signatures, the Representative Assembly, and village groups. In addition, we note that women's associations have played an important role in putting forth candidates, and we suggest that the Ministry of Civil Affairs encourage efforts by other nongovernmental groups to propose candidates for office.

3. Nomination Process: Second Stage. We believe that the direct primary system, used in Hebei, is far better in giving people a chance to participate in the selection of their candidates than the indirect system used in Fujian. We heard concerns in Fujian that farmers might not want to take the time to participate in direct primaries, but they did so in Hebei, and we believe that farmers ought to be given the opportunity to choose.

4. Impartiality of Election Machinery. It is very important that all steps are taken to ensure that Election Officials are not candidates and are perceived as completely fair and impartial. Specifically, we suggest that a person who joins the Election Committee should be ineligible to stand for election.

5. Enforcement of Election Law. There is an administrative law against electoral offenses in elections for people's congresses, but not for village elections. MOCA has proposed to include village elections in the law, and we agree that it's necessary.

6. Mass Voting: Secret Ballot. As we indicated, mass voting has certain advantages, but special precautions are needed to ensure that the ballot is secret and secure. First, we suggest more space between each voting booth. Second, at the moment that voting begins, the Election Chair should announce that the dignitaries sitting behind the booths will move in order to underscore their respect for the secrecy of the ballot.

7. Absentee Ballots. While they were a good idea in principle, absentee ballots were sent before the candidates were identified, and therefore, we believe that more experimentation is needed before this method should be widely accepted.

8. Proxy Ballots. Proxy ballots have been used in place of absentee ballots; however, they have also been used by heads of households to vote for their family memb

VI. Conclusions and Next Steps