

COMMENT

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Local governance in China, West differs

The elections in countries that call themselves liberal democracies seem never-ending. Regular or early elections, from presidential to parliamentary and local, create the illusion that “something is happening”. But it is all merely a façade, a recycling of the same, visibly inefficient and desperately flawed, politics. Citizens are told that elections are a “celebration of democracy”, masking the truth that democracy is lived every day, if it exists at all, not just when one steps into a voting booth. The quality of daily life is the true measure of democracy, but whatever remains of democracy is fast fading into insignificance.

North Macedonia is just one of many countries holding local elections this year at the municipal level. Political parties are drafting their election programs, gauging public opinion, compiling lists of citizens’ demands translated into campaign promises, and even launching pre-election campaigns to win public support. While working on a joint project with colleagues from China, a thought crossed my mind: how does such a vast country address local issues?

In other words, what is considered “local” in such a context? I asked my younger colleague from Shanghai what is meant by local governance in China. In reply, he said: “What exactly do you mean by ‘local’?” After all, my country, North Macedonia, is all of 25,000 square kilometers with barely 2 million people, which could be a “local community” in China.

He then explained that the term “local” in China carries multiple meanings. First, in relation to governance, “local” refers to a government multiple levels below the central government, including provincial, municipal and district governments. A local government comprises an administrative structure supported by the central government, but it maintains a certain degree of autonomy depending on the context.

Second, geographically speaking, “local” may refer to a specific region, province or city. For instance, “local” may refer to regional culinary traditions such as Sichuan, Cantonese and Yunnan. Economically, it signifies “domestic” or “regional” as opposed to imported.

Additionally, local businesses might be those operating within a single province or city rather than on a national scale. In political discourse, when Chinese leaders discuss “local” reforms or development, they usually mean policies

implemented at the provincial, municipal or rural community levels.

In North Macedonia, it is often unclear what is local and what is national. More often than not, in many local people’s eyes local governance is “feudalized” by some local sheriff who wins an election thanks to party influence and oligarchic power, with little concern for citizens’ voices. It also means political fragmentation, division along ethnic or political lines. There is no coherent social system or harmony, whereas harmony and social order are what sustain a country as vast as China.

I visited at least four cities in China last year. My first impression was how orderly and clean everything was. Residential complexes in China are self-sustaining units, providing their inhabitants with everything they need within walking distance.

With my Western-influenced mindset, my first concern was security. Perhaps people live in concentrated residential communities to protect themselves from theft or other risks. But my hosts laughed, with one of them saying: “No, our nation is built on the foundation of community and collectivity, from the lowest to the highest levels.”

It reminded me of our lost tradition of neighborly connection — the *karshi kapidzhik* — the neighbor’s door directly across from yours, which you could knock on anytime, whether for good or bad reason. We’ve lost this tradition because of Western-style alienation, self-isolation and detachment.

My Shanghai colleague said that the National People’s Congress, China’s top legislature, was focused on devising policies to improve the quality of people’s lives across the country. Unlike the West, which has become “individualistic” and failed to build communities, in China, the collective spirit is nurtured.

In China’s vast network of communities, provinces, municipalities and districts, the focus is on the collective good. Unlike the West, there is no system collapse or lawlessness in China. Chinese authorities value both unity and diversity, so instead of a uniform approach, they adopt policies to promote or even experiment with local initiatives at a local level before implementing them nationwide. Agricultural reforms, and urbanization and environmental protection policies are frequently tested in this way. The local Party and administrative structure is

solid yet responsive to challenges, resolving local issues through a “network of mediators”.

A particularly charming aspect of local engagement in China, as my Shanghai friend said, is the presence of “aunts from the neighborhood committee” (usually retired women overseeing day-to-day matters in residential complexes). In rural areas and smaller cities, public meetings are regularly held, local officials are openly criticized, and citizens’ petitions convey their dissatisfaction to higher authorities.

Zhang Weiwei, a professor at Fudan University, has elaborated on this issue. He emphasized the concept in his talk, “selection plus election”, in the North Macedonian capital of Skopje last year. Within the Communist Party of China’s structure, there is the spirit that drives officials to be competent, accessible and to gain public trust. And before advancing politically, officials have to prove their ability in local communities. One cannot lead a country without first proving oneself in a district or province — for at least two successful terms.

A Macedonian friend who has lived in China for many years shared an interesting fact with me.

He said that contrary to stereotypes of “authoritarianism” and centralized power at the “top”, China also has a key “decentralized” feature.

The 2025 Chinese national budget data showed the central government’s transfer payments to local governments will reach 10.34 trillion yuan, exceeding 10 trillion for the third consecutive year. Fiscal transfer payments are taken from developed provinces and used in underdeveloped regions to address regional fiscal imbalances and promote equalization of basic public services.

In contrast, in the United States, a so-called “federation”, the ratio between central and local financial distribution is about 50 to 50, and in European countries, on average, the distribution is 80 to 20 in favor of the central government. This shatters the myth of Western European democracies being champions of local self-governance.

In this regard, China’s self-governance model is efficient and effective. China may not be a democracy based on party struggles and political discord, but it is a democracy that focuses on solving problems, moving forward and improving people’s lives and livelihoods.

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Tenzin Lhundrup

Xizang promotes development through ethnic unity

The newly revised regulations on the establishment of model areas to facilitate the overall development of the Xizang autonomous region, implemented on March 1, will strengthen the legal foundation for promoting ethnic unity and protecting the interests of all ethnic groups in the region.

When China was wracked by poverty and weakness, colonial powers fragmented and humiliated its ethnic groups. This painful history has made it clear that ethnic unity serves not only the well-being of all ethnic groups in Xizang but also the overall interests of the Chinese nation.

Since the establishment of the Xizang autonomous region in 1965, particularly in the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, Xizang has accorded priority to addressing ethnic matters, while implementing policies aimed at ensuring ethnic equality and unity, regional autonomy, and shared prosperity. Guided by the vision of forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation, Xizang has tailored its policies to promote socioeconomic progress.

Today, Xizang enjoys political stability, social harmony and economic growth, and has achieved success in better preserving the ecology and securing the borders. The bond of ethnic unity today in Xizang is as inseparable as butter and tea (tea in Xizang is made with tea leaves and yak butter), reflecting the enduring spirit of unity in China. In fact, over the past six decades, Xizang has exemplified the country’s successful approach to addressing ethnic issues with Chinese characteristics.

Originally issued on Jan 11, 2020, the regulations to build up a model for ethnic unity were the first of their kind at the provincial level in China. After five years, Xizang’s local legislation began the process of revising the regulations to further strengthen the legal safeguards for ethnic unity.

The promulgation of the regulations shows that safeguarding and strengthening ethnic unity have become the common consensus of all ethnic groups.

The goal of the revised regulations is to reinforce the legal framework to build a Chinese national community as the country advances Chinese modernization through national unity. The regulations are based on the fundamental principle of governing Xizang in accordance with the law and designed to provide legal safeguards for the legitimate rights and interests of all ethnic groups in the region, and uphold national unity and ethnic solidarity.

What’s more, Xizang has four creative measures, with the first aimed at building a model area for promoting ethnic unity and progress, which can foster solidarity among and development of all ethnic groups, and advance the construction of the Chinese national community. The second measure is to build a pioneering zone which positions Xizang at the forefront of high-altitude economic growth in the country. The third measure is to build a national ecological civilization on the “roof of the world” for better ecological preservation and sustainable development. And the fourth is to secure the borders, promote prosperity, and improve people’s well-being to inspire other regions to follow Xizang’s example.

The revised regulations exemplify China’s approach to borderland governance, showcasing the region’s promotion of innovation in local governance and law-based governance under the leadership of the central government.

They demonstrate the local legislature’s exercise of legislative power to safeguard and improve people’s well-being, and promote ethnic unity and harmony in Xizang, underscoring the significance of local people’s participation in legislation. They are China’s latest contribution to the Global South’s efforts to address ethnic issues.

My first-hand involvement in Xizang’s ethnic legislation process has allowed me to observe how whole-process people’s democracy is being implemented through the regulatory revision. For example, our team conducted comprehensive research, held symposiums with representatives of various sectors and industries, and organized experts’ seminars and thematic meetings on legislation, followed by three rounds of public consultations across Xizang.

We also consulted national-level agencies in Beijing, soliciting 414 suggestions and opinions from the public and experts, and adopted 222 suggestions, ensuring the revised regulations are scientifically sound, democratically formulated and legally valid while guaranteeing their effective implementation.

The promulgation of the regulations shows that safeguarding and strengthening ethnic unity have become the common consensus of all ethnic groups. Xizang’s different ethnic groups have voluntarily integrated into the Chinese nation and made significant contributions to the formation and development of the Chinese national community.

Today, all ethnic groups in Xizang enjoy the substantial benefits and safeguards brought about by this community while continuing to strengthen their integration within it. As China pursues national rejuvenation by advancing Chinese modernization, all ethnic groups in Xizang have committed to becoming the guardians and practitioners of ethnic unity.

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MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Mohammad Saiyedul Islam

Beijing’s gift to Dhaka strengthens bonds

Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and the chief adviser to Bangladesh’s interim government, visited China from March 26 to 29, marking the beginning of a new chapter in Dhaka-Beijing relations. His visit yielded significant economic and social benefits for Bangladesh that promise to bolster the South Asian country’s development and help improve the lives of millions of Bangladeshis.

For example, China will continue to offer duty-free and quota-free market access to Bangladeshi products until 2028, extending the trade benefits for two years after Bangladesh is likely to become a developing economy. At their March 28 talks, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Yunus highlighted the importance of mutual political support and the Belt and Road Initiative in promoting Bangladesh’s development.

A joint news release issued by the two countries outlined the priorities for bilateral cooperation, including boosting infrastructure build-up in Bangladesh and aspects such as free trade and maritime cooperation. “The two sides underscored the importance to initiate negotiations on the China-Bangladesh Free Trade Agreement at an early date and officially start negotiations on optimizing the China-Bangladesh Investment Agreement,” the statement said.

As the crescent moon at the weekend ushered in the joyous occasion of Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan,

Bangladeshi people celebrated not only their spiritual triumph but also the extraordinary goodwill gesture of China — a testament to the deepening ties between the two countries and Beijing’s commitment to foster friendship and cooperation with Dhaka.

Beijing’s decision to extend Bangladeshi goods’ duty-free and quota-free access to the Chinese market even after it transitions from a least-developed country to a developing country is a lifeline for Bangladesh’s export-driven industries, particularly its readymade garment sector which employs millions of people and accounts for more than 80 percent of the country’s total export earnings.

Beijing’s decision is all the more welcome, especially because the European Union and other Western markets have indicated they may phase out duty-free access once Bangladesh achieves a developing nation status, posing a challenge to Bangladesh’s more than \$55 billion readymade garment industry.

Moreover, China’s openness to negotiating an FTA with Bangladesh presents an opportunity to diversify exports, because an FTA could open the door for pharmaceuticals, leather goods, jute products and agricultural exports, reducing the country’s over-reliance on a single sector. That China is the world’s second-largest economy will ensure the extended tariff-free access to Bangladeshi products will enable the country to remain competitive, create more jobs and sustain development.

Perhaps the most exciting outcome of Yunus’ visit was his suggestion that some Chinese companies in sectors like garment, electric vehicle, light machinery, high-tech electronics and chip man-

ufacturing, as well as solar photovoltaic panel industries relocate to Bangladesh, because it could be a game-changer for Dhaka. These labor-intensive and technology-driven sectors offer dual benefits: employment generation and skill enhancement. The suggested move, if it becomes reality, will not only create more jobs for Bangladesh’s burgeoning workforce but also facilitate the transfer of valuable technology and expertise, which will enable Bangladesh to climb up the value chain and diversify its economy.

Bangladesh has long relied on foreign loans to finance its critical infrastructure projects. Beyond trade, the proposed development and livelihood projects, and free up resources which then can be diverted to boost education, healthcare and poverty alleviation initiatives.

Bangladesh has a huge trade deficit with China. According to data from 2024, it imported more than \$22.9 billion worth of goods from China and exported goods valued at \$677 million. To address this imbalance, China has agreed to import Bangladeshi mangoes, jackfruits, guavas and aquatic products starting this summer. Since agriculture remains a cornerstone of Bangladesh’s economy, providing livelihoods for nearly half of its population, this initiative could reduce the massive trade imbalance between the two countries while opening up new export avenues for Bangladeshi farmers and fishermen.

Education takes center stage in Sino-Bangladeshi relations. China’s promise to provide scholarships to more Bangladeshi students will help the younger generation access world-class learning opportunities. Education is the founda-

tion of sustainable development, and increasing access to high-quality education abroad will equip young Bangladeshi minds with the tools needed to boost development back home.

As Bangladesh pushes toward digitalization and advanced manufacturing, the authorities need to build a rich pool of high-tech talents, which they can achieve by employing youths returning to Bangladesh after having completed their higher studies in science and engineering at top Chinese universities.

For millions of Bangladeshi farmers, manufacturers and entrepreneurs, China’s cooperation is akin to receiving a priceless Eid gift, as it creates for them more export opportunities, helps consolidate economic stability, and promotes prosperity and people’s well-being.

China’s decision is more than just diplomatic courtesy; it reflects China’s genuine understanding of Bangladesh’s aspirations. As a reliable partner, China has invested in Bangladesh’s development. In this respect, China’s is a more extensive strategic collaboration than a ceremonial exchange, especially as this year marks 50 years of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two sides.

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