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The Future of Factional Politics in China under Xi Jinping

By Jonghyuk Lee

SYNOPSIS

The recent leadership reshuffle in the Communist Party of China reflects a significant departure from the longstanding tradition of balancing factional politics and working collectively on an overarching goal to buttress control across the party's membership and bureaucratic structure on the ground. With Xi Jinping's approach, officials compete with each other in a bid to gain favour. Unfortunately, this could come at the cost of stifling local initiatives, which have historically played a significant role in China's progress.

COMMENTARY

The [20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China](#) (CPC) held in October 2022 saw the appointment of Li Qiang, Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang and Li Xi to the Politburo Standing Committee. They are all known for their close ties to President Xi Jinping. Candidates from the Youth League faction, including Li Keqiang and Wang Yang, were sidelined, and Hu Chunhua, once considered a strong contender for the premiership, even failed to retain his position in the Politburo.

This result marks the demise of China's long-standing collective leadership system, as Xi Jinping has surrounded himself with those perceived to be his loyal confidants. For the past two decades, Chinese politics were characterised by checks and balances among various factions, such as the Shanghai Gang under Jiang Zemin and the Youth League clique under Hu Jintao, among others. Now that the factional balance has been fully dismantled, ushering in the era of Xi Jinping's dominance, the question arises: how will factional politics in China transform?

Factional Politics under One Strong Leader

During times of conflict between different factions, members within each faction should collaborate with each other to collectively confront opposing factions. However, we have now reached a stage where only the Xi Jinping faction remains, and it is expected that competition will emerge among its members. Historically, when power struggles between factions subsided following the emergence of a strong leader, how did China's political landscape evolve?

Deng Xiaoping was a prime example of one who leveraged factional politics. Deng united talented individuals under a common objective: economic growth. He fostered [competition among different factions](#), such as reformists and conservatives as well as technocrats and generalists, to identify the most effective policies for achieving this goal. Each faction strove to advocate policies that aligned with the overarching objective of economic development.

They could freely apply their expertise and political philosophy, covering a range of areas from industrial policies to financial, fiscal, and eventually social policies. Deng Xiaoping assumed the role of an arbiter, effectively overseeing the entire process behind the scenes. This was possible because of Deng's unquestionable legitimacy as the supreme leader.

Xi Jinping's Effort to Build Legitimacy

With Xi Jinping now in the supreme position, how will factional politics unfold under his leadership? A major challenge is Xi's lack of personal legitimacy compared to Deng Xiaoping. Deng's legitimacy was bolstered by his [remarkable accomplishments](#), including the revitalisation of the country following the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and the success of his economic reforms and open-door policies. In contrast, Xi's legitimacy stems primarily from the historical achievements of the CPC.

In Xi Jinping's [various speeches](#), he highlighted his own accomplishments, such as in poverty alleviation, anti-corruption efforts, reducing inequality, and building a modern socialist country. However, these assertions alone are insufficient to confer personal legitimacy upon Xi. Moreover, his [frequent comparisons](#) to Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping as a means to solidify his own legitimacy raised doubts among both the Chinese people and party members. The narrative that Xi will lead the country towards strength, akin to Mao's nation-building and Deng's prosperity, is perceived by many as lacking the imprimatur of the people.

To compensate for this deficit, Xi Jinping has emphasised the importance of ideological struggle. His objectives, such as the "[China Dream](#)" and "[Great Modern Socialist Country](#)", are somewhat vague and abstract. Not only the CPC but the entire society is encouraged to promote these ideals. Xi Jinping faces challenges in setting clear goals such as in achieving double-digit GDP growth: Chinese society has become more complex compared to the 1980s, and clear goals may trigger backlash if not accomplished.

The Future of Factional Politics under Xi Jinping

Factional competition under these ambiguous goals may not lead to productive policy debates but rather excessive loyalty competitions. The focus will likely shift towards accommodating Xi Jinping's personal preferences, such as the [transforming of memorials](#) of Xi's father into sacred sites, [promotion of traditional Chinese values](#), and [establishment of Confucius temples](#). Likewise, many local officials are competing to create ideological learning centres or regional landmarks named after Xi Jinping, despite previous restrictions on idolising the supreme leader.

Furthermore, local officials will be very cautious about ingratiating themselves with Xi Jinping, having learnt from the implementation of the [zero-COVID policy](#). Despite the need to strike a balance between public well-being and epidemic prevention, local governments engaged in a race to enforce the strictest possible quarantine measures. Numerous human rights violations were reported in various regions, such as in Shanghai, Beijing, Jilin and Guangdong to avoid any failure in controlling the virus that would impact adversely on Xi Jinping's political standing and popularity.

Unless Xi lightens up, Chinese bureaucrats are likely to continue opting for conservative and stringent measures, posing significant challenges to both economic and social development in their jurisdictions. The principles of meritocracy and decentralisation, which have been instrumental in China's remarkable economic development, are at risk of erosion. Instead of prioritising local economies and the well-being of the people, bureaucrats may find themselves caught in a loyalty competition between Xi Jinping's close associates.

Conclusion

Despite the absence of democratic attributes, the CPC has effectively ensured accountability to the people and provided for good long-term performance through the maintenance of a delicate balance among its different factions.

One significant organisation is the [Communist Youth League](#), which serves as a training centre for party bureaucrats. Members of the league, lacking political privileges, can only compete on the basis of their abilities, surviving through a rigorous merit-based selection system. In contrast, other factions, particularly those dominated by the elite, rely on nepotism and personal connections for promotions.

Efforts had been made to institutionalise a fairer selection process, but they failed during Hu Jintao's time. It turned out that many senior officials were individuals who had gained advantages through political connections. In recent years, the absence of Youth League cadres ascending to the role of provincial party secretaries, the highest position within a Chinese province, serves as a notable illustration.

This phenomenon indicates the possibility that under Xi Jinping's leadership, China might not be particularly inclined to promote officials who hold differing political perspectives. In these circumstances, there is a degree of stability for the CPC's enduring governance, which may be advantageous for short-term efficiency in governance, as it minimises unnecessary political conflicts among the leadership. Yet,

it also raises concerns about the CPC's long-term capacity to effectively address the intricate socio-economic landscape of the country.

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