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'SIGNS OF DISQUIET IN CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY AS 20th CONGRESS DRAWS NEAR'

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Amid efforts by Chinese President Xi Jinping to marshal resources to imprint his image on people's minds as one among those in the pantheon of China's Greats, there are signs of possible disquiet in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

2. The 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) scheduled for late next year is crucial for Xi Jinping. Seeing himself as the Child of Red Destiny, Xi Jinping feels he needs to be at the helm to lead China to its rise. To all intents, therefore, he appears to be making a definite bid for securing China's three top and most powerful posts for a third time, unprecedented since 1980!

3. In addition to the extensive coverage of Xi Jinping's activities in the official media, there have been efforts to project Xi Jinping's personality. On May 7, for example, a lengthy special Xinhua article captioned: "Studying in progress | "He is really super kind" - Xi Jinping in the eyes of college students" listed students in different places praising Xi Jinping's personal qualities over the years at varying stages of Xi Jinping's career. They highlighted his "simplicity, approachability, kindness and caring nature".

4. Xi Jinping's efforts to reduce opposition has gone down to the provinces. At a seminar in Beijing for the "main leading cadres" at the provincial and ministerial level on January 11, Xi Jinping pointed to the "success" of his signature project for poverty alleviation. He emphasised that great historical achievements have been made in building a moderately prosperous society, and asserted that "Realizing common prosperity is not only an economic issue, but also a major political issue related to the party's ruling foundation". Underscoring the benefits of the CCP's leadership, he told the cadres: "Our country's economic strength, scientific and technological strength, comprehensive national power, and people's living standards have jumped to a new great level, becoming the world's second-largest economy, the largest industrial country, the largest trading country of goods, and the country with the largest foreign exchange reserves, a gross domestic product of over 100 trillion yuan, a per capita GDP of over 10,000 US dollars, an urbanization rate of over 60% and a middle-income group of over 400 million people."

5. The Chinese financial magazine Caixin (May 7) reported that five provincial capitals namely Changchun, Nanjing, Nanchang, Shijiazhuang and Lanzhou announced the appointment or departure of top officials during the month. It added that leadership changes in provincial capitals are the most important part of local government personnel reshuffles. A month later there were leadership changes in Shenzhen. These efforts and the CCP's ideological campaigns have been augmented by that against corruption. This year alone, at least 129 senior provincial officials have been placed under investigation by the Party's anti-corruption watchdog the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC). There are also reports of the dismissal of a couple of members of the CCP Central Committee (CC) and National People's Congress (NPC).

6. But there is discontent among intellectuals, academics, students, and business entrepreneurs. Many are critical of Xi Jinping and the CCP leadership for the deterioration in relations with the U.S. and what they perceive as China's growing isolation. Such negative sentiments increased in 2020 with the perceived mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak and criticism spilled over onto China's tightly controlled social media despite the personal risk to the authors of the posts. Many of those who criticised Xi Jinping were later detained, jailed or punished. Aware of the discontent among academics, students and intellectuals, the CCP has imposed progressively stringent controls on them. On April 16, the CCP CC promulgated the revised "Regulations on the Work of Primary Organizations in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions of the Communist Party of China" and issued a notice requesting urgent compliance to all regions and departments. These Regulations highlighted the Party's central role in academia and pointed out that they are guided by 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era'.

7. Over the past couple of years Xi Jinping has launched successive ideological campaigns in the CCP and People's Liberation Army (PLA) to instil greater adherence to more purist Marxism-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought to counter any "liberal" thinking and disseminate his own thoughts on various subjects. A 'Party History Study and Education' campaign was launched earlier this year to mark the CCP's centenary and is being rigorously implemented. China's official media, including the People's Daily, have publicised that as part of this campaign 'study sessions' have been organised in China's provinces, Ministries and departments in the government, in universities, colleges and schools and the PLA.

8. The People's Daily (April 16) reported that a Central Propaganda Group for Party History Study and Education had travelled to various parts of China to spread the education campaign among the masses. It disclosed that the group held sessions in more than 30 localities and 110 government organs and universities, and organised more than 70 interactive exchange activities. It said the group reached out to more than 22 million people through television and online broadcasting. The People's Daily said the propaganda group had successfully explained the "glorious course of the Chinese Communist Party's century of struggle," its contributions to the nation and the major theoretical achievements of sinicized Marxism.

9. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) too recently disclosed that the MoFA's Party school had carried out various activities and a 12-day "special study" of Party history which were attended by more than 400 directly affiliated party organizations and tens of thousands of party members. It said experts from the Central Party History and Literature Research Institute gave lectures to more than 50 department-level leading cadres.

10. Similarly, the state-owned CCTV reported on May 13 that the powerful Central Political and Legal Commission, which is at the apex of China's security apparatus, was "guiding" party members and cadres to study party history. It quoted the Central Political and Legal Commission as saying "The soul is forged, the sword is inwardly rectified, and the party and the people are trustworthy, reliable, and can be assured of an iron army of politics and law".

11. Possible signs of disquiet inside the Party, however, seem to be emerging. Chinese leaders have, over the decades, often used the Hongkong media to overcome opposition or float controversial ideas which could face opposition within the Chinese leadership.

12. A prominent example is Deng Xiaoping's well-known "southern tour" (or *nanxun*). Deng Xiaoping's 'open door' and reform policies were threatening to stall because of opposition from cadres within the party who blamed the policies for letting in foreign influences and ideas that had led to the Tiananmen events of 1989 and polluted China's atmosphere. To bypass opposition and mobilise

popular support for the policies, Deng Xiaoping undertook an unannounced 'southern tour' and visited Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Guangzhou and Shanghai, from January 18 to February 21, 1992. It was only when the Hongkong media reported his presence in southern China that the Chinese media picked up the reports and provided extensive coverage of his visit.

13. Another more recent example was when Prof Jin Wei, a senior faculty of the Central Party School gave an interview on June 6, 2013, to the Chinese-language Hongkong-based Asia Weekly captioned 'Reopen talks and resolve Tibetan Issues'. There had been no talks between the Chinese and the Dalai Lama's envoys since 2010. This interview proposed a new initiative, obviously floated by a group of very senior CCP cadres, but which could be controversial. Jin Wei's backers were powerful enough to send her to the UK, US etc to publicise the ideas but, in the end, no contact materialised because those opposed were able to prevail.

14. Now 80-year old former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has written an article which was serialised (March 25-April 15) by the little-known 'Macau Guide'. In the article, Wen Jiabao recalled the difficult times of poverty of his childhood and his mother's lessons to him, but it were his concluding remarks that attracted public attention. He wrote: "However, only sincere, simple and kind emotions cannot be faked. I sympathize with the poor and the weak, and oppose bullying and oppression. In my mind, China should be a country full of fairness and justice, where there will always be respect for the human heart, humanity, and always have the temperament of youth, freedom and struggle. I have screamed and fought for this. This is the truth that life taught me, and it was also given by my mother. In my mind, China should be a country full of fairness and justice, where there will always be respect for the human heart, humanity, and always have the temperament of youth, freedom and struggle. I have screamed and fought for this. This is the truth that life taught me, and it was also given by my mother." His remarks resonated with Chinese netizens and went viral on China's social media.

15. Wen Jiabao had, when he was Premier (2003-2013), also occasionally made carefully crafted yet ambiguous statements hinting at the need for reform, democracy and more openness. His recent remarks could, therefore, have been interpreted as hinting at the need for reform and more openness as well as a critique of Xi Jinping's policies. Implicit endorsement of this was evident in the decision of the authorities to take down the post overnight.

16. More recently on May 13, the CCP's official authoritative newspaper 'People's Daily' published a box item on its front page to remember the dead on the 13th anniversary of the Wenchuan Earthquake which occurred on May 12, 2008, and killed nearly 70,000 people and injured more than 370,000 with 18,000 missing. It is the 10th, 15th or 20th anniversaries that are normally commemorated in China. The appearance of the People's Daily box item is, therefore, intriguing. Its appearance would suggest allusion to former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao whose popularity was boosted when he visited the site of the earthquake within hours of its occurrence. In contrast, Chinese President Xi Jinping failed to visit Wuhan at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. This had provoked comments on China's social media at the time.

17. In the run up to the 20th Party Congress, Chinese President Xi Jinping is taking tough measures to thin out, if not suppress, opposition. It will be interesting to observe whether other hints of opposition to Xi Jinping and his bid to continue for a third term emerge. In the interim, Xi Jinping cannot afford to appear weak and this will dictate his policies on domestic and international issues. On territorial issues there will certainly not even be a suggestion of weakness or willingness to yield ground. The situation on the India-China border needs to be viewed in this backdrop.

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