

Xi Jinping's Anticorruption Campaign Alters China's Power Structure

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Since taking over as secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at the 18th party congress in 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping has cracked down on corruption within government and established new institutions to consolidate his own position. In comparison to the Hu Jintao era, Xi's anti-corruption drive stands out for three characteristics. 1. This time a much higher number of officials has been punished and many more provinces and government departments have been implicated in graft cases than in the past. 2. In targeting former Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang and other entrenched interests, Xi is rooting out corruption by moving from the periphery to the inner circle. His purge is more expansive and reaches into higher echelons than before, including senior figures of vice state leader level such as Zhou, Xu Caihou (the former vice chairman of the Central Military Commission), and Su Rong (vice chairman of China's parliamentary advisory body). 3. The CCP's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection strikes on its own initiative, deploys inspection teams to arrest people in a secretive and swift manner, and announces the cases immediately after netting the suspects. This time, the degree of unprompted initiative, swiftness and transparency by far exceeds what we have seen in the past.

Based on these features, this article argues that the anti-corruption fight in the Xi Jinping era is not only a means to an end but also an end in itself. The case of Zhou, in which numerous

people ranging from his subordinates to family members and relatives were caught before Zhou himself was taken in, illustrates how Xi deals with his political enemies. This is not only helpful for deterring retired leaders from interfering in politics but also for scaring local officials into promoting his "comprehensive deepening reforms" agenda to lay the foundation for his personal power. The instrumental nature of the anti-corruption drive is obvious since neither offspring of the founding fathers of the People's Republic of China nor any Xi allies have joined the ranks of the disgraced high-ranking officials so far. Moreover, Xi's anti-corruption campaign is not solely a means for consolidating his power. The fallen officials come from many provinces and government departments, which shows that part of the crackdown aims to straighten out the bureaucracy to dispel public discontent with the government and improve the legitimacy of those in power.

As for the establishment of new institutions, Xi took the helm of three newly created policy coordinating bodies as group leader or chairperson – the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms, the National Security Commission and the Central Network Security and Information Leading Group. In the wake of the 18th party congress, he had already successively assumed the positions of CCP secretary general, head of state, chair of the Central Military Commission as well as of the three CCP permanent leading small groups on Taiwan affairs, foreign affairs and national

security. By setting up these new bodies, Xi made sure that he will have direct control over the policymaking process for a much wider range of issues. These new bodies will also make up for the lack of coordinating agencies across ministries in the fields of deepening reforms, national security and stability maintenance as well as network control. The creation of the Central Network Security and Information Leading Group also shows that China intensifies its concrete actions to stem the influx of foreign ideas into Chinese society and public discourse.

Political observers at home and abroad generally acknowledge that with his way of concentrating power, Xi moves toward building a superior-subordinate relationship between him and the other members of the Politburo Standing Committee. The present concentration of power in Xi's hands runs counter to the collective leadership China's top echelons exercised during the Hu Jintao era. Therefore, we should track this trend closely. This phenomenon of power concentration is the joint product of three factors. First, China presently faces greater internal and external pressures than during the early Hu Jintao era and therefore needs a strong leader. China's challenges include: maintaining a medium to high economic growth rate; alleviating social contradictions resulting from the wealth gap; containing the escalation of ethnic uprisings in the Xinjiang region and Tibet; preventing the United States from encircling China and discouraging the Southeast Asian countries from teaming up and following America's lead. Second, Xi has lived through the times of Mao Zedong worship and the tumultuous Chinese Cultural Revolution. These experiences gave him a resolute and persevering character that craves national revival and admires strongmanship. Yet

it also enabled him to understand the hardships of social underdogs, the workings of realpolitik as well as the importance of the rule of law. Third, as Hu Jintao has completely retired from the political stage and Jiang Zemin is at an advanced age, Xi faces relatively little resistance from within the party against the concentration of power in his hands.

While the centralization of power under Xi is reality, Beijing has not yet abandoned the collective leadership framework. Therefore, China's current leadership structure could be described as a "systematic concentration of power by an individual under collective leadership." China's top echelons still publish policy decisions and documents in the name of the collective leadership. The members of the Politburo Standing Committee still vote to decide major issues. The existing concept and system of "combining collective leadership with individual responsibility" could restrain the unfettered expansion of Xi's power. Second, Xi is a leader by virtue of his political office. Since he cannot compare with the historic feats of Mao and Deng Xiaoping, he derives his power from the political system. Unless Xi can break through the compulsory retirement age barrier of 68, becoming a real political strongman will not be easy because he will have to hand his official posts to a new leader as soon as he turns 68. Yet there is a possibility that collective leadership could actually be hollowed out should a new order emerge in China over the coming eight years.

The anti-corruption agenda has raised Xi's social prestige, has frightened his political foes and local politicians, helping solve the problem that "orders don't get beyond Zhongnanhai"

(meaning that local officials with vested interests are not keen on implementing central government policies). Xi's move has also broken with the established practice that emerged in the wake of 1989, which gave apparent impunity to members of the Politburo Standing Committee. It might intensify the power struggle among high-ranking party members and turn it into a zero-sum game. Under Xi's "new deal" (fighting corruption and comprehensive deepening reforms) China could move to two extremes in the future, either the establishment of a new order or descent into chaos. In plotting the future of cross-strait ties, Taiwan needs to take into account the impact of its Sunflower student movement, the Occupy Central protests in Hong Kong and other factors. It must also improve its study of domestic developments in China and prepare contingency plans accordingly. The leadership reshuffle at the 19th party congress in 2017 will be a decisive factor in such an assessment. **BT**

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