

# Chinese government crackdown exposes fraud of local elections

John Chan  
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A protracted police crackdown on villagers in Taishi, near the southern city of Guangzhou, has revealed the worthlessness of the Chinese government's promises to extend democratic rights at the local level in rural areas.

The dispute erupted on July 31 when Taishi villagers complained to district authorities of financial irregularities in the running of the village committee. They demanded permission to set up a commission to dismiss the village head Chen Jinsheng, elect a new leadership and open the committee's books for public scrutiny.

Like many villages in Guangdong province, China's main export hub, a portion of the farmland in Taishi has been used to build an industrial zone. In return, the village collects annual fees from manufacturers. While the proceeds are supposedly distributed to adult residents as dividends, last year farmers each received only a thousand yuan (\$US123).

Villagers suspect that Chen, who is well off, has been profiteering at their expense, using public funds to pay business debts as well as for drinking and dining. They also accuse him of giving building contracts to family members.

However, the Panyui district government rejected the request for a commission, fearing other villages would follow suit. Corruption at all levels of administration is so endemic that any, even limited, moves in one village could have far broader repercussions.

On August 16, plain-clothes agents arrested 22-year-old Feng Weinan, a village leader who had called for Chen's removal. Upon hearing the news, some 1,500 villagers surrounded four cars carrying district officials and demanded Feng's release. Authorities dispatched 500 armed police who violently dispersed the crowd. Dozens of villagers were injured, two seriously.

Feng, who was released several days later, told the

BBC: "We will continue the petitioning and ask the local government to remove the village chief through recall procedures." In the late 1980s, a regulation was introduced that formally allows citizens to demand the removal of local officials.

Believing their campaign was both legal and justified, villagers invited journalists to report on their protests. On August 31, more than 100 villagers demonstrated in front of the Panyui government building. Another 300 farmers staged a hunger strike inside the village for their demands.

Police arrested three protestors and warned journalists reporting the events. A group of plain-clothes police officers attacked a taxi carrying a reporter from the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*.

On September 12, local authorities again sent hundreds of riot police backed by water cannon to Taishi. Police raided the village administration's financial department, seized the books and arrested 48 farmers. A lawyer hired by the villagers to defend their rights simply disappeared.

Feng told AFP: "We still don't know why they did this to us. We wanted to protect the accounts as evidence, now the government has the evidence." The reason became obvious, however. The police were removing incriminating evidence, before a new manoeuvre aimed at bringing the situation under control.

Three days later, district authorities announced an election—the next day—and a slate of seven candidates, six of whom were Communist Party officials. The police presence was stepped up to intimidate villagers. Two more people were arrested for using fax machines in the neighbouring industrial zone to appeal for broader support.

The election notice was deliberately vague. It was not

even clear what was being elected—a new village committee or a commission to remove the village head—leaving all options open if villagers rejected the official candidates. Local teachers were instructed to tell students to urge their parents not to vote because they would be “disturbing public order.”

According to Radio Free Asia, the ballot was at a primary school, surrounded by 400 police officers. Three people were arrested during the voting, including a lawyer and a volunteer election “observer” who supported the farmers. Despite these extraordinary measures, the outcome was a shock. All seven official candidates were defeated and local farmers, a factory worker and a taxi driver were elected instead.

District officials promptly declared that the election was for a commission, rather than a new village committee. A conference to dismiss the village head was announced for October.

Within a week, however, six of the seven elected had been intimidated into resigning for reasons ranging from “low cultural level” to ill health and having to work in the city. The defeated official candidates were then installed and plans for a new village committee election were shelved.

On September 5, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao loudly proclaimed that the elections at the village level would be extended to township administrations in the next few years. Significantly, he had nothing to say about events in Taishi, which make a mockery of Beijing’s absurd claims about establishing local democracy.

The villages in Guangdong province are relatively better-off than those in rural inland provinces. But here too, deepening social polarisation has produced sharp tensions. As elsewhere, Beijing’s answer to the aspirations of farmers for democratic rights and better living standards has been police repression.

The Chinese government established direct elections at the village level following de-collectivisation of agriculture in the 1980s, which was part of Beijing’s market reforms. The resulting village administrations were invariably dominated by farmers and rural businessmen who had enriched themselves at the expense of the vast majority of peasants.

Like the Chinese constitution, the regulations for village elections formally pay lip service to democratic rights, including freedom of the press and the right to form political parties. In recent years, workers and

farmers have increasingly seized on the relevant clauses to legitimise their protests and demands. They have been joined by a number of lawyers and scholars who sympathise with their plight.

These liberal intellectuals promote the illusion that, while officials at the local level are corrupt and venal, the central leadership will address their grievances and defend their rights. The only difference between local bureaucrats and their counterparts in Beijing is the magnitude of their corruption and crimes. Not surprisingly, Ai Xiaoming, a scholar involved in the Taishi campaign, received no answer to her letter to Premier Wen urging him to support the demands of the farmers.

Amid the Taishi unrest, Yang Zaixin, a lawyer with the Beijing-based Empowerment and Legal Rights group, was arrested in Guangzhou while trying to assist farmers in another land dispute. The Stalinist bureaucracy is deeply concerned that the involvement of intellectuals, despite their limited political outlook, will act as a catalyst to bring together the numerous, but isolated rural protests, into a broader political movement.



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