Wukan’s Direct Election

Harbinger of democracy in China?
Abstract

Wukan is a relatively small village (population ca. 20,000) located in Guangdong, China. Wukan’s residents started to protest against local corruptive officials in September 2011 and the village was finally granted the right to elect their leaders directly. Under the Organic Law of Village Committees, all of China’s approximately 1 million villages are expected to hold competitive, direct elections for subgovernmental village committees. However, the Organic Law does not provide any other guidance on election method. Therefore, nearly all of the local elections are rigged and only “direct” in formality. Wukan’s residents had casted their votes for the village chief in March 2012. Wukan’s democratic experiment is going to challenge those who suspect if Chinese are “ready” for democracy. If the less educated villagers are able to manage direct election well, the argument that democracy is not “feasible” in the country of the largest population in the world is invalid. More importantly, will Wukan be the harbinger of democratization in China? What effect has Wukan delivered to other villages in China? Methodology of this research is based on examination of public documents (digesting local newspapers and broadcasts which are not accessible in the U.S) and a field observational trip, during which I will record villagers’ public behaviors and possibly local administrative changes brought by the election.
Why Wukanese Protest?

• Land is an essential part of peasant’s assets in China. In Wukan, most households own land inherited from their ancestors. In addition to private ownership, much more land is owned collectively by the Wukan people as a whole. The communal land should be managed by the Village Committee (VC), which, according to Organic Law of Village Committees, is a “primary mass organization of self-government” (Article II) in village level in China.

• Wukan party chief Xue Chang and his subordinates, including the former village chief Chen Shunyi, bluntly manipulated Wukan’s elections for more than four decades and used their power to sell collective land without informing Wukan’s 13000 villagers whom the land belongs to.
• Wukan’s former party secretary, Xue Chang, stayed in power for 41 years before ousted by villagers in late 2011 – the same duration as Gadaffi.

Xue’s home looks humble from outside
A huge petition demonstration broke out in September 21, 2011 when thousands of villagers walked out on the street and marched to Lufeng city government, demanding investigations of Xue and his associates and retrieval of their lost land.
• There was a second petition demonstration exactly two months later. The November 21 demonstration was similar to the one in September, but there was no government official standing out this time. Villagers left peacefully later.

On December 9, four temporary village representatives were “kidnapped” by plainclothes police, according to those who were near; one of them, Xue Jinbo, was found dead in custody two days later. Villagers were terrified and outraged, but remained unbowed. They began to gather at the village opera stage and waved banners, accusing the government of corruption and murder.

Source: 明报 Mingpao
The hostility between local government and Wukan did not cease until senior provincial officials intervened in the dispute and acknowledged villagers’ basic demands, which include the return of the Xue Jinbo’s body; release of the three detained temporary representatives; direct negotiations with the temporary committee, whose members were denounced by the local government as criminals.
• In the 1980s, villagers’ rights to directly elect the Village Committee (VC) were written in the Chinese constitution. However, the “local level (jiceng)” democracy has not led to further democratization.
The election thus became the first task for the new Wukan. Villagers were nervous not only because the majority of them had no experience of voting but also because they knew people in China even in the world were watching them. If they failed for any reasons, such as chaos during the elections or any form of electoral fraud, those who claim that Chinese society is not suitable for democracy would use Wukan as evidence to support their theory. Therefore, the less educated villagers worked under unequal pressure.

Hand written posters are everywhere in the village during the preparation for elections.
- Wukan elections have three stages. They are (in chronological order): the election of the Election Committee, whose duties are to operate future elections, mobilize villagers to vote and ensure the fairness of the elections; election of the Village Representatives, an ombudsman’s body made of over 100 villagers who will monitor the village finances and the work of the village committee; election of the Village Committee, who are in charge of most of village affairs and village welfares.
• Outsiders may question: how do the villagers, with a middle school education on average, most of who have never been to an election before, understand the complicated mechanism of elections?
• Villagers have chosen about fifteen literate villagers who understand electoral laws and they formed a “preparatory team” to explain rules to normal villagers and answer their questions before and during the elections.

Source: Weibo
Election of the new VC started on March 3. Because only two candidates won more than half of the votes, an additional round was held the next day when the seven-person VC was finally elected. Sixty-eight years old Lin Zuluan won 91% of the votes and became the chairman of the VC. He is also the new party secretary of Wukan. Four out of the seven VC members are under thirty years old, including the only female candidate, Chen Suzhuan.
Wukan in the news

China News Weekly reports the regime’s guard against the village increased, despite the incident seeming to calm down.

The second is that the whole nation should learn from Wukan villagers’ experiences, as an effective way to fight the CCP.
• Probably in China’s history, never has a village been visited by so many journalists. By a glance at the “collections” that one young villager showed to me, I found journalists from the U.S, the UK, France, Japan and Hong Kong.

• Now that the event has ended for more than four months, how foreign and Chinese media report differently about Wukan?
• Foreign reports tend to depict the Wukan protest as another crisis under China’s seemingly prospering development. Generally, it is believed that Wukan reflects some serious social problems in China under CCP’s rule.

• Compared with foreign media, Chinese journalists have been more “restrained” from criticizing the current way of governance. Many Chinese newspaper and scholarship focus on how to improve the relationship between government and its subjects, instead of directly dealing with the “social problems” that many foreign media mention.