

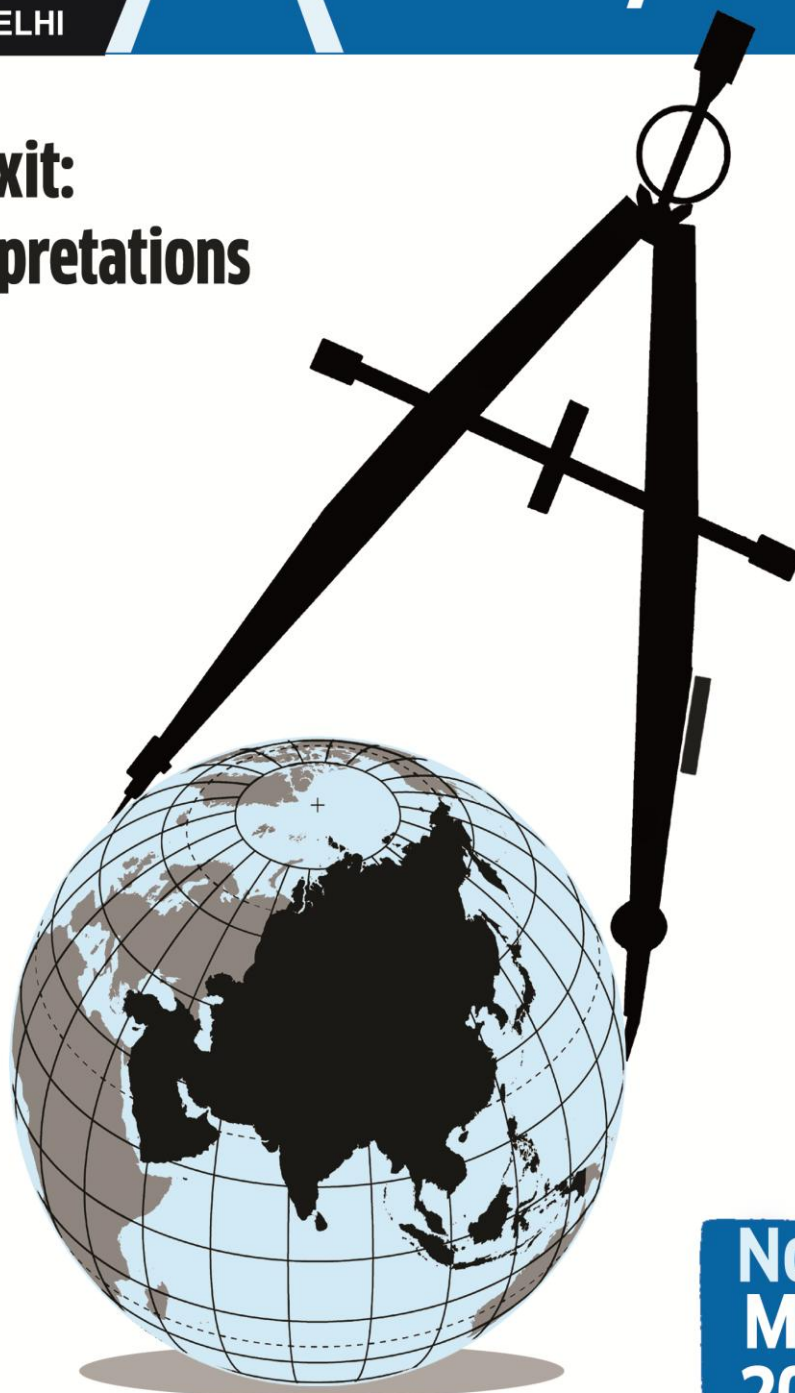
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# Analysis

## Bo Xilai's Exit: Some Interpretations



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The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution which has a leadership role in promoting Chinese and East Asian Studies in India. ICS Analysis aims to provide informed and balanced inputs in policy formulation based on extensive interactions among a wide community of scholars, experts, diplomats and military personnel.

# Bo Xilai's Exit: Some Interpretations

The ides of March in China saw the dismissal of Bo Xilai, Party Secretary of Chongqing, one of China's four major city-level provinces. He was subsequently also suspended from his position on the Politburo and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The significance of these events lies in the fact that Bo was apparently a strong contender for a seat on the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) of the CPC at the upcoming 18th Party Congress in October. However, it needs to be borne in mind that till date there has been no official Party statement explaining either Bo's suspension or the events surrounding it. A further caveat may be added – it is by no means certain that for all his prominence (especially in the international media), Bo would have actually made it to the PBSC. This is not the first time that an important provincial Party Secretary has been suspended in the run-up to a major Party Congress. Chen Liangyu lost his job as the Shanghai Party Secretary in 2006, a year before the 17th Party Congress in 2007 and earlier still, Chen Xitong, mayor and Party Secretary of Beijing lost his positions in 1995. Both were members of the Politburo like Bo Xilai and both were sacked on charges of corruption and subsequently jailed.

## What led to Bo Xilai's downfall?

Several reasons may be put forward and they are listed here not necessarily in order of importance. For one, Bo's dismissal was possibly a reaction against the cult of personality that he seemed to have built around himself and reflects the CPC's wariness of leaders who have sought to directly or individually appeal to the masses. Wen Jiabao has also been seen as a popular CPC leader but he has operated strictly within the power hierarchy and has not attempted to

challenge the Party leadership through populism.

Bo Xilai, on the other hand, had begun a campaign of reviving 'red culture' including the singing of communist songs in Chongqing, greatly reminiscent of the Maoist style of politics. He had also advocated a return to strongly socialist welfare programmes to counter the effects of China's rapid but hugely unequal economic growth. Reportedly, Bo even paid money out of his government's funds to public intellectuals to promote his 'Chongqing model' of development. It is debatable whether these moves indicated his 'New Left' leanings or whether he was merely being used by the anti-reform groups.

The Wang Lijun incident however was the spark that led to the prairie fire of Bo's exit. Bo's popularity to some extent stemmed from his crackdown on the Chongqing city mafia that his police chief Wang Lijun spearheaded. Bo Xilai's wife Gu Kailai's involvement in the death of a British national and the attempted cover-up, created a divide between Bo and Wang. The latter then tried to seek asylum at the American consulate in Chengdu but was turned away by the Americans. Media reports highlight alleged misdemeanours of the Bo family, including corruption, ostentatious lifestyles, money-laundering and obtaining foreign citizenships.

## Implications for the Chinese political system

Two implications would seem to be in order – both of which only serve to underscore the limited access to and/or information about the inner dynamics of the CPC, that is available to outsiders. The first is with regard to the much discussed political and systemic reform process that has been underway in China. The second is with regard to factions and

factionalism within the CPC. This is reflected in the widely divergent assessments which have been seen since mid-March with regard to both aspects. Added to that, the speed with which rumours began to surface and circulate, highlights also the weaknesses of the government/Party-people interface. Despite or perhaps because of stringent controls on the media and the Internet, ordinary Chinese filled the vacuum of knowledge on the goings-on at the highest levels of Chinese leadership, with unsubstantiated reports. Many of these were picked up and used to make informed assessments. It would be necessary to be extremely wary in using this information uncritically to reach unwarranted conclusions. One such example would be to see Bo Xilai's exit as an instance of an intense factional struggle underway in the CPC. The question as always is whether this fresh episode is indicative of a deep or systemic political crisis? Or would it be more profitable to assess such developments as part of the gradual transformation in the CPC in the broader context of the new political economy of the market reforms.

Nevertheless, it is notable that the CPC called at short notice, a highly public re-education campaign within the PLA during which Bo's mistakes were highlighted and loyalty to Party stressed as the PLA's founding principle. This is reminiscent of long-standing traditions within the CPC, when any political crisis led to public reiterations of the CPC's founding principle - that the Party must always control the gun. There are some conventions that retain their significance within the CPC even today.

The open contest between Bo Xilai as head of Chongqing and Wang Yang – his predecessor at Chongqing and now Guangdong Party Secretary – over two models of development named after their respective provinces, also highlights another facet of the evolving political system in China. Despite the trend of recentralization of powers from the provinces that began in the 1990s, provinces remain the most important sites of reform and

experimentation. Bo's developmental model of redistribution of wealth in Chongqing and the anti-mafia (打黑, dahei) campaigns was juxtaposed against the 'Guangdong model' of a continuing open market economy. With the central government depending on the meritocratic promotion of leaders from the provinces to fill its leadership positions, more leaders can be expected to use provinces as bases to test their ideas and to contend for higher office at the centre.

Premier Wen Jiabao has – among all the PBSC leaders - been in the news most frequently on account of his statements on 'political reform'. However, he discusses it in the context of structural reform (体制改革, tizhi gaige) or the reform of the party structure and not in terms of the reform of the political system as a whole (制度改革, zhidu gaige). Deng Xiaoping himself after having started out with the latter term switched to the former as he sought to preserve the Party in power in the 1980s. This is not to deny that some important movement has been made with respect to judicial reforms and environment legislation. Even official sources called upon the Party to come out with the whole truth on the Bo Xilai affair. On the whole, the Hu-Wen record in power is generally perceived as one in which there were hardly any moves towards genuine political reforms; if anything, there have been heavy curbs on the freedom of expression whether by the general public through the Internet or by public intellectuals and activists. It is interesting that this period also saw a shift in the ordering of development priorities from the urban to the rural and the countryside. The close control over the media and civil society activists has however, not prevented sections among the Party, including the 'princelings' – from raising uncomfortable questions about the past. In particular, there has been a call to reconsider the 1981 Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the Republic – the official Party account of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. This is one debate that needs to

be closely followed as it unfolds in the coming years. It could well be one of the fundamental issues in the future evolution of the CPC.

The 18th Party Congress meanwhile, is likely to take place as scheduled and it is unlikely

that (factional or otherwise) balances will be substantially altered as a result of Bo's exit. If anything, the remaining contenders for the PBSC are likely to 'keep a low profile', at least, until they have been confirmed in their positions.



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