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COMMENTARY

Chinese version of democracy doesn't fit Western notions

By Bruce J. Dickson

China watchers in the West have been fruitlessly searching for signs of democracy for more than 25 years. But there has not been a sustained democracy movement in China since the tragic end of protests in Tiananmen Square and elsewhere in 1989. Most outside observers agree that the People's Republic remains what it has been since its founding in 1949: a one-party authoritarian regime.

Most Chinese citizens do not see it that way, however. In a nationwide survey in 2014, more than 4,000 urban Chinese were asked how democratic they perceived China to be at different

and right to tell the government their views." Another 15 percent identified equality and justice among citizens: "Everyone is treated equally" and "to be more equal in terms of income, housing, and employment" were typical responses of this type.

In short, about one-third of urban Chinese defined democracy in terms of checks and balances or other ways that closely match Western notions.

By contrast, a different 30 percent of Chinese described democracy in terms

The activists who promote Western-style liberal democratic reform face suppression from the state and indifference from much of society. Liu Xiaobo, for instance, was arrested in 2008 for his role in drafting Charter 08, a bold call for building liberal democracy in China. When he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, many in China were unfamiliar with him. Others doubted he had achieved anything worthy of the prize.

Despite lacking political rights and freedoms that we take for granted here, many Chinese see their country as becoming more open.

Still, it's hard to be sure that trend will continue.

Since Xi Jinping



points in time. The vast majority view the level of democracy as increasing steadily since the late 1970s. Almost

60 percent believe China is already somewhat or very democratic today. Remarkably, more than 80 percent are optimistic that in the near future China will enjoy a level of democracy on par with the United States.

How can this be? How can external assessments of China's government and the perceptions of people living under it be so radically different?

The answer turns on the meaning of the word democracy.

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to define democracy in their own words. Most Americans would define it as a political system with free elections, competitive parties, rule of law and related institutions of liberal democracy. But less than 5 percent of Chinese pointed to those attributes.

About 15 percent defined democracy in terms of rights: for example, "people enjoy the right to information" and "the opportunity

of how leaders should run the government, not how they are chosen. Comments such as "the people and the government are interdependent" and "government policies reflect public opinion" get at this notion. More importantly, these comments suggest that the public's interests and the state's interests are fundamentally in harmony (or at least should be).

THE PURPOSE of democracy, as seen by many Chinese, is to make the state strong so that it can better provide for the common well-being of the people and the nation as a whole. It is not a way to hold leaders accountable through elections, limit the state's authority in order to protect individual rights and freedoms, or adjudicate between competing interests.

But by far the most popular definition of democracy — given by a third of the urban Chinese respondents — was "I don't know!"

became president in 2013, the scope of repression has increased. The party has tightened control over media con-

tent, arrested human rights lawyers and warned scholars against discussing topics such as universal values, civil rights, civil society, press freedoms and judicial independence. Xi's ongoing anticorruption campaign has exposed the venal top echelons of the party, government and military, which may erode support for the regime. Growing economic inequality and social injustice may also lead people to be less satisfied with the status quo.

But for the moment, besides the party itself, the major obstacle to China's democratization is the popular belief that the process is already underway.

Bruce J. Dickson is chairman of the political science department at George Washington University. This article was adapted for the Los Angeles Times from his recent book, "The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival."

