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Centre for China Analysis & Strategy
中国分析及策略中心

27 July 2022

XI JINPING BEGINS APPOINTING LOYALISTS TO KEY POSTS

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The political situation in China is becoming volatile as the 20th Party Congress draws near and rumours of imminent purges circulating in Beijing gain momentum. The absence of a 'Revolutionary' veteran founding leader with unchallenged authority to decide on leadership appointments has added to the uncertainty. Surviving leaders like Song Ping are over 103 now and frail. The failed bids for power in 2012 by the now incarcerated former Politburo (PB) member and 'princeling' Bo Xilai and incarcerated Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member and Security Czar Zhou Yongkang continue to haunt the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Preparations have also begun for the important annual confidential conclave of senior and veteran CCP leaders scheduled to be held at the Beidaihe seaside resort in August where major decisions are usually taken. The platform has traditionally been used by senior veteran communist leaders to voice their views -- which carry considerable weight -- and approve through consensus the promotions of cadres to the PBSC, PB and Party Secretaries of provinces. But cadres of pre-eminent stature, like former CCP CC General Secretary Jiang Zemin or PBSC member Zeng Qinghong, are very few in number, are 'tainted', and individually limited in their potential to pose an effective challenge to Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Beidaihe conclave. Unless there are a sizeable number of cadres in the Party Central Committee (CC), or Delegates to the Congress, who are agitated enough to criticise Xi Jinping, many veteran leaders are unlikely to throw their weight behind them and oppose Xi.

Xi is simultaneously securing his next term, and possibly beyond, at the upcoming 20th Party Congress. His acolytes have been saying since 2013 that 'under Xi Jinping, China has embarked on a new thirty year era like those of Mao and Deng before him'! The official Chinese media has stepped up its almost daily promotion of Xi, his thoughts and his leadership. Many provincial Party leaders, those in central leadership positions and others within the CCP appear to have assessed that Xi will secure a third term and have expressed overt support for Xi and lined up behind him. Reflecting confidence that he will secure the third term -- unprecedented since Deng Xiaoping -- Xi has commenced promoting and positioning his loyalists in key positions. He has also cautioned prospective opponents that the anti-corruption campaign will continue and prominent 'tigers' might fall.

At the meeting of the Politburo's Group Study Session in Beijing on June 17, Xi warned that corruption in the country remains severe and complicated even though progress has been made in the battle against graft. He said its "stubbornness and danger" cannot be underestimated. Indicating that senior cadres are now in the crosshairs of the anti-corruption campaign, Xi Jinping vowed "zero tolerance" on corruption and asked senior government

officials to keep themselves, their family and relatives in check and ensure a moderate and clean relationship between the government and business community.

Soon after, on June 20, the Shanghai-based 'Paper' publicised that the CCP CC General Office had issued "Regulations on the Management of Leading Cadres' Spouses, Children and Their Spouses to Run Business and Run Enterprises". Stating that "You can't have both fish and bear's paw. When you are an official, don't make a fortune. If you are rich, don't become an official. This is a car that runs on two roads", the regulations quoted Xi as saying that "the requirements for leading cadres are to be stricter". It clarified that "Centrally-managed cadres, cadres at the bureau level and equivalent positions in the provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities and central units are all included in the scope of the specification, leaving no blank spots". The 'Discipline Inspection and Supervision News', a newspaper of the CCP's powerful anti-corruption watchdog, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), reiterated the warning. In a commentary on managing the children and families published on June 21, it said "Leading cadres must study the spirit of the "Regulations" in depth, take the lead in strictly implementing the rules and regulations, accept the supervision of the party and the people, take the lead in improving family style and family style".

Wu Guoguang, Canada-based Chinese Political Science Professor and former editor of People's Daily and member of the Central Policy Group on Political Reform during the term of Premier Zhao Ziyang who resigned in protest against the Tiananmen events, said "Since Xi came to power, he has continued to carry out high-level political purges in the party through anti-corruption. It should come as no surprise that he did so at such a crucial stage of preparation for such a reorganization of power." He predicted that around July or August, Xi Jinping may purge high-level political figures in order to further deter the elites in the party, and warn the various forces that may challenge him to dare not act lightly.

The Politburo meeting of June 17 and the other regulations and newspaper articles together sparked speculation inside China that Xi intends to neutralise opposition from Jiang Zemin and Zeng Qinghong and that among those who could be targeted in a new anti-corruption campaign are Jiang Zemin's two sons, Jiang Mianheng and Jiang Miankang. Taiwan's media quoted Zhang Yushao, a researcher at the Cross-Strait Policy Association, as saying the Jiang Zemin family used to have a close relationship with Chinese tycoon Jack Ma. Jiang Mianheng, Jiang Zemin's eldest son is known to have an influential shareholding ratio in many listed companies. Zeng Wei, the son of former Vice Chairman and Jiang Zemin's right hand, Zeng Qinghong, is engaged in the oil trade and is rumoured to be involved with Shanghai Volkswagen, Beijing Hyundai, and Shanghai Eastern Airlines. The Shanghai Municipality responded that after it started conducting inspections in 2014-15, requiring leading cadres to declare businesses of spouses and children, 2133 leading cadres of Shanghai Municipality had made 'special declarations' on their spouses and children running businesses.

Speculation has been reinforced by the report that Xiao Jianhua, who was taken away from the Four Seasons Hotel in Hong Kong in January 2017, would be tried in Shanghai before the end of the month. The speculation links Xiao Jianhua's case with the larger enquiries into Jiang Zemin's family and claims that after his arrest Xiao Jianhua has probably "cooperated" in the investigations with the authorities. These reports add that in view of his relationship with Jiang Zemin, Zeng Qinghong, and other powerful families, the authorities would have

obtained relevant evidence of the power and money transactions that have been discussed. Xi and his loyalists will use this evidence to neutralise Jiang Zemin, Zeng Qinghong and others likely to oppose him, which includes incarcerated former PB member Bo Xilai's supporters.

Discontent is, however, simmering below the surface. Many 'princelings', businessmen and entrepreneurs, Party cadres, intellectuals, students and others are dissatisfied with the slowing economy which has seen unemployment and the cost of living soar. Writing in the *Ziyou Yazhou diantai* on May 24, a retired NDRC official and CCP cadre who writes under the pseudonym Liang Jing, forecast that US President Biden would see the fall of Putin and Xi Jinping, probably in 2022. He said that unlike Russia under Putin, China has seen no gains during Xi's terms and the elite is very unhappy.

More recently on June 18, Radio France International published a Chinese-language article that was originally published by the CDIC's "China Disciplinary Inspection and Supervision Magazine" on June 1. Titled "Abandoning Exquisite Egoism", the article criticised "Prime Minister Li" and generated a lot of speculation. Once it went viral the article was deleted, leaving only screenshots and snippets of quotes. WeChat accounts and WeChat groups that disseminated the article were censored. The article, which cites two negative examples, one is the prime minister of the Qin Dynasty, Li Si, and the other is the prime minister of the Tang Dynasty, Li Linfu, said: "Exquisite egoism refers to making good use of superbly realistic acting skills and high-sounding reasons to carefully embellish and subtly cover up the nature of selfishness and greed." Speculation was rife in China that Chinese Premier Li Keqiang was the article's target. It is strange that the CDIC issued such an article at this sensitive period and it points to ongoing inner-Party factional struggles.

Signalling his confidence, Xi has begun appointing loyalists to important senior CCP posts without waiting for either the Beidaihe conclave or the 20th Party Congress. He has also sidelined some who were expected to be elevated like former Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo and International Liaison Department Chief Song Tao. Both have been appointed to bodies under the National People's Congress (NPC) and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Chen Quanguo has been appointed Deputy Head of the Central Rural Work Leading Group.

The 35th meeting of the 13th NPC Standing Committee on June 24, presided over by NPC Chairman and PBSC member Li Zhanshu, approved new appointments among which were Pan Yue as Secretary of the Party Leadership Group of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, while he continues as Deputy Minister of the United Front Work Department. Pan Yue relinquished the post of Director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.

Wang Xiaohong was promoted and appointed Minister of Public Security. The appointment of 64-year old loyalist and former Executive Vice Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong as Minister of Public Security at this juncture is particularly important. He is the first professional police officer to lead the Ministry in 24 years. Wang Xiaohong is likely to be 'cleared' for promotion as State Councillor, or even the PB, at the Party Congress in October-November and formally appointed at the "two sessions" (*lianghui*) meetings in March 2023. Other important appointments made by Xi are those of Liu Jianchao as head of the important CCP CC International Department (formerly the International Liaison Department), replacing

Song Tao, on June 6. The following day the appointments of other Xi loyalists to Ministerial-level posts were also announced. These include: Cui Maohu as Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA); Fu Hua as President of Xinhua News Agency; and Lv Yansong as Editor-in-Chief of Xinhua News Agency.

Fu Hua, is a long-time media veteran who served four years (2010-2014) as Deputy Propaganda Chief for the city of Beijing, and nearly two years (2018-2020) as the top propaganda official in Guangdong province. He has risen rapidly through the ranks and is regarded as a thoroughly loyal Party apparatchik. Fu Hua has given priority to Xi Jinping's notion of "telling China's story well" and the need to find new ways for the CCP to control public opinion domestically and globally. For example, shortly after joining Beijing Daily, Fu Hua referred to Xi's first major speech on propaganda and ideology on August 19, 2014, where he stressed the need for propaganda officials to "be bolder in raising the banner and showing their swords".

Before being promoted as Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), 1965-born Cui Maohu was Deputy Director of UFWD, in which capacity he has worked closely with Xi. Another Xi loyalist to be elevated is Xie Chuntao who, in a rare internal promotion was appointed Executive Vice President of the Central Party School.

Born in 1963, Xie Chuntao used to be the President and Editor-in-Chief of the CCP CC Party School and in May 2018, served as the Vice President (Dean) of the Central Party School (National School of Administration). Soon after his appointment, on June 30 Xie Chuntao published an article in the People's Daily where he declared "In the face of economic and trade frictions provoked by the United States, General Secretary Xi Jinping personally led the response, effectively safeguarding China's sovereignty, dignity. The core interests show the leadership level and the art of struggle of a leader of a big party and a big country strategizing and directing. In the people's war, the overall war and the blocking war in the prevention and control of the new crown pneumonia epidemic, General Secretary Xi Jinping took the overall situation and made decisive decisions, which provided the most fundamental guarantee for major strategic achievements in epidemic prevention and control. In the face of external forces interfering in Hong Kong affairs and rampant "anti-China chaos in Hong Kong" activities, the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core maintained its determination and adopted a series of measures to address both the symptoms and the root causes, so as to push the situation in Hong Kong to achieve a major transition from chaos to governance".

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has two potential vacancies to be filled at the Party Congress, namely those of Politburo member Yang Jiechi in case that position is to be retained and that of 69-year old Wang Yi as Foreign Minister. Surprising was the sideways movement and 'demotion' of Vice Foreign Minister and Russia expert Le Yucheng, widely regarded as Wang Yi's successor. It is probable that he was side-lined because of a factional struggle. Reports have long suggested that there are differences between Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi. Vice Foreign Minister Ma Chaoxu, and the current Director of the Taiwan Affairs Office Liu Jieyi are possible successors to Wang Yi. There are rumours too that Wang Yi's term could be extended by a year or two, but his elevation to the Politburo is doubtful. There is speculation, however, that Xi has someone else in mind for the job of Foreign Minister.

Senior CCP cadres have been competing for some months now to demonstrate their loyalty to Xi in the run up to the 20th Party Congress, further confirming that personal loyalty to Xi Jinping has become an important criterion for promotion in the CCP. A total of 11 Party Secretaries were noticed till June 29 praising Xi Jinping and extolling his leadership qualities in their reports to the respective Provincial People's Congresses. Some of them are vying for a seat in the CCP CC Political Bureau.

The Party Secretaries include: Lou Yangsheng, Party Secretary of Henan, who wrote (June 22) in the "Learning Times" that cadres should "hold high the ideological banner and keep in mind the leader's entrustment", regard Xi Jinping's political theory as a "lifelong career", and call for "item-by-item" implementation of Xi Jinping's decree; Li Hongzhong, Party Secretary of the Tianjin Municipal Party Committee, who was the first to shout the slogan of "Xi's core", also mentioned "two safeguards" in his report to the Tianjin Party Congress (June 17), while calling on officials to strengthen "Xi's "core status", political identity, ideological identity, and emotional identity," and "unswervingly" follow Xi; Jiangxi Provincial Party Secretary Yi Lianhong in his speech (June 13) called Xi "the leader at the helm", and urged cadres to "keep in mind the entrustment and keeping up with the leader's pace"; Shandong Party Secretary Li Ganjie published (May 30) an article on the front page of the "Study Times" calling Xi Jinping "the man at the helm" and describing Xi's instructions as a "compass", "golden key" and "fulcrum". In addition, provinces and Municipalities have held several seminars to study the red pocket book and some have organised special exhibitions.

There are others too, like Zhejiang Party Secretary Yuan Jiajun whose report to the 15th Party Congress of Zhejiang on June 20 included 19 references in praise of Xi Jinping. He additionally ensured that eye-catching banners of "Practicing the 'Eight-Eight Strategy' faithfully, resolutely achieving the 'Two Maintenance', and striving to promote socialism with Chinese characteristics for common prosperity and provincial modernization in high-quality development" were placed on the balcony on the second floor of the venue! 59-year old Yuan Jiajun is an aerospace engineer best known for his role as chief of the Shenzhou program and is a Full Member of the 19th CC who would be hoping for elevation to the PB. 1960-born Jing Junhai, Jilin Party Secretary, in his report to the Jilin Party Congress on June 20, declared "The people of Jilin are infinitely grateful, highly trusted, and sincerely support General Secretary Xi Jinping" and "sincerely appreciate General Secretary Xi Jinping's care and concern". In his report to the Hubei Province Congress on June 18, Hubei Party Secretary Wang Menghui mentioned Xi Jinping 10 times. Attributing Hubei's successes to Xi Jinping, he ended with the exhortation "Let us unite more closely around the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core, hold high the great banner of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era ... and make new and greater contributions to ... realizing the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation!" Ningxia Party Secretary Liang Yanshun referred to Xi Jinping 39 times in his report to Ningxia's 13th Party Congress on June 10! Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Party Secretary Ma Xingrui too praised Xi in his report to the Eighth Congress of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps.

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