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The “Big Tiger’s” Curtain Call: A Sign of Lesser Things to Come?

By James Char

Synopsis

The staging of China’s former security czar Zhou Yongkang’s secret trial last month suggests schisms in the upper echelons of the Chinese Communist Party. Crucially, it is a clear sign that further arrests of other ‘big tigers’ within the Party’s top leadership will be unlikely for the foreseeable future.

Commentary

THE MUTED announcement by China’s state media a fortnight ago that the former security czar, Zhou Yongkang, had been tried behind closed doors and sentenced to life imprisonment has raised more questions about the sustainability of Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign. Does the fact that the trial was held behind closed doors indicate schisms in the upper echelons of the CCP? Is the life sentence – rather than the widely anticipated suspended death penalty – an indication that the CCP’s crackdown on graft is about to end with a whimper?

While the Communist regime has reasserted its ability to stay on top of matters yet again, its decision to choreograph proceedings behind the scenes – reportedly carried out on the 22nd of May – has led to speculation over what might have led to the unexpected verdict. Indeed, the life sentence handed out by the Tianjin People’s Intermediate Court on the former Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member carries great significance, and has also cast doubts on the CCP’s proclamations of combating endemic official malfeasance.

An Inexplicable Turn of Events

Zhou’s grizzled hair and his apologetic tone in accepting his sentence may well have served as a useful reminder for other Party leaders who continue to resist the authority of the current CCP general secretary and his anti-graft movement. Still, the political overtone of the abrupt announcement of a behind-the-scenes trial calls to mind the schisms at the top of the Party leadership. Similar to weighing the pros and cons not long ago of whether Zhou would have been executed, this latest development can be interpreted in a number of ways.

Although life imprisonment may not differ much from a suspended death penalty – in both cases, the ‘tiger’ is kept alive – the lighter tenor of the former, coupled with what many believe to be vastly

watered down figures of the sums Zhou allegedly received in bribes, suggests that the fallen 'tiger' has been let off the hook. Even though the sentence may have assuaged popular expectations for matters to be finally brought to a close, the abruptness of the proceedings have the inadvertent effect of portraying the Party's move as a desperate course of action.

The CCP's decision to do a volte-face and shy away from a public inquest into at least two of Zhou's charges – namely, bribery and abuse of power – on the pretext of safeguarding state secrets that the former head of China's internal security apparatus might have disclosed, similarly, seem unfathomable. To be sure, the same communiqué did stipulate that whatever classified information Zhou had leaked – given his privileged access to confidential data of the party-state's key figures – did not apparently lead to any grievous consequences for the nation.

Ultimately, the decision to try Zhou behind closed doors could well betray a lack of confidence on the part of the Party's top leaders. Given that Zhou's immediate family members are also being held by the Chinese authorities, the chances of him straying off the script – à la Bo Xilai in 2013 – would have been remote. Indeed, trying the 'tiger' in secret can only invite speculation as to whether other Zhou associates from the country's state security apparatus still at large, are in possession of other incriminating evidence about CCP elites.

Schisms in the Inner Sanctum?

A roaring start to a campaign that began with Xi Jinping's ascension to the top Party post and Wang Qishan's appointment at the helm of the CCP's anti-graft body has in recent months been seen to be slacking off. With the life imprisonment meted out to Zhou no different from that received by Bo Xilai – in spite of his being considered to be Bo's political patron – Xi and his allies at the apex of power have confounded expectations with what appears to be a commuted death penalty for Zhou. To be sure, most China watchers had predicted prior to the trial that the ex-security chief would, at the very least, be handed a suspended death sentence.

Still, the attenuated sentence should not come as a surprise considering that there had been discrepancies between Zhou's charges and earlier allegations dating from December last year. Gleaning from an article published on the website of the Central Discipline and Inspection Commission (CDIC) – depicting the ongoing anti-graft efforts as “a double-edged sword” which has “hurt the party and tarnished its reputation” – one cannot help but wonder if Party leaders have long been making plans to temper the high societal expectations of the anti-corruption drive.

Even as Xi Jinping has moved swiftly to assert his authority over the entire CCP machinery since assuming its leadership, the handling of China's purported trial of the century has demonstrated that the Party's top leader has had to acquiesce in his political choices by factoring in the interests of rival groups. While it is speculative to claim that Xi has actually yielded to pressure from other heavyweights within the CCP, it can be expected that the 'tigers' in the crosshairs of Wang Qishan's CDIC henceforth will be those with limited political clout.

A Missed Opportunity for Xi and the Party

Following Zhou's trial and the subdued coverage of the event by China's state media, an equipoise of power between the factions at the upper echelons of the CCP appears to have been established. While Xi Jinping can be expected to push forward with his signature campaign, public yearnings for the capture of the Party's so-called 'mega tigers' – political elders purportedly behind the likes of Zhou and Bo Xilai – can be put to rest.

Having snared the big beast that is Zhou Yongkang, the days of netting 'big tigers' appear to be over. In light of recent criticisms pointing to the easing off of the ongoing anti-corruption movement, quite how the Party would have passed up on the opportunity to burnish the standing of Xi's war on graft is anybody's guess. More crucially, it may also represent a missed opportunity for the CCP in starting the campaign in the first place: to bolster the legitimacy of its rule.

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