



# **Carter Center Delegation Report: Village Elections in China and Agreement on Cooperation with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, People's Republic of China**

**2 Mar 1998**

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How Dr. Robert Pastor, reached a long-term agreement with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) on election-related projects.

The delegation found that the elections provided the voters a reasonably free choice, but there were some procedural problems in several of the villages. The Ministry, provincial, and county civil affairs officials understand clearly the significance of a secret, individual ballot, but some villagers did not. There were several other electoral problems related to proxy voting

China, it appears that there has been progress, but still there is a distance to travel before the elections could be considered technically competent and in conformity with the Organic Law on Village Elections. Most impressive for the delegation was the openness and candor of Ministry, provincial, and county officials in acknowledging problems and seeking advice on ways to resolve them. ry

in a rapid and transparent manner. The Carter Center will seek funds to help install the software in three pilot provinces and the Ministry and eventually to connect all the provinces. In addition, the project includes exchanges and visits for training on election management and data collection. Carter Center teams will also help formulate uniform election procedures and

## Background and Terms of Reference

The significance of the current economic and political transition in China is self-evident. Since it embarked on an ambitious modernization process in 1979, China has sustained high levels of growth, causing dramatic changes in the economic and political lives of the country. With this rapid economic development has come the challenge of evolving a popular, stable, and flexible political framework that would allow the country to channel both the new social forces that have emerged as a result of the growth and the frustrations that could occur in the event of an economic downturn. China's success in meeting these challenges will have the greatest significance not only for the people of China, but also for others far beyond her borders.

One important aspect of China's complex transition is the introduction of direct elections at the village level, beginning with the passage of the Organic Law of the Village Committees in 1987. This law, in part a response to the need to find more responsive structures for governance at the village level, introduced a secret ballot and multiple candidates for village committee elections. For the first time in China's recent history, the key democratic elements of secrecy, choice, and competition were introduced into the selection of village leadership. (It needs to be noted, however, that the village party secretary continues to have considerable responsibilities and power in the villages, though he is not elected by the villagers.) Since 1987, four rounds of village elections have been held. A number of international groups have observed some of these elections in China's approximately 930,000 villages and agree that the







departures from the rules.

Although the elections in Jin Zhou district clearly displayed more problems than those we observed in Jilin Province, there are also some noteworthy positive features. There appeared to be some progress from one election to the next toward more competitive elections. Campaign speeches were given three or four days before the election, allowing some time for the promises to be considered and questioned. The voters who assembled at the main polling and counting centers were patient and disciplined.

## **HOW SIGNIFICANT? HOW REPRESENTATIVE?**

In our report last year, we focused on the question of the significance of the village elections, and we concluded that, "despite problems, the village elections are important" for three reasons: (1) the election law mandates the basic norms of a democratic process – secret ballot, direct election, multiple candidates; (2) each round of the electoral process widens and deepens China's technical capacity to hold elections; and (3) the openness of the government to exchange views in the most candid manner was a sign of a commitment to work with The Carter Center to find the best ways to implement the electoral process. Our observations this year confirm our conclusions from last year.

Indeed, we encountered more determination on the part of the central government and provincial officials to improve the electoral process. Perhaps because we have developed closer relationships based on candor and mutual respect, the government demonstrated repeatedly its readiness not only to exchange views on sensitive issues but to revise electoral procedures and also expand cooperation. In response to the fourteen recommendations in last year's report, the government has informed us of efforts to:

- improve the secrecy of the ballot by instructing local election committees to have citizens vote in separate rooms;

- synchronize election days at the county level to improve opportunities for civic education and reduce the cost;

- increase the number of training programs for local officials; and

- pay more attention to the electoral process and less to whether villagers are electing competent individuals.

We spent a considerable amount of time with government officials in Beijing and in the provinces of Jilin and Liaoning provinces discussing specific electoral problems. We will describe the issues and our suggestions

how many and which villages are genuine models and which ones are failing.

During this visit, we reviewed with the MCA officials the forms that will be needed to obtain the information from the villages both on the election results and on the state of the electoral process. We will return to the United States and develop the software for inputting the data on disks or directly on to the Internet at the county and provincial levels. This data will be sent rapidly and transparently so that the Ministry would receive the information and begin acting on it to strengthen civic education programs.

Our proposed programs for exchanges and training aim to contribute to the further development of the

observed. There are several problems with roving boxes: they diminish the sense of civic obligation that comes with going to the polling station; the secrecy of the vote can be easily violated; and individuals voting as a family lose their individuality. The good news is that ministry, county, and provincial officials agreed with this analysis. Many of the arguments against roving boxes also apply to proxy voting, by which individual voters can vote for as many as three other people.

**Recommendation # 3: Roving boxes should be banned or minimized, to be used only by the very few people who are physically unable to come to the polling stations. In wealthier communities, however, like those we saw in Liaoning, the community should consider arranging to send**



have a chance to participate by asking questions of the candidates.

**Recommendation # 9: Those of us with experience in elections in transitional countries in the Third World know the difficulty of persuading candidates to acknowledge before an election that they could lose and to say that they will respect and accept the results. The candidates, who made this point in Jilin should be commended and should become a model for others.**

**5. The Count.** We saw a number of ways in which villages counted the ballots. Some of the approaches – like those in villages in Liaoning – were chaotic and not secure. Those in Jilin were far more organized and transparent – critical ingredients of a free election – but there was an important difference. One was held inside a small room, and the people pressed their faces against the window, finding it difficult to see the count. An alternative, which we had earlier suggested, was done in the public where everyone could see. It was done quickly and efficiently, by dividing up the votes according to different polling stations.

**Recommendation #10: A methodical and transparent count, visible for all to see, is a desirable way for allowing voters to follow the process from start to finish. We recommend a number of ways to improve the count.**

duplicate.

**2. Preventing multiple voting.** A good technique to prevent some from voting more than once is to dip each voter's thumb in indelible ink after they have voted.

**3. Security of Ballots.** In most countries that we have monitored, there is great concern that the incumbent candidate and his supporters will take ballots before the election and use them to "stuff" the ballot box on election day. The villages and the townships handle the ballots and the registration list in a very haphazard affair. This needs to be corrected at the local level or it could cause grave problems if it occurs at higher levels in the future.

**4. Election Commission.** Since World War II, many countries have chosen to consolidate the various agencies that deal with electoral matters into a national and independent election commission. It is particularly important that the Commission is independent of the government and therefore viewed as impartial with respect to the electoral process. In China, there are a number of government groups that are responsible for the conduct of elections. In an interview, the Deputy Party Secretary in Liaoning explained that he sat on two separate committees that are engaged in elections – the MCA committee on village elections and the Standing Committee of the County People's Congress. These two organizations prepare separate registration lists, organize the nomination and selection of candidates, conduct the election, count the votes, and announce the results. One question is whether such a duplication of functions is necessary, or whether the two committees could be combined in a way that increased their competence and credibility.

**Recommendation # 13: The Ministry of Civil Affairs might consider establishing an expert working group to review and offer some recommendations on the four medium-term issues described above.**