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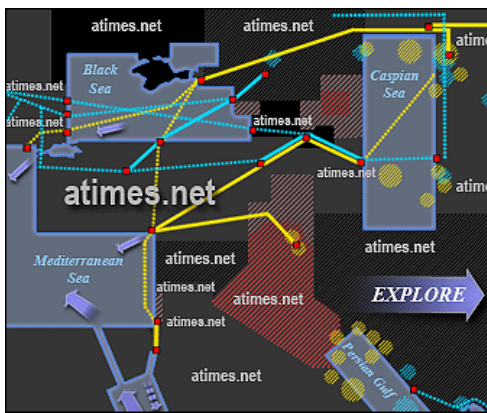
SUN WUKONG

General and scholar test reform waters

By Wu Zhong, China Editor

HONG KONG - About two years before President Hu Jintao and other top Chinese leaders retire from office, there are growing public calls for them to start political reforms.

This time, the calls for democratization and the rule of law are not being made by political dissidents but by prominent figures from the pro-establishment camp. This indicates that more liberal-minded members within the establishment, increasingly impatient with slow progress in reforms, are worried that a failure to make political changes that keep pace with economic transformation will result in violent conflicts within society and the ruin of all that



has been achieved in the past few decades.

Lieutenant General Liu Yazhou, political commissar of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) [University of National Defense](#), the training [school](#) for PLA generals, boldly predicts that China will have to replace its current authoritarian political system with a democratic one in the coming decade because there is no "way of escape" for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). That was according to a media report on August 5.

Two days later, Hu Xingdou, an economics professor with the Beijing Institute of [Technology](#) (BIT) best known for his studies of disadvantaged groups in China, publicized on his website an open petition to President Hu Jintao, entitled "China's Road To Ruin And The Way Out". In the letter, he claims that the death of social fairness and justice is putting China on a perilous path. The only remedy is to launch political reforms to truly give people back their constitutional rights and freedoms.

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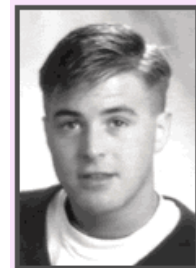
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Liu's prediction is contained in an article in the latest issue of the Phoenix Weekly, a publication of the pro-Beijing Phoenix TV based in Hong Kong. Perhaps because of the boldness of Liu's remarks on such a sensitive topic, the article was published with an Editor's Note that it was based on an exclusive interview with Liu and published without him seeing the final version.

The article starts with Liu's harsh criticisms of "money worship" prevailing in China. Liu says that now the whole Chinese nation, from top to bottom, worships the strength of money while neglecting soft power such as culture and ideology. "Having more money does not mean the increase of soft power ... A nation that worships the strength of money is a backward and foolish one, both in terms of its internal governance and international expansion," Liu said.

Internally, "corruption becomes China's largest economic loss, largest social evil and largest political challenge", the general said. Internationally, money worship has badly damaged China's image. For example, Liu said China's investment made in Africa is to bribe local officials, and as a result, local officials' appetite for bribes grows bigger and bigger while ordinary Africans become increasingly averse to the Chinese government and enterprises.

Without democracy, it is impossible for China to continue on a long-lasting upward trajectory, Liu said. "A system is bound to fall, if it fails to let its citizens breathe freely and enable them to maximally realize their creativity, and if it fails to send those to the [leadership](#) who can best represent this system and the people."

Taking the former Soviet Union as an example, Liu pointed out that what caused the collapse of the Soviet communist party was its system, not an economic or military failure. In an apparent allusion to current practices in China, Liu said that the Soviet Union used to set the maintenance of stability as its priority, "putting stability above everything else and trying to use money to solve all problems. But in the end [social] conflicts intensified and things turned to their opposite."

In comparison, the very secret of the United States' success lies in its long-lasting rule of law and the system behind the rule of law, not in Wall Street or Silicon Valley.

Therefore, according to Liu, China must change its political system. "Restructuring our political system is a task endowed to us by history. There is no way of escape for us," Liu said. He predicted that "within 10 years, a transformation from an authoritarian political system to a democratic one will inevitably take place. Great changes will be witnessed in China."

The 57-year-old PLA general, son-in-law of late president Li Xiannian and thus himself a princeling, is widely seen as a rising political star in the CCP and PLA but also a Young Turk because his outspoken speeches and [writings](#) often violate many taboos and restrictions. He is now also a member of the CCP's Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection, China's top anti-graft watchdog.

Given his position and background, it is no surprise that Liu's remarks on political reforms immediately aroused feverish public attention. The Phoenix Weekly article has so far been widely reprinted or reported on and discussed on major Chinese websites.

Yang Hengjun, a popular [blog](#) writer, told Deutsche Welle that "It is shocking for any other PLA general to say such words. But I'm not surprised that they were spoken by outspoken Liu Yazhou, who said similar words before. Liu is a person of conscience and foresight." In Yang's view, Liu spoke out for many inside the CCP. "Things can hardly go on in China as they are today. The CCP can hardly continue its rule like it does today. There must be changes, though people may have different views on how to

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make changes."

Some political analysts in Beijing believe Liu's remarks suggest the princelings and younger elites in the party are eager to gain a greater say in political affairs. They also hope expression of liberal views may help them to win greater popularity in the run-up to the 18th party congress in late 2012.

"The princelings, who think it is their destiny to safeguard what their parents or grandparents fought for, are worried that the CCP may lose its legitimacy to rule if nothing is done to make political progress. Also they certainly hope to benefit more from the reshuffle [in] two years," one of them says.

But some netizens criticize Liu's view about the success of the US. "His understanding that the success of the US lies in its rule of law and system [behind it] is superficial. One may ask then, from where has the US derived its rule of law and system?"

Like Liu, Hu Xingdou is concerned with the failure of the existing political system in China. In his open petition to President Hu, he said governance in China had yet to find the "right track". In order to maintain stability and safeguard their power and vested interests, many local governments "make use of lies, violent means, false charges, labor re-education, triad societies, illegal prisons and lunatic asylums, to detain journalists, informants and people who hold different views," he wrote. As a result, "[social] fairness and justice have already died. This is the biggest failure of the governance of the current administration."

Hu Xingdou attributed the unfairness and injustice to the existing system, featured in "the integration between [administration](#), legislation, supervision and judiciary, the integration between officials and business people, and the integration between the party and state." As a result, he said, China was on a road to ruin.

The way out is to build what he called "constitutional socialism", making social justice the very foundation of governance. "I advocate a road of gradual reforms that are in accord with China's own national conditions. I don't advocate a road of totally Westernized liberty. I call it constitutional socialism."

In interviews with media after posting the petition, Hu Xingdou elaborated on the concept that constitutional socialism was the combination of constitutional government with justice. In short, socialism and CCP rule must abide by the constitution. Coming down to details, in his opinion people must be given back constitutional rights and freedoms, such as the rights of election and supervision of government, and the freedom of speech and publication

Hu Xingdou said he advocated a road of gradual change because many intellectuals agreed that China must avoid another violent revolution. So only a gradualist, evolutionary approach to push forward social progress and development was in the interests of the vast majority of the people. And he made it clear that his approach was pro-establishment: "After all, socialism is acceptable to the ruling party. Therefore this [my] proposal is one for moderate reforms."

Hu Xingdou said that while his open petition was addressed to the president, he had also passed copies to some top leaders through friends. It is not important whether Hu Jintao responded, the scholar said; what is important "is to wake up the masses and cadres in the establishment so that they will know the truth and understand how to improve our nation and push forward social progress."

Analysts say it is probably no coincidence that Liu Yazhou and Hu Xingdou make public appeals for political reforms at about the same time. It is likely that there is at present a debate at the top, and the liberal camp wants its views publicized to test reactions from within the party and the general public.

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