CHAPTER NINE

POLITICAL TRANSPARENCY: FOSTERING DEMOCRACY AND TRUST

Lin Shangli
Translated by Jia Yajuan

Introduction

In a certain sense China’s development over the past three decades has been a process of gradually moving towards transparency. This development has taken place in the context of the reform and opening up policies. These policies have facilitated China’s integration into the international community and helped China to absorb valuable elements from the outside world. China’s extensive involvement with the international community has not only led to the breakdown of ideological divisions and the removal of institutional barriers, but has also helped the rest of the world come to a better understanding of China’s politics, economy, society, science and technology, culture, military, etc. As such, it is fair to say that the reform and opening policies have played a central role in transforming traditional China into a more open, transparent and dynamic country. Political transparency affects citizens’ trust in and identification with the state domestically; it also exerts a profound influence on the willingness of other countries to trust and identify with the country internationally. Therefore, political transparency is not only a fundamental requirement needed to push forward the development of political democracy in China; it is also an important mechanism for China’s national construction. In 2008, a devastating earthquake hit Wenchuan and several neighboring counties in Sichuan Province. The Chinese government’s rapid, efficient response to the disaster as well as its disclosure of information about rescue work not only gave Chinese citizens a new understanding of their government, it also led the international community to reevaluate its understanding of China and the Chinese government. Hence, political transparency is not only conducive to the development of democracy, but also meaningful in improving citizens’ trust in and
identification with the state, the government and the Party. China’s development during the last three decades bears out this point.

1 People’s Democracy and Political Transparency: The Logic of Chinese Politics

Political transparency is both a basic requirement of democracy and an important symbol of democratization. Political transparency and democracy are correlative and dependent upon each other. In practice, increased political transparency is often seen as an important milestone in the development of democracy. Political transparency is a reflection of the relationship between the political system and the public; transparent systems place emphasis both on the political system being open (kai fang 开放) and on the political system’s activities taking place in public view (gong kai 公开). An “open” system allows public participation, and an “in public view” system allows public oversight. “Openness,” “in public view,” “participation” and “oversight” are all key elements in the operation of democratic politics; their increased effectiveness spurs democratic development. Therefore, political transparency is a useful mechanism for promoting democracy and increasing public trust in the political process.

To a large extent, the relationship between the political system and the public depends on the form democracy takes. Democracy takes different forms, each bringing together values, system and process in an organic whole. Different types of democracy are, thus, fundamentally different. As a socialist country, China practices people’s democracy, which is based on the principle of people’s sovereignty. It entitles the people to both liberties and power, or put another way, it aims to realize a combination of liberties and power for every individual. This constitutional principle implies that state power originates with the people, while the people, as the masters of the country, exercise the power to manage the country. In China, the people’s congress system is the institution embodying this constitutional principle. The democratic logic of people’s congress system is: representatives to the people’s congresses at all levels are selected by the people and then subject to their oversight; representatives exercise state power through the people’s congresses at all levels. Congresses at each level determine the organization of all administrative, judicial and legislative agencies and departments of the state at their level and then oversee the work