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## How Will China Democratize?

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### Abstract

Given the mixed signals and trends in China, it may be premature to identify a specific timeframe within which China will become Free or even Partly Free on the Freedom House scale. A more fruitful intellectual exercise might be to ask not when but how the Middle Kingdom could become Free. No one should underestimate the will and skill that the ruling Chinese Communist Party will put into keeping its grip on power.

## Comment

# HOW WILL CHINA DEMOCRATIZE?

*Minxin Pei*

*Minxin Pei, senior associate and director of the China Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is the author of China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy (2006) and From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union (1994).*

In his thought-provoking essay, Henry Rowen revisits and updates his optimistic argument that China will experience gradual democratic change. This change, he claims, will raise the Middle Kingdom from Freedom House's "Not Free" category to its "Partly Free" category by 2015 (a mere eight years from now) and then to the ranks of "Free" countries just ten years after that. We should all draw encouragement from Rowen's prediction. China's democratization would add one of the world's preeminent powers—home to about a sixth of our planet's people—to the global community of democracies, and would provide a powerful extra impetus to the spread of freedom around the world.

Yet as those familiar with the tricky business of political forecasting know, predicting *when* a momentous change will occur is much harder than predicting how it likely will unfold. Many variables, most of them unforeseeable, are at work in causing structural changes in societies and political systems. It is much easier to identify these variables and to speculate about how they might contribute to the desired change than it is to say at which precise moment they will make that change occur. Thus discussions of China's democratic future should focus on understanding the processes or mechanisms of political change. China could well be Partly Free by 2015 and Free by 2025, just as Rowen predicts. But it may get there through an entirely different process than the fairly linear one that Rowen seems to envision.

To summarize, Rowen identifies three key drivers of political liberalization and democratic change. First, as modernization theory has established, economic development will continue to raise the income

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