

THE  
CARTER CENTER



*Waging Peace. Fighting Disease. Building Hope.*

# THE CARTER CENTER IN CHINA

## ***What is the status of democracy in China?***

Political and social reforms have lagged behind economic reform in China. But while political reform is slow, during the past two decades there have been significant changes. The Chinese government began direct village elections in 1988 to help maintain social and political order in the context of rapid economic reforms. Today, village elections occur in about 600,000 villages across China, reaching 75 percent of the nation's 1.3 billion people. These elections are for representatives on village councils and members of the local People's Congresses. At levels above local villages, the political process is still determined by the Communist party.

Yet direct democracy at the village level is impacting China's urban centers, encour-

aging urban residents to demand accountability, and some have even run for local People's Congress deputies in the past two cycles of elections.

China is not a democracy, but forces in China are propelling popular demand for meaningful democracy to be introduced and applied. The current economic slowdown also will create more momentum for this change to take place.

## ***What is the Carter Center's role in China?***

Soon after becoming U.S. president in 1976, Jimmy Carter began to look into normalizing relations with the People's Republic of China. After years of difficult negotiations and overcoming both popular and official resistance at home, President Carter and Chinese leaders

decided to normalize relations effective Jan. 1, 1979, almost simultaneous with the Chinese decision to launch economic reform and initiate measures to open their society.

In the 1980s, The Carter Center helped address needs of disabled Chinese through two projects: one to train 900 Chinese elementary teachers of deaf and blind students, and another to help design and construct a large manufacturing facility for high technology prostheses.

In 1998, an unprecedented three-year agreement was signed with China's Ministry of Civil Affairs for The Carter Center to work primarily in four China provinces to observe village elections and help the ministry standardize election procedures across villages. This included gathering election data with computer technology, educating voters, and training election officials. The project later expanded to include helping amend election laws and assisting limited attempts at election reform beyond the village level in townships and counties.

Today, the Center's China Program works to help the government be more transparent and accountable to citizens. It also is strengthening citizen participation in governance through online portals for debating public policy and advancing political reform, and scholarly forums on democracy, human rights, and rule of law principles on college campuses. All programming is done in consultation with Chinese government agencies and designed to deepen reform measures on the government agenda.



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## *What role is online dialogue playing in political reform?*

As a leader in the global economy, China has been tolerating greater citizen access to online information, with a watchful eye. This is having an inevitable impact on all facets of China's social, economic, and political life. According to the Pew Internet Project, there are an estimated 137 million Internet users in China. Very soon, China will boast the largest number of Internet users in the world.

Carter Center websites in China have become popular platforms for gathering information and exchanging views on political reform. One website—[www.chinaelections.org](http://www.chinaelections.org) (Chinese) and [www.chinaelections.net](http://www.chinaelections.net) (English)—promotes better governance and elections in China, and is acknowledged by many as the most influential portal on political reform in China. Another website, [www.chinarural.org](http://www.chinarural.org), is the most comprehensive website on village elections and villager self-government in China. The program works to improve understanding of China's role in Africa and facilitate

collaboration between the regions by convening a multi-stakeholder policy advisory group and raising awareness online via the [www.sinoafrica.org](http://www.sinoafrica.org) website. In addition, the Center's Access to Information Project and China Program are collaborating to help citizens implement new rights to information by hosting [www.chinatransparency.org](http://www.chinatransparency.org). Most of these websites' editors are inside China, in different regions. Although the websites always adhere to Chinese government policies, in recent years China's hold on censorship has become more tolerant to diverse voices. The China Program's experience with online platforms has shown the Internet to be a powerful tool in facilitating dialogue on political reform issues and reflecting popular will within China.

## *Why is community building important in China?*

China's economic reforms, while offering hope to millions and lifting the destitute out of poverty, also have created enormous social and economic dislocation in the country. The gap between the

rich and the poor is widening, as the successes of new capitalist measures and the market economy, while responsible for China's economic boom, have not been evenly distributed.

In the cities, old communities supported and maintained by state-owned enterprises collapsed following privatization or bankruptcy of businesses. In rural communities, better-educated and younger residents look to capitalize on economic opportunities offered in urban areas, but often encounter unspeakable hardships. Chinese state structure and an archaic registration system deny migrant workers access to health care and other welfare provisions given to native urban residents.

The China Program works with government and nongovernmental partners to promote rural community building and design and test better ways for urban communities to integrate various social groups. Community building shifts the focus from government responsibility to civic responsibility and includes cultivating public oversight of government affairs and volunteerism.