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Stoplight democracy helps Beijing keep lid on grassroots dissent

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Members of the audience watch Chinese officials and vote blue for no/unsatisfactory, red for yes/satisfactory. Source: Supplied

A CROWD files into a theatre with raked seating, each person given two paddles, red and blue.

The mayor and senior officials are on the stage. They talk up their projects, and defend their records on transport, environment and schools over the past year.

Members of the audience have their say and ask questions, then comes the time of reckoning — they vote blue for no/unsatisfactory, red for yes/satisfactory.

This, after all, is Red China.

This is also the 21st century, and the meetings — held each Friday each October — are broadcast live on local TV, to the rest of Hangzhou, an ancient city near China's central coast, which - contains the famous West Lake, inspiration of painters and poets for centuries.

Chen Kang, a professor at the National University of Singapore, an expert on China's economic reform, has recently turned his focus towards such "deliberative democracy" — about which he has been speaking this week as the guest of the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology, Sydney.

As China has grown richer, and has begun to pay more taxes, its grassroots population has naturally begun to expect more and better services from the government.

At the local government level, not only has frustration built where performance is lacklustre, resentment has grown over officials apparently rewarding themselves, particularly when land has been forcibly acquired.

Local governments depend on land sales for at least 35 per cent of their revenue and have in the past onsold to developers with a mark-up of as much as 4000 per cent land seized from farmers.

This has prompted scores of thousands of “mass incidents” — demonstrations, office invasions, group petitions, labour strikes — every year, arousing the anxiety of the central government and temporarily destabilising local economies.

The anti-corruption purge or campaign being driven by President Xi Jinping — who has vowed to swat corrupt “flies” or local officials as well as hunt down “tigers” or powerful crooks — is one part of the central government’s solution.

Another is to give people more of a say at the grassroots, so projects that, for instance, involve potentially dangerous pollutants — but may line the pockets of officials — can be vetoed before they trigger violent protests.

As such challenges emerged in the late 1990s, three-yearly elections were sanctioned by Beijing at the lowest administrative level, under the Organic Law of Village Committees.

This scheme began to lose steam, as local Communist Party officials usually contrive to remain, predictably, in power. While village elections continue in many areas, and have moved up a layer, in some, to township elections, it is not clear this trend has the full backing of Xi, an unequivocal champion of party leadership.

The alternative of addressing local governance issues through forms of “direct democracy” is now clearly sanctioned and starting to spread.

Professor Chen told The Weekend Australian that promoting stability is a crucial goal. Local leaders whose districts are afflicted by “mass incidents” usually don’t get promoted. The answer now being pursued, he said, was to involve residents from the start.

One district he is researching is Jiamusi, near the Russian border in Heilongjian. Its leaders needed to respond more effectively to a Beijing directive to improve the attractiveness of rural areas, after meeting resistance from fed-up residents.

Previously, that response had involved, annually, painting the walls of buildings facing main roads and patching up road surfaces — for which farmers were expected to co-pay, through money or labour — followed by a brief “inspection tour” by local leaders in a limousine convoy.

Inevitably, said Chen, people turned hostile. “They asked, why should we pay for sightseeing tours?” And they threatened to withdraw their involvement.

The new answer is local meetings, at which villagers discuss options for projects, including how to handle waste. The local government pays for 80 per cent, and the residents provide the rest in money or labour.

“Things are really moving there now,” Chen said.

“The new basis is, no consensus, no funding.”

The Hangzhou public meeting model emerged from running feuds with residents over the modernisation of housing within the old city.

The government, for instance, micromanaging in the usual fashion, insisted it knew best where to install additional toilets it was helping to fund in an ancient building.

Now such issues are resolved at the public meetings. This is not a model that can be replicated everywhere, Chen said, because Hangzhou has a rare concentration of residents whose families have lived in the city for many generations and carry its culture in their genes.

Xi, he said, is watching this move closely, because “he wants to develop a China model for - participatory democracy” that is different from the Western electoral template, and opposes praising “GDP heroes” for boosting growth at any price — while “on the other hand, he doesn’t like to see power going outside the government.”

Gradually, though, Chen believes, such schemes “will change China’s political culture from below”.

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