A convergence of China’s political reform agendas

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Significance
A ten-year plan for social and political reform touted by Chinese establishment intellectual Yu Jianrong is gaining traction both within and outside China’s party-state. Yu’s plan is the most notable reform agenda to emerge since the Charter 08. It signifies a willingness among party-state officials to engage in open-ended discussions about democracy and human rights in China.

What we need to know
While the issue of political reform has been notably absent from official proclamations during the first days of the Chinese Communist Party’s 18th Party Congress, China’s political future is being widely debated both in Chinese establishment and non-establishment circles alike.

Although both reform camps agree on the need for political change they differ in their specific reform recommendations: while establishment figures call for a gradual evolution of China’s political system, anti-establishment intellectuals call for a complete overhaul of the Chinese body politic along liberal democratic lines. Despite such differences a convergence of China’s political reform agendas can be observed. One of China’s most renowned establishment intellectuals Yu Jianrong has touted a ten-year plan for social and political reform which strikingly resembles parts of China’s Charter 08.

China’s Charter 08 was inspired by the Charter 77, a petition promulgated by anti-Soviet dissidents in Czechoslovakia, and calls for an end to one-party rule and the protection of human rights. It has been signed by more than two thousand citizens within China and supported by more than ten thousand signatories abroad. While signatories of the Charter 08 suffered from harassment and political prosecution, Yu Jianrong has been able to continue both his academic and political work uninterrupted. At a time of increasing suppression of dissidents a renowned Chinese establishment intellectual thus has become a leading champion of political reform.

Yu’s ten-year plan is indicative of the central role reformers working within the system can play during transitional periods. Yu Jianrong adopts the reformist goals of the Charter 08 and re-packages it into a more procedural and watered down reform agenda. The fact that his Yu’s plan can be discussed
both online and offline signifies a willingness among party-state officials to engage in open-ended discussions about democracy and human rights in China.

**Detailed analysis**

1. **Mounting calls for political reforms**

In intellectual and political circles within China there is no shortage of complaints about the directionless and trapped nature of China’s political transition process. The recently concluded Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) 18th Party Congress with its retrograde language and lack of a coherent vision of China’s political future is a case in point. Political reform suggestions are not only articulated by anti-establishment intellectuals such as artist and activist Ai Weiwei or Nobel peace prize winner Liu Xiaobo. Both Ai and Liu have been among the initial 303 signatories of the Charter 08, which calls for the establishment of a legislative democracy and the protection of human rights in China. In spring 2012 the renowned Chinese establishment intellectual Yu Jianrong posted a 10-year plan for China’s social and political reform on Weibo, China’s micro-blogging service.

A researcher at the party-state-funded Chinese Academy for Social Sciences (CASS) Yu Jianrong is a prolific writer on issues ranging from rural development to social justice. Within China he is best known for his long standing appeal to abolish China’s dysfunctional petitioning system, which dates back to imperial times. As of November 2012 his micro-blog on Weibo is being followed by 1,491,872 netizens. His tweets on domestic affairs are being forwarded by between 100 to 10,000 followers and comments on individual tweets range in the thousands.

Yu Jianrong’s ten-year plan is the most notable reform agenda to emerge since the Charter 08. Signed by Chinese citizens from all walks of life in October 2008 the latter called for an end to one-party rule in China. The key initiator of the Charter 08, Zhang Zuhua, was repeatedly interrogated by Chinese security. In 2009, Charter 08 signatory Liu Xiaobo was subsequently sentenced to 11 years in prison. Yu Jianrong on the other hand could continue his work without harassment.

The different reception of both reform agendas can partly be explained by their choice of reform goals and means. Yu Jianrong follows the footsteps of other prominent establishment intellectuals such as Yu Keping, Deputy Director of the Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Both men with the family name of Yu are working within the system (tizhi nei) and are advocating incremental political reforms. Just like Yu Keping, Yu Jianrong is frequently invited to speak at domestic seminars and trainings funded by the Chinese Communist Party.

Signatories of the Charter 08, on the other hand, consider democratic reform a necessary condition for China’s development, thereby placing themselves outside the current political system (tizhi wai).
Despite political and philosophical differences of anti-establishment and establishment intellectuals a convergence of their political reform agendas can be observed. Yu Jianrong’s ten-year plan shows that many of the key reform demands of the Charter 08 are gradually finding their way into the system.

2. Political reform from within

Yu Jianrong suggests a sequencing of reform steps that will lead to an open society with a free media and multi-party competition between the years 2016 and 2022. With this goal in mind Yu suggests that in its first term from 2012 until 2015 the new Chinese leadership should focus on social reforms, promote welfare policies and help protect people’s rights.

During the first five years of the ten-year plan the new leadership is supposed to focus their attention to bread and butter issues such as welfare reform, more specifically in the areas of pensions, unemployment, and health insurance. Yu also calls for a reform of the household registration system. Social reforms are to be accompanied by greater efforts to develop China’s rule of law. Yu suggests strengthening the judicial system on the provincial level, calls for lifetime tenure of better paid judges, and demands that politics and law committees below provincial levels should be abolished. In terms of the protection of citizen rights he calls for the abolishment of both the traditional petitioning system and the re-education through labour system. A more transparent Chinese government should ensure freedom of speech and freedom of expression as well as foster civil society development.

Yu Jianrong considers the first five years of social reform a suitable foundation for a second phase of deeper reforms which could pave the way to constitutional democracy brought about by political reforms. Yu demands the expansion of local democratic elections from the village to the county level. Towards the end of the second tenure of the new Chinese leadership Yu suggests bolder reform steps, such as the establishment of a press law and a political party law. Such reforms would not only allow the liberalisation of Chinese media but also lead to multi-party democracy in the PR China.

In Yu's vision the CCP thus progressively reduces its social and political control, builds the rule of law and empowers Chinese citizens and their associations. He is also sympathetic to greater devolution of power to the provinces and enhanced democratic control of county-level governments. Yu’s 10 year plan for social and political reform in China is directly aligned with the upcoming leadership transition. The first five years allow for a partial continuation of populist policies started under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.

Yu Jianrong applies a developmental perspective that is based on the assumption that the incoming leadership under Xi Jinping is both willing and able to carry out social and political reforms. His perspective differs considerably from signatories of the Charter 08, which have lost faith in the CCP’s leadership. As such, the fundamental difference between Yu Jianrong’s plan and the Charter 08 is the question whether political reform can
be brought about from within the CCP alone or whether such a transition requires societal impulses from outside the political system.

3. Reform impulses from outside the system

Comprising of nineteen key demands the Charter 08 advocates a new constitution, separation of powers, legislative democracy, an independent judiciary, public control of public service, guarantee of human rights, election of public officials, rural-urban equality, freedom to form groups, freedom to assemble, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, civic education, protection of private property, financial and tax reform, social security, protection of the environment, a federated republic and truth in reconciliation. Since its promulgation on the eve of the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 2008 the Charter 08 has been signed by two thousand Chinese citizens inside the PR China and supported by more than ten thousand signatories outside China.

While Yu Jianrong has not signed the Charter 08 sixteen of its nineteen key demands can be identified in one form or another in his ten-year plan. He steers away from three of the nineteen demands, namely civilian control of the military, protection of the environment, and a federated republic. Yu Jianrong demands a progressive reform of the restrictive household registration system which would lead to an end to China’s caste-like distinction between citizens with a rural or urban-status. The Charter 08 on the other hand demands an immediate abolishment of the household registration system. The difference between both demands thus is procedural, not substantial.

Another example of convergence are the relevant views on an independent judiciary. Yu Jianrong demands that the CCP’s Committees on Political and Legal Affairs below the provincial level should be abolished. The Charter 08, in contrast, calls for their abolishment on all levels.

In terms of civil rights both Yu Jianrong and the signatories of the Charter 08 agree that the re-education through labour system should be abolished. In terms of freedom of speech and freedom of expression both Yu’s plan and the Charter 08 maintain that words should no longer be viewed as crimes. Both Yu’s plan as well as the Charter 08 demand greater space for Chinese civil society. In both cases civil society is not only restricted to more or less a-political civil society organisations which provide social services but also includes a constitutional right to form political parties.

In terms of elections the 10-year plan calls for the expansion of elections from the village to the county level. The Charter 08 goes further in its demand that elections on the county, city, provincial and national level should be “systematically implemented”. Finally, both Yu’s plan and the Charter 08 agree that a press law is required to liberalise China’s media.

These eight points of convergence suggest that Yu Jianrong’s 10-year plan is a watered down version of the Charter 08. This finding suggests that the authors and signatories of the Charter 08 have successfully set the bar for
establishment intellectuals working within the system. At the same time the ten-year plan falls short on three of the Charter’s key demands.

By emphasising process over outcomes, Yu’s plan is more open-ended and therefore may be more appealing to reformers within the party-state. On his blog Yu Jianrong has revealed that he is openly discussing his ten-year plan with party officials. In a tweet on 12 May 2012 he quotes a county deputy party secretary who attended one of his many trainings: “I agree with your reform proposal. Only this way our party can realise a soft landing. What is needed now is to rationally contemplate the challenges and solutions and not to incite nationalism. Societal transformation requires to pay a certain price, but the less bloodshed the better.” By making such comments from an anonymous Chinese Communist Party official public Yu Jianrong illustrates that China’s democratic future can and should be discussed free of fear from reprisals.

A convergence of reform agendas

Both Yu Jianrong’s ten-year plan and the Charter 08 are available on the Chinese language internet. Despite the party-state’s crackdown on the latter within China politically interested and internet-savvy Chinese citizens can access the text of the Charter 08 through virtual private networks (VPN). It is close to impossible to gauge with certainty how ideas expressed in both reform agendas are travelling through China. At the same time the convergence of political reform agendas by liberals within and outside the political system suggests that there is common ground for future alliances of party- and non-party affiliated reformers. In times of increasing public disillusionment over the way China is governed such alliances of reformers within and outside the party may prove to be decisive to push forward political reform and help develop a more civic political culture.

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