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China's New Senate

Educating The People

When, on October 19, 1907, the late Emperor Kuang-hsu issued an imperial edict establishing provincial legislatures in each of the 18 provinces of China and announcing that the organization of a national parliament would quickly follow, there was some disposition, particularly in Europe, to dismiss the edict as a mere sop to the reform party at Peking—as a politic and insincere device to head off a threatened *coup d'etat* by the more ardent and impatient reformers.

But during the year which followed, it became increasingly apparent that, in so far as the provincial legislatures were concerned, at least, the leaders of the court party were perfectly sincere. Lecturers were sent into all parts of the empire to explain the nature and responsibilities of representative government to the people and to prepare them for the impending elections, and a number of decrees were issued defining the duties and prerogatives of the proposed legislatures. The provincial governors and nobles, whose powers would be greatly restricted by a reform of the government, were given solemn warning that open opposition would be to their cost, and those who disregarded the warming were promptly and severely punished.

A Constitution In Nine Years.

Hardly had the campaign of education and preparation got under way when Kuang-hsu and his mother, the famous Empress Dowager, fell ill, and affairs at the capital grew turbulent and chaotic. But despite this setback and the great pressure of other matters the constitutional plans were not forgotten. On August 27, 1908, when the Emperor lay dying, an imperial decree was issued in his name reaffirming that of October 19, 1907, in every detail, and containing the further assurance that the reorganization of the national government upon a constitutional basis would proceed apace and that within nine years it would be completed. On December 3, 1908, after the death of Kuang-hsu and the accession of the infant Hsuan-t'ung, these promises were repeated in the name of the latter, over the signature of his father, Prince Ch'un, the regent and actual ruler of the empire.

Soon afterward orders were given that the election be proceeded with in each of the 18 provinces and that, in addition, legislatures be elected in each of the three provinces of Manchuria and in the "new dominion" or colony of Chinese Turkestan. These elections were duly held as ordered during the spring of 1909, and on October 14, 21 of the 22 legislatures assembled for business. In the case of Chinese Turkestan it was found impossible to choose a representative chamber in the time available on account of the large size of the territory and the

difficulties of communication. Instead, the officials of the larger towns organized a sort of colonial council, and this was later officially recognized at Peking.

The Methods Of The East

So much for the provincial legislatures. Nearly all of them buckled down to work without delay and a number of them revealed at once a surprising comprehension of their duties and responsibilities. But what of the promise of a federal constitution and a national parliament? What of the promised reforms at Peking?

It soon appeared that here, too, Prince Ch'un and his advisers were sincere. But things are not done in accidental fashion in China. Instead of proclaiming a constitution at once and then proceeding to put it into effect during the nine years defined in the decree of August 27, 1908, the regent apparently decided to put it into effect first and proclaim it afterward.

That is to say, he began at the top by ordering the organization of a senate and gave that senate in effect authority to work out for itself the question of its powers and limitations and that of its relations to the other branches of the nascent constitutional government. Thus when the time comes for the promised constitution to be actually drawn up and proclaimed it will be possible to frame it in the light of at least partial experience of the country's needs, desires and capacity for self-government.

Manchus Are In Control

The senate was organized by an imperial decree of May 9, 1910, and it will hold its first meeting on October 3. It bears the title of Tzechen-yuan and consists of 91 members, all of whom owe their appointment to the throne. In other words, it is not an elective body, but, like the upper houses of most European countries, it is designed to represent, roughly, the sentiment of the ruling and propertied classes.

At the top of its roll of members stand the names of 14 princes of the blood royal, the official spokesmen of the throne. Next come six high dignitaries of the emperor's clan, though not of his actual family; 12 representatives of the provincial nobility; 17 representatives of the imperial colonies and dependencies; 32 provincial officials of high rank; and, finally, 10 men eminent for their learning. The last named will be the parliamentary experts of the new senate. Upon their shoulders will rest the duty of organizing it in accordance with European ideas, and yet without losing sight of Chinese prejudices and limitations.

A Check On The Commons

The senate, as has been said, is by no means a popular assemblage. Though the invading Manchus, to which race the ruling dynasty belongs, constitute, in all probability, not more than 10 per cent of the total population of China, the majority of the senators are of Manchu blood, and most of the actual Chinese nominated are in full sympathy with Manchu rule.

But perhaps it is not to be wondered at that the royal family should thus seek to insure its own security. The lower house, when it comes to be organized, will probably be strictly representative, and in consequence preponderantly anti-Manchu. Against its possible onslaughts upon the throne the senate will stand as a bulwark of fidelity.

Reforming The Courts

Meanwhile the spirit and letter of the decree of December 3, 1908, are being observed in other ways. On February 6, for example, an imperial decree was issued providing for the division of the 188 provinces into departments and prefectures, upon the French plan, and for their government by elected officers, under the general control of governors and department prefects nominated by the throne. The day following there came an imperial decree ordering a reform of the judiciary upon Western lines and the abolition of the old system of bribery and torture. In theory, at least, justice is now free in China, and neither plaintiff nor defendant need make presents to the court. But in actually the hunkerous provincial magistrates are still doing business in the ancient manner, and it will take a good while to root them out of office and put an end to their extortions.

All such things, in truth, take time. No doubt China's first parliament will have a rough road to travel. Perhaps there will be bloodshed before things move smoothly. But the great step has been taken: the work of reform has begun, and in another dozen years China may be astonishing the world as Japan once astonished it.

(Source: Iowa State University, Parks Library Media Center, Microfilm Collection)