The Future of Democracy in China

By Dylan Kolhoff

“I’m released, I’m home, I’m fine. In legal terms, I’m — how do you say? — on bail. So I cannot give any interviews. But I’m fine.” In a brief phone call with the New York Times, Chinese dissident and artist Ai Weiwei explained little about his past months spent in detention. Ai, a Beijing artist famous for his critical view of the Chinese Government, was initially detained while boarding a flight to Hong Kong in April 2011. He was released in late June “because,” as the government news agency Xinhua reported, “of his good attitude in confessing his crimes,” namely tax evasion.

This has come over a year in which China’s global economic and political might has been increasingly evident. China’s burgeoning economy continues to grow faster than any other major economy. Its diplomats have used the country’s United Nations veto power to prevent sanctions against Syria and Iran even while allowing NATO’s intervention in Libya. President Obama acknowledged the strength and importance of China in announcing America’s new military strategy, stating that America would be “strengthening [its] presence in the Asia Pacific” as it slims down its military overall.

With much of the Arab world embroiled in the democratic revolutions of the Arab Spring, the future of democracy in China has come into question. Chinese domestic politics over the past year have highlighted this question, showing China to be a train riding toward a juncture with route unclear, conductor unsure, and passengers divided.

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Early last year, following the series of peaceful protests in the Middle East, bloggers in China began calling for country-wide protests. Because unauthorized demonstrations are illegal in China, the bloggers suggested people “stroll” in cities around arranged areas. In response, the Chinese government proceeded to clamp down on public gatherings, news reporting, and the Internet to prevent discussion or imitation of the Arab Spring. According to the New York Times, at least 54 Chinese dissidents were arrested in early 2011 alone.

This year has also seen a rise in opposition to government corruption and to government policies in general. In July 2011, a high speed train crashed after being hit by lightning and losing power, leaving at least 35 dead. Though similar issues had been reported in the weeks before the crash, nothing had been done to fix the malfunction. Railway officials attempted to cover up the causes of the crash, leading to widespread anger toward the government that has used its high speed rail system as a symbol of modernity and progress.

One young Beiinger, Sun Peijie, expressed his doubt of the official account, saying that he thought “that was all fake.” The crash exposed anger over the safety standards and quality of work brought about by China’s rush to world prominence. As one blogger wrote on Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, “Was this just an accident, or are there safety issues with high speed rail itself? Is this the result of the massive expenditure on this face-maintaining construction? What a great nation
needs is true strength, not just a shiny facade. And now we’re playing with the people’s lives as if it were a joke? My great motherland, what is the matter with you?” (Translated by Chinageeks.org)

In the village of Wukan in Guangdong Province, a similar anger erupted in late 2011 over land seizures by government officials for real estate development. This anger intensified after a leader of the protests died under suspicious circumstances during government questioning. Dissatisfied with inadequate compensation for the land and with the government’s explanations of the village leader’s death, the villagers began a town-wide revolt. They barricaded the village’s roads and held out against the Chinese government for more than a week. The villagers ended their protest only after, as reported by the government news agency Xinhua, the government met their main demands and “promised a ‘fair and open’ investigation into [their] grievances.” Early this year, the protest’s leader was named the village’s Communist party secretary.

The conciliatory reaction of the government to the protests sharply contrasts with the crackdown in China that followed the Arab Spring. Furthermore, as T.J. Cheng, a professor of International Relations at The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA, pointed out, the incident in Wukan “shatters… conventional wisdom that democratization cannot unfold well in places that are poor and uneducated.” While the village is still certainly under central government control, the Communist party can no longer “direct every single step.”

While the success of the residents of Wukan is uncommon, the unrest is not. According to Ying Gong, an adjunct instructor of Chinese Studies at the College of William and Mary, “to a Chinese person… it’s not very special.” When Xiuyuan Mi, a Chinese student studying at the College of William and Mary, was asked whether she thought there were other episodes similar to the protests in Wukan, she immediately responded, “Of course!” Xiuyuan added that “in most circumstance[s], the government will do everything to stop the news from spreading.” Professor Cheng admitted that the incident in Wukan was a “perfect storm,” but added that, “well, there are many perfect storms.”

Impending leadership changes may make the issue of governance in China even more contentious. As the current leadership chooses its successors, “the public will scrutinize newspapers and Party announcements for even the slightest policy shifts,” reports the Global Times, a newspaper owned by the Communist party. After the peaceful resolution of the episode in Wukan, people may be looking for a more responsive domestic policy.

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This does not necessarily mean that democracy lies on China’s horizon. Even as Western journalists and academics laud movement towards democracy in China, there remains a significant portion of the population skeptical to the idea of democracy at all.

Some say that the Chinese people would not function well under democracy. Movie star Jackie Chan stated at the 2009 Boao Forum for Asia, “I’m not sure if it’s good to have freedom or not… I’m gradually beginning to feel that we Chinese need to be controlled. If we’re not being controlled, we’ll just do what we want.” Chinese college student Xiuyuan said, “I don’t think democracy is really feasible
right now in China.” She added that “most college students don’t even know the vice president of China. They are completely ignorant about that, and they are college students.”

Critics further their argument against democracy by focusing on the weak responses of Western democracies following the Great Recession. The United States and Europe led the crisis with, according to the CIA World Factbook, negative GDP growth rates while China led the recovery with growth rates above 9%. The West’s weak economic recovery made the strength of democracy no longer seem self-evident. Critics further point to the debt ceiling debacle in the United States and the current Euro crisis as evidence of failings of democracy.

Professor Gong countered this, saying that people who do not want democracy for China “do not understand democracy....They see it as elections, such as those in the countryside where farmers are given gifts to take part.” Most people “definitely” want democracy, she insists.

Still others maintain that that arguing over democracy’s future misses the point. Michael Wang, a Chinese college student, insists it has already arrived. “China is a democratic country [with] democratically elected politicians,” Wang said.

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On Sina Weibo, a blogger lamented the state of the country following the high speed rail crash, writing, “When a country is corrupt to the point that a single lightning strike can cause a train crash, the passing of a truck can collapse a bridge, and drinking a few bags of milk powder can cause kidney stones, none of us are exempted. China today is a train traveling through a lightning storm. None of us are spectators; all of us are passengers.” (Translated by China Media Project)

On this figurative train, the conductors and many of the passengers believe the route is continuing straight forward, with the Communist party firmly in control. When tourists visited Tiananmen Square last year, they found the usual portrait of Mao Zedong joined by a massive hammer and sickle centerpiece celebrating Chinese Communism’s ninetieth anniversary. Uniformed and plain-clothed policemen all around the area made the Communist party appear all the more unassailable. As Sun Peijie said, “the government is too strong. They have people parading around saying that they love the government, and they show off the good economy, and they make it seem like everything is well.”

However, a portion of the metaphorical train’s passengers are dissatisfied with the current service and look for a route to democracy with new conductors. Xi’an resident Yin Hui finds this force from outside of the party the most likely path to democracy. Speaking of government officials, he said that, “fifteen years ago they were sitting, sipping tea and reading the paper, and now they are sitting, drinking tea and reading the paper.” Xiuyuan thought revolution was the only possibility, saying that, “I don’t think the Communist party has any hope. It has a pretty long history up to now, and it is really hard to change its nature despite maybe a handful of people in the party who are willing to change... I feel like China cannot change without bloodshed.”
Other allegorical passengers seek the same route to democracy, but look to the current conductors to provide the change. They think democratic change will most likely emerge within the Communist party itself. Professor Cheng supported this, saying that democracy will most likely come “from the top... It will be the result of the Chinese Communist Party splitting in half.” As Cheng wrote in an article on the subject, “China’s hope for democracy relies more on the ruling elite’s initiation than on social opposition.”

Whatever direction China will take, it appears to be nearing a juncture that will shape its route for years to come.