



Politics under the Xi Jinping Era: Bringing the Party Back In!

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Chair: Amb. Vinod C. Khanna

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The presentation tries to explore the state of Chinese politics since the 18th Party Congress in 2012 and the role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in emerging ‘strongman’ politics under Xi Jinping leadership. Dwelling on party documents and available data, speaker Bhim Subba explains how the nature of the polity has been changing and has marked an important departure from the previous leadership of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

At the outset, the speaker considers it pertinent to study current ‘authoritarianism’ debates and enumerates few important works. From Landry’s *‘Decentralized Authoritarianism’* to Ringen’s *perfect dictatorship of ‘controlocracy’* to most recent Minzner’s work on *China’s Authoritarian Revival*, the speaker highlights creeping authoritarian trends in Chinese politics. Xi leadership; discarding the established norms institutionalized under Deng Xiaoping’s reform leadership in the 1980s; has focused on rebuilding the party and he himself has taken the task of reinstalling the ‘faith of the people in the party’ through party rectification (*dang zheng feng*) via mass line (*qunzhong luxian*) education and anti-corruption movements (*fanfu yundong*) and not to mention ideological reorientation (see table below) among the cadres and members pledging utmost loyalty to the party under Xi’s core leadership.

Although looking at the 19th Party Congress elected new Central Committee Politburo, the institutional representation of the members in this 25-member body remains a status quo. Unlike the previous politburo, the current body is representative of more of ‘allies’ and less of strict factional representation, but some of Xi’s protégés and confidants have made it to the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee. However, one important development was the lack of anointed successor represented at the PBSC. With Xi becoming the core, and a *lingxiu*—people’s leader, it is unlikely that he will hang his boots in 2022 Party Congress. Further, with the removal of term limits of President and Vice-President, Xi has not only broken the norm but also challenged the existing constitutional status quo that may upset political careers of future leaders. Again, with Wang Qishan being chosen as his state deputy as Vice-President in the recently held 13th National People’s Congress meeting indicates Xi’s

consolidation of power into single authority by invoking the so-called ‘legitimacy crisis’ of the Leninist party.

On the other hand, Xi’s leadership focus on ‘division of labour’ (*dangzheng fengong*) in the party-state than the previously separation of party and government affairs (*dangzheng fenkai*), have made the party subsuming whatever meagre state functions especially in the realm of domestic security, minority and political affairs. This deliberate hollowing out of existing state powers in the pretext of administrative reforms has made the party more powerful since the reforms and open (*gaige kaifang*) period. For instance, the party’s United Work Front Department has subsumed many of the functions of religious, ethnic affairs. Similarly, the newly constituted National Supervision Commission (NSC) has subsumed the functions and powers of the Ministry of Supervision. Yang Xiaodu (64), the minister also is the founding director of the NSC, and deputy director of the party’s watch dog, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). Thus, a division of labour merely becomes a misnomer for the leadership to strengthen its power vis-à-vis the state organs.

Similarly, one of the important dimensions of Xi’s party building (*jian dang*) is through anti-graft campaign initiated since Xi came to power in 2012. Xi-Wang duo was successful in arresting many flies and some prominent spiders like Zhou Yongkang, Ling Jihua, Bo Xilai and some top-PLA officials like Xu Caihuo and Guo Boxiong for graft and party indiscipline. However, the most important aspect of anti-corruption was also the campaign against “Four Forms of Decadence” (*xifeng wenti*) and “Eight Frugality Codes” (*baxiang guiding*) among the party cadres and civil servants. Data shows that many of the officials were investigated for breaking these rules and then disciplined. Similarly, mass-line campaign in education and culture was initiated from the primary school onwards thereby maintaining the party loyalty among the people.

Ideological Campaigns since 2012

Concept	Definition
Four Confidences, 四个自信 (2012)	Confidence in China’s overall path of development, the Chinese system, Chinese Theory, and Chinese culture
China Dream, 中国梦 (2013)	Achieving strong but balanced economic development while restoring Chinese to a respected place in the world
Community of Shared Destiny, 人类命运共同体 (2013)	China’s official FP propaganda slogan; the world faces many of the same problems, so it needs to work together to solve them
Socialist Core Values , 社会主义核心价值观 (2014)	Set of twelve values drawn from pre-modern sources, the Chinese socialist tradition, and reinterpretations of concepts such as democracy and freedom

Four Comprehensives , 四个全面 (2014)	Policy goals in four areas: development, overall reforms, judicial reforms, and party discipline
Consultative Democracy, 协商民主 (2014)	Incorporation of different political organizations and societal forces under single-party rule

Source: MERICS Data, 2017

Similarly, Xi Jinping’s self-proclamation of ‘core’ (*hexin*) since 2016 indicates the shift from earlier practice. The title ‘core’ was never adopted by the incumbent. It was rather given by the mentor or a successor. Deng bestowed Jiang Zemin as “Party Centre with Comrade Jiang Zemin at its Core,” (*yi Jiang Zemin tongzhi wei hexin*) and to Hu Jintao as “Party Centre with Comrade Hu Jintao as General Secretary” (*yi Hu Jintao tongzhi wei zhong shuji de dang zhongyang*) by Jiang and Zeng Qinghong. But in Xi’s case, he is not just first among equals, but only ‘first’ which means no alter ego! Likewise, the speaker pointed out that Xi’s control of the PLA through the ‘CMC-Chairmanship Responsibility’ unlike the previous ‘Vice-Chairmanship Responsibility’ has made the PLA and military more answerable to the party and more so to Xi himself. The speaker reiterated whether it is through ideology, personnel control or party rectification, Xi has strategically reasoned the party’s legitimacy crisis for centralizing authority through ‘personality cult’ and policy agenda and mobilizing the people and the party to ‘never undermine and forget the original vision’ (*buwang chuxin*).

Discussion

In the Q&A session, the query on the ‘division of labour’ was substantiated by the speaker as the CCP’s language. As of now, it merely indicates ‘subsuming’ than ‘co-optation’ of the state functions. But more details are awaited. With the question raised on Wang Qishan’s come back, the speaker pointed out that Wang even after retirement has been an active member of Xi’s inner circle. It is also speculated that Wang was an active participant in PBSC meetings before being elected Xi’s deputy as state vice-president. But Wang having stepped down, remained an important member of the Central Leading Group on Party building. On the query of party’s role in multilateral diplomacy, the party’s central Leading Groups play an important role, and most of these are under direct control of the party than state organs. In the end, thanking the speaker, the chair concluded by summing up the importance of studying domestic politics to understand China in a more holistic manner.

Report prepared by Bhim B Subba, Research Associate, ICS

About the Speaker

Bhim B. Subba (蘇斌) is a Research Associate at the ICS. He has recently submitted his PhD dissertation in the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi. He was an ICS-HYI Visiting Fellow and spent a year at Harvard University for his doctoral research (2016-17). He is a Political Science major from the Centre for Political Studies, JNU, Delhi. From

2015-16, he was affiliated with the Mandarin Training Center, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, ROC where he pursued language study and independent research. As a recipient of a Confucius Institute Scholarship, he was also enrolled at Harbin Normal University, Heilongjiang, PRC pursuing Mandarin language training. His research interests include comparative political theory, Chinese politics and India-China comparatives

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