

**CHINA'S RECENT DISCUSSIONS
OF POLITICAL REFORM AND
LEADERSHIP RESPONSES**

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Executive Summary

1. The discussions around political reform, virtually banned in the past decades, have reemerged among Chinese intellectuals, particularly politics- and policy-concerned intellectuals in Beijing.
2. Some policy measures have been suggested in the discussions, which include the direct elections of CCP leaders at every level, the establishment of three parallel committees in the CCP national leadership, and, under a theory of “constitutional socialism,” the elections of CCP leaders by the National People’s Congress.
3. Officially, the Beijing leadership has not responded to these discussions. However, its response come in the manner of ideological propaganda as indirect criticism of the discussions, political repression over the discussions, positive consonance with the discussions, and advocating Maoist practice as an alternative of political reform.
4. In the first line of responses, the regime repeats its own rhetoric of political reform, and self-praises its “Chinese democracy.” Meanwhile the regime has tightened control over the mass media and over those elite groups’ informal meetings to prevent the influences of the discussions from spreading.
5. Premier Wen Jiabao, however, is sympathetic to the growing voice of political reform. In his recent September 14 speech in Dalian, Wen made the bravest, lengthiest and most systematic statement on political reform with his emphasis on the separation of the Party from the state and the expansion of people’s democracy through elections.
6. Bo Xilai’s practice in Chongqing can be viewed as an alternative response to the pressure of political reform; he has turned to Maoist spirits and traditional “socialist” practices to cope with issues such as crimes, the apathy of social morality, and socioeconomic inequality.

7. Despite these bold moves, it is highly doubtful that the 18th Party Congress will adopt a systematic plan of political reform; it is likely to be rhetoric rather than policy. The designated Xi Jinping-Li Keqiang leadership also shows no preference in this regard.
8. The reemergence of the discussions shows the eroding confidence in the “China model,” which will negatively influence the public perceptions of the current regime’s legitimacy. The regime’s continuous disregard of the pressure for political reform will only aggravate social tensions and political confrontations in China.