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Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference: China's Practice in Consultative Democracy

Summary: On the rich soil of 5,000-year long Chinese culture, a great creation of the Communist Party of China and Chinese was built – socialist consultative democracy as the world's unique and original form of political and cultural organization, in which people govern their country. The aim of this paper is to point to the importance of social dialogue and continued consultations with the people in order to ensure that individuals exercise comprehensive and true rights in the political, economic, cultural and social life. For its realization in practice, it calls for the functioning of a highly inclusive and integrated democratic system in which every idea and talent have an opportunity to develop and be applied in real life. Only in this manner it is possible to realize high development objectives of this great country which, spreading solidarity and democracy, integrates the will of the Party, people and state.

Keywords: dialogue, consultations, tradition, public opinion, people's democracy

Whole-process people's democracy is the defining feature of socialist democracy. Rooted in the rich soil of the five-thousand-year Chinese culture, as a unique and original form of socialist democracy, consultative democracy is an important way by which whole-process people's democracy is practiced. It is a great creation of the Chinese communists and the Chinese people. The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (hereinafter referred to as the CPPCC) is a crucial channel and specialized consultative body for socialist consultative democracy. With its full-fledged institutional

procedures and participatory practice, the CPPCC plays a key role in promoting whole-process people's democracy.

Public Matters Decided Through Discussion: the Concept of Consultation in Whole-Process People's Democracy

As pointed out by General Secretary Xi Jinping, under the socialist system in China, public matters

should be discussed and decided through consultation to find the maximum common denominator of social will and demand, which is what people's democracy is really about. In China, consultation is a cultural concept, a way of participation, and more importantly, an institutional arrangement, which showcases the salient features of whole-process people's democracy and ensures that people run the country.

As a cultural concept, consultation is deeply rooted in the fine traditional Chinese culture. Consultation involves "discussion", something we Chinese do all the time without being aware of. It reflects a basic behavioral mode for the Chinese to get along with other people, deal with things and coordinate relations, which also gives expression to the cultural essence of the fine traditional Chinese culture, especially the culture of peace and harmony. In China, "discussion" is applied in dealing with not only social relations, but also political relations. It reflects the people-oriented philosophy. In the Rites of Zhou, the importance was stressed to consult all ministers, all officials and all people. In the Book of Documents, there was a calling to consult even the lowest strata of the people. And in the Book of the Songs, there was an admonition that one should not fail even to consult the woodcutter. Therefore, it is easy to see that since ancient times, there has been great emphasis in China to give expression to the will of the people, as well as their worries and concerns. It reflects the Chinese belief that everyone under heaven belongs to one community and people are the root of the nation. In the long course of history, the awareness of discussion and the concept of

consultation have been incorporated into the social, cultural, and psychological fabrics of the Chinese people and China's political and cultural traditions, which gives rise to the way of thinking and behavioral patterns of the Chinese nation, thus providing rich social soil for the realization and practice of whole-process people's democracy. Comrade Mao Zedong was deep in Chinese history and culture. He once said: "The handling of relations in every respect needs consultation". "As you well know, the character of our government is to discuss with the people. We can well call it a government of discussion."

As a way of participation, consultation reflects the value of regarding people as masters of the country. Letting people run the country is the founding mission of Chinese democracy. China boasts 9.6 million square kilometres of land, over 1.4 billion people, and 56 ethnic groups. The ethnic groups and regions vary greatly from one another in terms of customs and culture. In such a complex country, to ensure that people exercise extensive and genuine rights in political, economic, cultural and social lives, there needs to be a highly inclusive and integrated democratic system, where people have channels to air their views, platforms to express differences, and mechanisms to coordinate different interests and pursuits. In China, consultation is an important means for the people to participate in political life and the administration of public affairs. The formulation and implementation of all important decisions are based on the solicitation of opinions of relevant parties through consultation.

Important matters of the state are decided based on soliciting people's opinions. During

the drafting process of the 14th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives through the Year 2035, General Secretary Xi Jinping made multiple field trips to different localities, and presided over numerous thematic symposiums to listen to ideas and suggestions of people from all walks of life and working in different fields. Through on-line solicitation of opinions, 1.018 million pieces of opinions were collected, which were then categorized into 1000 plus suggestions and absorbed into the final documents in one way or another. The extensive, multilevel and institutionalized activities of consultation and diversified channels of consultation have enabled the people to feel for themselves democracy in its real sense. It has been proven that whole-process people's democracy is democracy in its broad, genuine, and effective form.

As an institutional arrangement, consultation is a result of long-term explorations on political democracy. Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the CPC has had ever deeper grasp of the laws underlying political democracy, come up with the concept of whole-process people's democracy, and translated the concept into well-conceived and effective institutional arrangement and the real practice of democracy. It is the natural outcome of the long-term unremitting political and democratic explorations of the CPC.

During the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japan, the CPC put forward the ideas that "state affairs are public affairs of the country, not a private matter of one single political party", "a common program must be found based on consensus through consultation as guiding principles

of governance". A democratic government against Japanese aggression was established which involved consultation and cooperation with people from outside the party based on the "third-third-third principle", namely, CPC members constituted one third, left-wing outside-party personnel constituted one third, and people of the middle ground the rest one third.

On the eve of the founding of the People's Republic of China, comrade Zhou Enlai said, "One of the features of New Democracy is that consultation and discussion are carried out widely so that everyone has an idea of what is to be discussed, and that a common agreement can be produced through open discussions at meetings."

The 13th National Congress of the CPC called forth the establishment of dialogue mechanisms for social consultation. The 18th National Congress of the CPC called on improving the socialist system of consultative democracy, with stipulations on multilevel institutional development of consultative democracy. The 19th National Congress of the CPC stressed on strengthening the institutions of consultative democracy and developing complete procedures and practices. The 20th National Congress of the CPC emphasized improving the system of consultative democracy and various institutional consultative platforms. While pressing ahead with political democracy, the CPC has continuously improved its institutional arrangements for consultation, which constitutes an important foundation for the political practice of exercising whole-process people's democracy.

The Chinese communists have always upheld the value of people's democracy. Through

democratic elections, democratic consultations, democratic decision-making, democratic management, and democratic oversight, the system of socialist political democracy has been established. Consultative democracy has been embedded into the whole process of socialist democracy, which covers all political parties, organizations, ethnic groups, social strata, and people from all walks of life, and is reflected in every link of democratic practice. With its all-encompassing nature in all dimensions, it can avoid focusing only on elections where empty promises are made during campaigns only to be forgotten afterwards. Consultative democracy ensures that the people enjoy the most extensive, sustained, and in-depth participation in their daily political lives.

State Affairs Decided Through Consultation: the Practice of Consultative Democracy of the CPPCC

As an institutional arrangement with distinctive Chinese features, the CPPCC has conducted consultation, focusing on the priorities of the Party and the country, and has played an important role in the different historical periods of socialist revolution, construction and reforms. The CPPCC exercises whole-process people's democracy by promoting the multilevel institutional development of consultative democracy, and has contributed greatly to economic and social development.

Important state affairs have been decided through political consultation. Founding the

People's Republic of China through political consultation was a shining example of Chinese consultative democracy, which also marked the opening chapter of political consultation of the CPPCC. In April 1948, the CPC Central Committee released the "May 1st Calling", which called on "all democratic parties, people's organizations, and socially influential people to convene a conference of political consultation". It was warmly responded to by various democratic parties and personnel of various sectors. Over 1,000 democrat personnel in Hong Kong went to the liberated area in over 20 batches, several of whom were directly involved in the preparations for the New Conference of Political Consultation. In July 1949, the preparatory meeting of the new CPPCC solicited designs for the national flag. 2922 draft designs were contributed. Through group discussions at various levels, the design of "red flag with five stars", made by Zeng Liansong, a company staff in Shanghai, won the most approval. Finally, this design, by an ordinary citizen, after minor changes, was designated as the national flag for the People's Republic of China and became the high-flying five-star flag we see today. From September 21 to 30, 1949, the first plenary meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference was convened. 662 members from 46 units were gathered together to discuss important state matters. The meeting adopted the Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, equivalent to the provisional constitution, the Law on the Organization of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and the Law on the Organization of the People's Central Government of the People's Republic of China. Decisions were

made during the conference on matters such as the state capital, national flag, national anthem, and annals. The National Committee of the CPPCC and the Committee of the Central People's Government were elected. The plenary announced the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

Whenever there are important decisions to make, consultations will be conducted. The CPC values the spirit of consultation in its state governance, as reflected in its consultations with representatives of other political parties and of all walks of life. Members of the Standing Committee of the CPC Central Committee are invited to attend plenary sessions of the CPPCC every year to discuss important state matters. Responsible officials of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council and those in charge of certain departments and ministries are often invited to thematic standing committee meetings of the CPPCC, thematic consultation symposiums and seminars, where in-depth discussions and interactions are carried out. On the afternoon of March 4, 2016, General Secretary Xi Jinping attended the discussions with the CPPCC members from the China National Democratic Construction Association and the Association of Industry and Commerce. After hearing the views of the CPPCC members, General Secretary Xi made the important proposition about building "cordial" and "clean" relations between the government and the business community. Such scenes of face-to-face solicitation of ideas and interactions are a vivid example of Chinese-style democracy.

Democratic oversight enhances good governance. As an important form of delivering socialist consultative democracy, democratic

oversight by the CPPCC is part and parcel of the supervision system in China, and is of the consultative nature. It mainly takes the forms of airing opinions, criticisms or suggestions. The focus of democratic oversight is on how state policies and decisions are implemented, with the aim of helping the Party and the government better solve problems, improving work, strengthening solidarity, and building cohesion. For instance, the 12th CPPCC conducted supervision and research on the implementation of changing business taxes into VATs, the two-child policy and the pollution control of the Tengger Desert. Focusing on major issues on the implementation of the 14th Five-Year Plan, the 13th CPPCC carried out special programs of democratic oversight. Ten special committees organized continued oversight on one major issue in their fields respectively and came up with opinions based on these efforts. In 2021, centering around "continuously improving the business environment", the Economic Affairs Committee of the CPPCC conducted research on over 130 selected SOEs, private businesses, and foreign businesses. Bi-weekly consultation symposiums were convened. The implementation of key resolutions was vigorously supervised. The CPPCC also cooperated with the Association of Industry and Commerce in organizing over 10,000 businesses in reviewing the business environment. The CPPCC members aired the problems they discovered such as lingering miscellaneous fees imposed on businesses, the lack of smooth transition from old to new policies, policy gaps among authorities and between various departments, lack of policy continuity between incumbent authorities and their predecessors etc.

PROGRESS

Vol. V / No. 1

2024.

They raised constructive suggestions on stable, predictable, and law-based business environment, and received positive response from relevant authorities. These activities of democratic oversight have gone a long way in facilitating the implementation of relevant policy measures aimed at improving the business environment and boosting the confidence of market players.

Consultation serves development agenda. The CPPCC has a concentration of talents and influential figures from various sectors, including accomplished experts, experienced officials

familiar with policies, industrial pacesetters and seasoned entrepreneurs. As distinguished representatives of various sectors, they are highly capable of contributing constructive ideas and suggestions. For example, the thematic consultation meeting on “Innovation-Driven Development” on May 14, 2019 drew together nearly 100 academicians, who had been working on the front line of education and research over the years, with insights on the status, underlying laws, and problems in fundamental research and scientific innovation. With open discussions

32 |



View of Xiamen, the city in the Province of Fujian

Photo: Ivona Katić

and candidate actions, the meeting turned out to be highly constructive. Responsible officials in charge of relevant Party departments and State Council ministries gave briefings and listened to these suggestions, many of which were later incorporated into ensuing policies. The story of “a hundred academicians discussing innovation” soon spread and received thumbs-up from the wider society.

Consensus-building is facilitated by seeking common ground while putting aside differences. Since its inception, the CPPCC has always been committed to consolidating the common political foundation and building consensus through extensive and democratic consultations, thus contributing its strength for the development objectives of the country. In June 1950, the second meeting of the 1st CPPCC National Committee discussed the issue of land reforms. Comrade Liu Shaoqi (then Vice Chairman of the Central People's Government) delivered the “Report on Issues Related to Land Reforms”, in which he elaborated on the necessity, justice and relevant policies of land reforms. Most participants at the meeting showed endorsement. But there were also some who thought that government decrees would be enough without the need to mobilize the masses. Some liberals who came from the landowning class had reservations and doubts concerning land reforms. Given the situation, leading officials of CPC central committee invited representatives from democratic parties, personnel without party affiliation, and other patriots to discussions to exchange views. With much in-depth communication, consensus emerged through various forms of consultation. After the meeting, all democratic

parties released statements and resolutions in support of land reforms.

Solidarity is created from diversity. Solidarity and democracy are the two themes of the CPPCC. Like thousands of rivers running into the oceans, the CPPCC is the most extensive patriotic united front organization, with wide representation and inclusiveness. The 14th CPPCC covers 34 sectors including 8 democratic parties, personnel without party affiliation, major people's organizations, all 56 ethnic groups and the five major religions. There are around 3,200 CPPCC committees and over 600,000 CPPCC members at the national, provincial, city and county levels. The CPPCC members come from different political parties, ethnic groups, social strata, and groups with various religious beliefs. Working together in solidarity based on the common ideal and political foundation, the CPPCC members strive for more harmonious relations between political parties, ethnic groups, religions, social strata, and compatriots at home and abroad. In recent years, mechanisms have been improved in the CPPCC for various political parties to participate in exchanges on relevant matters. There have been more smooth channels for non-CPC intellectuals, people working in the private sector and those of emerging social strata to air their opinions. The CPPCC members of ethnic minority groups and religious groups have enjoyed more access in terms of themed tours and inspections, sector-wise consultations and reflection of public opinions. The CPPCC members in Hong Kong and Macau are encouraged to support the law-based governance of the Special Administrative Regions and their chief executives. Exchanges have been expanded

with party organizations, social organizations and people of various communities in the Taiwan region. Representatives of overseas Chinese are also invited to the CPPCC activities, so as to facilitate solidarity among Chinese compatriots at home and abroad.

Specialized Consultative Body is innovating for better consultation

34 |

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels once said that the whole question is determining the true meaning of democracy. General Secretary Xi Jinping also pointed out that democracy is not an ornament for decoration; rather, it is for solving real problems of the people. History and practice have proven that consultative democracy fits China's realities and can help solve many problems. In today's world with its diversified ideas, complex interests and varied social strata, the reason that China has achieved the two miracles of rapid economic growth and long-term social stability is that consultative democracy, deeply rooted in the Chinese soil, can strike a balance between uniformity and diversity and achieve the integration of the will of the Party, the state and the people. The development of consultative democracy is a long-term historical process. As the specialized consultative body, the CPPCC is constantly evolving with innovation in practice. Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the CPC Central Committee with comrade Xi Jinping at its core has paid great attention to the role of the CPPCC as an important channel and specialized consultative body for socialist consultative democracy, with a series of important guidance

made, which prompted the CPPCC in theoretical and institutional innovations and innovation in practice.

The CPC attaches great importance to the role of the CPPCC in consultative democracy and provides theoretical guidance for the development of the CPPCC as a specialized consultative body. The Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC National Congress in November 2013 pointed out that the overarching goal for comprehensively deepening reforms is to improve and develop the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and to modernize China's system and capacity for governance. In October 2017, the 19th National Congress of the CPC stressed that the CPPCC, as a distinctively Chinese political institution, is a major channel for socialist consultative democracy, and its committees are specialized consultative bodies. In September 2019, the CPC Central Committee convened a conference on political consultation, which further clarified the functions and responsibilities of the CPPCC committees as specialized consultative bodies. The meeting made clear that the CPPCC is part and parcel of the state governance system and called on the CPPCC to improve the content of consultation, enrich its forms, improve its rules and procedures, cultivate a consultative culture and improve the consultative capabilities. In October 2022, the 20th National Congress of the CPC stressed that we will uphold and improve the system of CPC-led multiparty cooperation and political consultation and ensure the integration of Party leadership, the united front, and consultative democracy. We will give full play to the CPPCC's role as a specialized consultative body and see that it coordinates

efforts to promote democracy and unity, and emphasizes on both consultation and consensus building. Improvements will be made to institutions, standards, and procedures to help the CPPCC ensure that in-depth consultations and interactions are conducted, opinions are fully expressed, and broad consensus is built. Efforts will also be made to improve the systems and mechanisms through which the CPPCC committees conduct democratic oversight and their members stay engaged with people from various sectors.

The CPPCC as a specialized consultative body, has deepened explorations for the practice of consultative democracy. The 12th CPPCC renewed the mechanism of biweekly consultation meetings, which was practiced once on the history, thus greatly increasing the frequency of consultations. The biweekly consultation meetings are of small scale but with high-level attendance. The Chairman of the National Committee of the CPPCC often presides over meetings of around twenty people, covering the CPPCC members, officials in charge of central ministries, experts in certain fields as well as front line workers and ordinary folks. On June 19, 2020, the biweekly consultation meeting on “improving takeaway food safety regulation” was held. Among the participants were Wang Lei, CEO of Ele.me (a food delivery platform), Mu Rongjun, co-founder of Meituan Group and Gao Zhixiao, express deliveryman who persisted in his work even during the pandemic. Gao Zhixiao said with excitement: “I used to work just to make a living. After the pandemic, I feel the greatness of my job, for what we are delivering is not just daily necessities but also warmth and hope.”

In response to new circumstances and new tasks, the 13rd CPPCC National Committee started the practice of long-distance consultation meetings and expert symposiums, which further expanded the width and depth of consultations. Through live streaming, such long-distance consultation meetings have brought consultations to local communities, schools, factories, and the fields. Some CPPCC members also present their points with pictures and videos. “I did not know that the work of the CPPCC could be so posh!”, the CPPCC members and Chinese netizens commented. Being flexible, professional and in-depth, expert seminars often focus on one specific issue with continuous consultations in a relaxing atmosphere.

Over the past ten years, centering around “matters of great significance for the state” and the concerns of the people, the CPPCC has held 19 thematic standing committee meetings, 20 thematic consultation meetings, 144 biweekly consultation symposiums, 17 long-distance consultation meetings, and 74 expert seminars. The means and platforms of consultation have been continuously improved. A paradigm of regular, multilevel consultation in various fields with orderly participation has taken shape. The CPPCC members and ordinary folks who have participated in these consultation meetings reflect their perception in a straight forward way: “political consultation meetings are where to discuss matters”.

The CPPCC has been pressing ahead with its institutional development to ensure well-conceived standards and procedures, which has demonstrated the institutional efficiency of consultative democracy. Efforts have been made for earnest implementation of important documents

such as the Regulations of the Communist Party of China on Political Consultation Work, Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Strengthening and Improving the Work of the CPPCC Committees in the New Era, Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Strengthening the Development of Socialist Consultative Democracy, as well as Opinions on the Implementation of Strengthening Consultative Democracy of the CPPCC and Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Work of City and County CPPCC Committees released by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee. In 2018, amendments were made to the CPPCC Charter, which established Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era as the guiding ideology of the CPPCC. The amendments to the CPPCC Charter in 2023 reaffirmed commitment to the integration of Party leadership, the united front, and consultative democracy, which constitutes the solid common ideological foundation for the CPPCC to strive in unity. Institutional development in a systematic manner based on the CPPCC Charter, with the systems of consultation as the mainstay, enhanced with full-fledged mechanisms and structures, has provided important

guarantee for the CPPCC to perform whole-process people's democracy.

The governance capability of a state or a system is reflected in how effective it is in solving real problems of the era. As pointed out by General Secretary Xi Jinping, "if people have the right to vote but not the right to extensive participation and if the people are only woken up during the election cycle but go dormant after voting, then that democracy is just a formality." Under the leadership of the CPC and drawing strength from the fine traditional Chinese culture, whole-process people's democracy in China enables democratic participation of the people in the various links of democratic elections, democratic consultation, democratic decision-making, democratic management, and democratic oversight, thus realizing the unity between the procedures and substances of democracy. The CPPCC is an institutional arrangement with distinctive Chinese characteristics and a great creation of socialist consultative democracy. Socialist consultative democracy is a form of democracy that is in line with China's national conditions and reflects the common values of mankind, which contributes Chinese wisdom to the enrichment and development of human political civilizations.