

The Role and Development of Political Parties

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Political parties are expected to perform many roles. The often-mentioned roles of political parties include grooming of politicians for electoral contest and government formation, providing civic education to the public, articulating and representing societal interests, aggregating policy preferences and demands of the people from all walks of life, and developing policy platforms to win over voters.

In reality, political parties vary a great deal in terms of their roles, depending on their formative history, the particular political context of the day and their strategy of positioning therein. Even if we can speak of the roles of political parties in a general sense, it is important to recognize that they are in competition with other organizations and institutions. For instance, the government may be in a better position to groom politicians than parties, interest groups may provide a more closer-up of interest representation at the local levels, and schools or the mass media can be more effective agents in political socialization.

In light of the competition for roles, it is useful to focus more on the kind of role(s) that can, at least theoretically speaking, best distinguish political parties from other organizations in terms of functional utility. Simply put, the most important role that political parties can effectively perform as a system is the higher-level aggregation of interests and preferences of the citizens considered as political equals. Unlike interest groups such as the chamber of commerce, a political party is supposed to be broadly based, moving beyond particularized interests. While individual parties differ in terms of how encompassing they are, the party system that consists of all political parties in a society is likely an accurate mirror of the major cleavages and broad patterns of policy preferences in society. In other words, political parties travel across diverse interests, transcend complex shades of opinions and develop higher-order policy options by focusing on key values and the priority of development. Interest aggregation through political parties is thus an amazing chemical process of achieving unity within diversity. Although a charismatic supreme leader or a coherent government with broad society support can play such a role equally well, political parties are advantaged by being a buffer zone between the state and the people, reducing the risk of direct confrontation between the leader or government of the day and the mass public when things go wrong. With such a role of political aggregation fulfilled, the party system serves as an ideal intermediary between the government and the people.¹ Such a role is especially important in modern democracies where the

¹ . It is the lack of functional intermediaries nowadays that renders governance difficult in Hong Kong, exposing the government to the direct pressures of the mass publics from time to time. It is the

people are no longer passive subjects to be governed but awaken and aspire to participate actively in the political process.

Although it is hard to imagine a functioning democracy without political parties, they are not necessarily welcome in young democracies. Anti-partisan attitudes and practices were common in both Europe and the United States in the old days. The political outcomes of such anti-partisan practices were the dominance of special interests or personalities in the decision-making process and historical or lateral inconsistency in public policies. As a democracy matures, a competitive system of political parties tends to be recognized as an indispensable ingredient of the democratic system, that provides some order to the otherwise volatile and uncertain process of the democratic game.

As implied in the preceding paragraph, the development of political parties as a system of political competition and aggregation can be a protracted process of learning by all stake-holders.² We can speak of several paths and dimensions to the maturing of political parties and the party system. Under normal circumstances, political parties develop through the channels of elections, legislative and budget-allocation activities, and governing. A party first emerges as an electoral party that takes part in elections. When it succeeds in winning seats, it becomes a parliamentary party able to learn about the actual representation of societal interests, prioritization of competing demands, and the operation of the government. A party in parliament can be strong enough to form the government after elections or alternatively to be invited into a ruling coalition, thereby experiencing first-hand the skills of governing. How conducive these channels are to the development of political parties and the party system depends very much on the design of the political institutions of elections, the legislature and the executive-legislative relationship. This institutional design is in turn shaped by the political culture, the major cleavages (divisions), the pattern of socio-economic modernization, and the strategies of key politicians at particular historical moments. In Hong Kong, there is an additional factor of significance, i.e. the role of the Central Government of China, that affects the fate of political parties in Hong Kong and its party system. Given this multiplicity of factors, the subject matter of party development is indeed very complex and we need to focus on what appears to be more manageable within a short period of time. Political culture³, social cleavages⁴

deficiency in the mechanism and process whereby diverse, conflicting interests can be aggregated into authoritative policy solutions that have plagued Hong Kong in recent years.

² . The statement as formulated implies the exclusion of the development of a revolutionary political party that seizes power by force. Whereas its struggle with the enemies during the revolutionary period can still be regarded as a game of competition, learning during this period only reinforces the tendency for the post-revolutionary ruling party to eliminate any form of political competition. When in power, a revolutionary party seeks to change everything according to its ideology, rather than serves as an intermediary between the state and the people. The concept of party system does not apply in this case since the state is a one-party state. Transformation is possible only when the post-revolutionary, ruling party calls an end to revolution and begins to wonder how it can best represent the interests in society.

³ . Among others, propensity to join social organization and attitudes towards political parties are two key items of political culture that are most relevant to the development of political parties. On both count, the people of Hong Kong have been changing in a positive direction, from a parochial to a civic culture and from anti-partisan attitudes to growing acceptance of political parties.

⁴ . The number of cleavages in society is said to determine the number of effective political parties. Hong Kong has been fortunate in the absence of ethnic, religious, language, regional, and cultural cleavages that plague many parts of the world. The major cleavage pertains to the political

and socio-economic modernization⁵ are broad phenomena that take considerable time to evolve, stabilize and then change again, whereas political institutions are more amenable to revisions subject to appropriate strategies of key politicians. I therefore propose that we focus on the political-institutional factor⁶.

Political institutions relevant to the growth of political parties vary widely in terms of the general political system (e.g. presidential vs. parliamentary, federal vs. unitary), election (e.g. plurality vs. proportional representation), and the relational pattern government formation (party's role vs. no role). We have a fragmented political system in Hong Kong in which centrifugation is not compensated by any effective mechanism of aggregation. Our system is quasi-presidential, with a chief executive invested with great powers, but expected to stand above and isolated from political parties. There is no institutional linkage at all, not to speak of a political party or a coalition of parties as an institutional linkage, between the executive and the legislature to resolve disagreements or conflicts between them. The legislature is fragmented by two (three in the past) different channels to legislative power in terms of composition and voting methods, with two of these channels designed to restrain the development of political parties. The election has raised democratic expectation among the voters and yet has no impact whatsoever either on policies or the formation of government, thereby widening the gap between the rulers and the ruled. Since the election does not determine who govern and the elected representatives have been, until recently, more concerned about representation of interests rather than participation in governance, there is no stable, disciplined support rendered to the executive by the legislature. This trend is reinforced by the lack of a role for parliamentary parties or any role for the legislature as a whole in the formation of government. All in all, the overall institutional configuration is anti-partisan and not conducive to a healthy evolution of political parties.

It is much easier to provide an analysis of party development than offer realistic solutions to kill the ills, since institutional reforms are often the results of hard bargaining among strategic elites who are informed by interests and power rather than rationality in constitutional design. At the theoretical level, a decent design needs to address all three levels mentioned above: the electoral, the legislative, and the executive-legislative. In the interest of time, I would like to stress that the chance to participate in governance has universally been proven as a pivotal intervention to promote the maturation of political parties and the party system. And given the specific feature of Hong Kong's political legacy, the issue of functional constituency also calls for immediate redress if we are truly serious with the development of political parties and the party system.

dimension (attitudes towards democratization, Beijing and the HKSAR Government). A secondary cleavage refers to socio-economic equity (the poverty gap). Political parties in Hong Kong are clustered around these two cleavage dimensions. Related to the cleavage factor, the issues of how political parties are linked to social groups and the citizens at large are also important issues in the development of political parties.

⁵ . Among the socio-economic modernization forces, the nature and strength of the mass media are most important for the development of political parties. They largely account for the different patterns of development in old and new states. In the latter, political parties no longer require an organizational structure of mass membership as they can appeal direct to the people and mobilize them through the mass media, rather than party cells and activists.

⁶ . I would also like to leave the political leadership factor untouched.

The factor of participation in governance can be examined from several aspects. Without exhausting the arguments, suffice it to give a few pointers. To begin with, the Central government needs to come to terms with the need for a positive role of political parties in the decision-making process of Hong Kong. The current electoral system can be revised in a number of ways to give political parties more room to develop.⁷ The prohibition against party membership of the Chief Executive should be withdrawn.⁸ Political parties can be given more say in the nomination of members to the Executive Council.⁹

The functional constituency is a feudal, colonial legacy of the appointment system to political power. Its continued existence exerts an adverse effect on the healthy development of political parties in two major aspects. First, it hinders political parties in their function of aggregating societal interests across sectors/functions through pre-decisional consultation and post-decisional party discipline. Politics of particularized interests prevails over politics of partisan policy projects, resulting in a political system operating at a lower, hence more fragmenting level of interest compromise and reconciliation. Secondly, it provides a structure of incentives for political elites to shun political parties, resulting, and overall speaking, in a political system operating more to the logic of personalities than the logic of organization. It is precisely the low degree of organization that constitutes the major ills of Hong Kong's politics. In short and from the perspective of today's topic, all reform proposals are empty talks if the role of the functional constituency is not to be reduced. Therefore, I can never with good conscience lend my agreement to an increase in the number of seats to the functional constituency even if there is a reciprocal arrangement for the geographical constituency, because the anti-partisan logic of the functional constituency will definitely be reinforced one more time and there would most likely be more established interests against the expansion of universal suffrage in future, thereby hampering the healthy development of political parties and the party system in Hong Kong in particular and the advancement towards democracy in general.

⁷ . The rule for votes-seats conversion and the nature of the list system under proportional representation requires a re-examination in the interest of not only party development but capability of the legislature.

⁸ . It is a myth that any chief executive in any political system can escape from partisanship unless she is one of the dual executive with largely a symbolic role to represent the unity of the nation while another executive can be embroiled in day-to-day partisan politics.

⁹ . The current practice of appointing key members of certain parties on a personal capacity to the Executive Council is a first step forward but still a half-way house.