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China's Hu walks cautious line on political reform

By Chris Buckley

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BEIJING (Reuters) - Alarmed by stubborn corruption and public unrest, [China's](#) President Hu Jintao is steering the ruling Communist Party to reforms that will make officials more answerable.

But he has resisted calls for deeper democratic change, and critics inside the party question whether his wary changes are enough to cure the country's ills.

The party's Central Committee met in Beijing this week to discuss Hu's ideas for a "harmonious society," including expanding "inner-party democracy," the term for strengthened consultation and competition inside the ruling hierarchy.

Hu hopes that exposing officials to clearer rules and scrutiny will help stem abuses recently highlighted by the fall of Shanghai's party boss, Chen Liangyu, who was accused of misusing pension funds and helping enrich cronies, say observers.

But Hu and other leaders have repeatedly rejected calls for deeper democratic transformation, keeping any reforms within the limits of one-party rule. Critics say that is a mistake.

"We have a market economy but power is concentrated in the party, and the result is corruption. Political reform has to accelerate or else these problems will only worsen," said Gao Fang, a professor at the People's University of China in Beijing who joined the party in 1949.

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China's Communists refuse to embrace Western-style democracy, saying radical change would sap national unity and risk chaos.

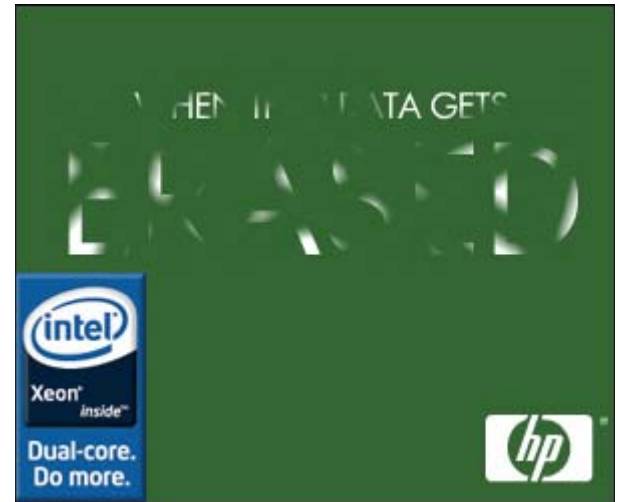
But over the past decade China has also sought to meet pressure for change by marketing a homegrown brand of "democracy" and saying the ruling party is preparing for greater openness.

Since taking over the party in 2002, Hu has veered between promising to respect the law and cracking down on disgruntled citizens. Polls show that even officials have high demand for deeper political reform, and some experts warn Hu's piecemeal approach is damming up, not defusing, volatile social strains.

"The system is in a very dangerous condition. Ordinary people don't thank the party for economic development, but they blame it for corruption," said Gao, who recently published a book-length call for political reform.

But there are signs that as Hu prepares for a Party Congress next year, which is likely to strengthen his hold on

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power, he is holding out at least the promise of broader political change.

The party is drafting a "governmental innovation program" that may be announced near the time of the congress, said He Zengke at the China Center for Comparative Politics and Economics, a party think-tank in Beijing.

"China's political system reform is proceeding along the same path as economic reform -- starting with the simple and proceeding to the difficult," said He, who advises on the plan.

Across the country, too, the party has been quietly dabbling in local government reform, allowing party members and ordinary citizens to comment and sometimes vote on official candidates.

"It makes a certain amount of sense that if you set up democratic institutions against the party that won't work, so the next step is to democratize the party," said Joseph Fewsmith, an expert on Chinese politics at Boston University.

But Hu, an instinctively cautious leader who does not want to risk his power or the party's, has signaled that he will not let local initiatives threaten top-down control.

Several months ago, Zhou Ruijin, a former People's Daily editor famous for promoting late paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, called for equally bold political change.

Zhou said China should follow Vietnam's communists, who now have a multi-candidate selection process for their top post.

Two sources close to the Chinese party told Reuters that Hu has internally criticized the Vietnamese experiment as a step too far from the leadership's traditional top-down dominance.

"Hu basically said that Vietnam's market economy reform was correct, but it's taken the wrong route politically," said one of the sources, an editor who requested anonymity.

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