

IS XI JINPING REALLY AS POWERFUL AS HIS IMAGE SUGGESTS?

by JAYADEVA RANADE

Chinese President Xi Jinping's appointment to China's three top posts, of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and China's President, for the first time simultaneously in thirty years clearly indicated the strong support he received from the Party's veteran and senior cadres. Since his appointment to these three posts at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, within a short span of five years Xi Jinping concentrated unprecedented power and sought to build himself an image virtually on par with Mao Zedong. Today, he heads fifteen Central Small Leading Groups – the most powerful decision making bodies in communist China. Amidst speculation that Xi Jinping may have stepped beyond the mandate initially given to him – of restoring the CCP's legitimacy as the sole ruling party and promoting Party ideology -- recent events suggest that Xi Jinping has perhaps begun going beyond that.

Soon after assuming office Xi Jinping began building his popular image. In sharp contrast to the coverage received by his predecessors Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin in the official media, Xi Jinping has ensured that either his photograph or activities figure in China's official media each day. Whereas the official media reported on Hu Jintao on average 2000 times a year and Jiang Zemin was featured over 3000 times, Xi Jinping has averaged 5000 times a year. Xi Jinping's portraits and statues are also reported to have been put up, at times, replacing those of Deng Xiaoping. Unusually, Deng Xiaoping's role in 'opening up and reform' has not received special mention during this 40th anniversary year. In fact, soon after Xi Jinping unveiled the strategic geo-economic initiative of 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR), later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and adopted a more assertive foreign policy thus discarding Deng Xiaoping's dictum of 'lie low, bide your time', his acolytes began saying that China is embarked on another thirty year era under Xi Jinping like those of Mao and Deng Xiaoping earlier!

Taking cognisance of the widespread discontent caused by corruption in China, Xi Jinping unleashed a vigorous anti-corruption campaign the ambit of which was within months extended to include the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The campaign, which is the most sustained and penetrating that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has witnessed, was widely welcomed. A number of high-level officials were apprehended and punished and by the time of the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, it was officially reported that over 176 officials of the rank of central Vice Minister and above, more than 145 officers of and above the rank of Major General and 14,000 officers in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and a million Party members at different levels had been caught. However, the initial applause with which the Chinese people welcomed Xi Jinping's far-reaching anti-corruption campaign, especially that targeting the People's Liberation Army (PLA), appears to be yielding to mounting apprehension of a return to a potentially autocratic one man rule.

Conscious of the damage done during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution decade when millions died and suffered, Deng Xiaoping had sought to build checks against the emergence again of an authoritarian one-man rule. While the CCP General Secretary remained the pre-eminent authority, there was an effort at separation of powers with the creation of the posts of Chairman of the CMC and President of the PRC. A two-term limit on the tenure of the PRC President was imposed and a convention established over two Party Congresses that Party cadres would be ineligible for promotion to the Politburo (PB) and Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) in case they are 65 years or more. There was also the effort for decisions by consensus with the Party Chief being *primus inter pares*.

Indications are now beginning to surface of resistance to Xi Jinping dismantling these barriers and becoming so powerful. The decision to abolish the term limits for the posts of President and Vice President appear to have been the trigger for the opposition. After news emerged on February 25, 2018 that the Chinese Communist Party had proposed abolishing term limits for China's President and Vice President from the State Constitution, an old meme comparing President Xi Jinping to Winnie the Pooh resurfaced on Sina Weibo and Tencent's WeChat. It elicited numerous online reactions. The state-owned CCTV's report on this proposal was shared nearly 10,000 times within hours before the comments section was shut down.

The same day Li Datong, a former editor of the official newspaper of China's Communist Youth League (CYL), issued an "open" statement on WeChat addressed to Beijing's Deputies to the National People's Congress (NPC). Li Datong wrote that abolishing term limits would "sow the seeds of chaos. If there are no term limits on a country's highest leader, then we are returning to an imperial regime. My generation has lived through Mao. That era is over. How can we possibly go back to it?" He ended with a call to the NPC Deputies not to vote in support of the bill. Separately, Wang Ying, a businesswoman who has advocated government reforms, wrote on WeChat that the Communist Party's proposal was "an outright betrayal" and "against the tides." She said "I know that you (the government) will dare to do anything and one ordinary person's voice is certainly useless. But I am a Chinese citizen, and I don't plan on leaving. This is my motherland too!" Both Wechat posts were soon deleted, but not before they had been shared thousands of times.

The First Session (March 5-20, 2018) of the Thirteenth National People's Congress (NPC), which consolidated the process begun by Xi Jinping of the Party being pre-eminent and dominating every sphere of endeavour in China, added to Xi Jinping's pre-eminent status when it amended the Constitution to abolish term limits on the posts of China's President and Vice President. While the 19th Party Congress last October invested Xi Jinping with greater power, his status was further enhanced when at its first meeting after the 19th Party Congress the Party's new 25-member Politburo described him with the honorific – *lingxui* - hitherto used only for Mao! Soon thereafter the official CCP newspaper People's Daily publicly acknowledged Xi Jinping's elevated status by referring to him as "the helmsman of the nation" and the "guide of the people", both terms very similar to those used to refer to Mao Zedong. During the heydays of the Cultural Revolution, Mao was called the "Great Helmsman" and "Great Teacher". Highlighting this emerging personality cult was the remark on March 8, 2018 on the sidelines of the NPC session when Wang Guosheng, Party Secretary of Qinghai province which includes a part of Tibet, claimed that the rural people of the province – which includes large portions of erstwhile Tibet – referred to Xi Jinping as a 'Living Buddha'!

Popular resentment at Xi Jinping's moves to further concentrate power and elevate his stature seems to be spreading among China's intellectuals and youth. On March 13, a poster captioned "Protest China's Pseudo-Constitution and Xi Jinping" appeared in the building of the Student Union of the Shanxi University of China, on the campus billboards and other public places in the University. The poster was almost identical to those put up by overseas Chinese students in schools in different countries. These posters in English and Chinese stated: "We never recognized the Chinese Communist Party, pseudo-constitution, or pseudo-chairman." "He is not my chairperson" etc. This is the first time that a protest poster identical to those put up by overseas Chinese students has appeared in a Chinese university. One Shanxi University student who posted the posters said in an interview that Xi Jinping is repeating the history of Mao Zedong!

Later on May 4, a 73-year old Peking University alumnus Fan Liqun, despite the usual heavy security presence in the area, posted a 24-page big-character poster near the Biology Building and Geological Building of Peking University. The title was "Maintaining the Party Constitution. China must be

resolute. Opposing individual worship and sticking to the Constitution, state leaders must implement the tenure system, that is, the limited system.” He was soon escorted away by public security personnel and student Party activists but news of the incident attracted journalists who contacted several departments of Peking University on May 7 seeking details. Fan Liqin wrote: “I’ve been through the ages. I’m a survivor who has suffered hardships. In my lifetime, there are people who dare to engage in personal worship of my own and I have never dreamed.” He criticized Xi Jinping as “just for more power, for a long time, power has great enthusiasm, greediness is a common problem among people in ancient and modern China and abroad, it is addictive like opium. This is bad psychology and behaviour.” Another alumnus of the university, praised Fan Liqin and added that he reflects Deng Xiaoping’s line and so has support within the Party and that “the strength of his big poster should not be underestimated.”

Sporadic protests have continued indicating the restiveness among China’s intellectuals and students caused not only by the move towards increased authoritarianism, but also by the steadily growing stringent Party controls on academia. On July 4th morning a young woman live-streamed herself splashing ink on an image of Xi Jinping in front of a Shanghai office building while speaking out against one-party rule in China. The woman, surnamed Dong, shouted in protest: “I oppose Xi Jinping’s autocratic rule and tyranny!” and then splashed black ink onto Xi Jinping’s face in a “Chinese dream” poster located on the street in front of the HNA Building in Pudong. She also claimed to have been under Chinese Communist Party “mind control” for the past year, asking international organizations to intervene and investigate this issue. Dong then went on to taunt the Chinese President declaring, “Xi Jinping, I’m waiting here for you to catch me! I splashed ink onto your portrait in front of your property.” Around 3 pm that day Dong posted a photo on Twitter of what appeared to be multiple officers standing outside her door and wrote “Right now, there are people in uniform outside my door. Once I get changed, I will go out. I haven’t done anything wrong. The ones who have done wrong are the people and organizations that hurt me.”

On July 24, Unirule, the liberal economic think tank in Beijing, published an essay in the form of a ‘Ten Thousand Word Petition’ by Tsinghua University legal scholar Xu Zhangrun which has sparked wide interest inside China and abroad. It was republished on the website of the Hong Kong-based Initium Media and the article has been widely shared and discussed by intellectuals and scholars inside and outside the China. It is essentially a protest against the China that Xi Jinping is hoping to create. Initium said in a tweet that “this text carries out a systematic critique of the retrograde tendencies in Chinese social and political life, in particular since the end of 2017. It explicitly points out and warns against the danger of the return to totalitarianism, and calls for a stop to the cult of personality and the resumption of term limits on the post of the state chairman. The piece has become one of the few direct criticisms of contemporary ills in China among the intellectual class.” Xu Zhangrun ended the essay with: “I’m done talking; I leave my own life and death to destiny, the rise and fall of the nation to Heaven.” Xu Zhangrun was on an academic tour in Japan when the essay was published and there is no word yet on what awaits him when he returns, but he is likely to be penalised. Xu Zhangrun is, according to reports, suffering from cancer.

There was another protest, though masked, on August 1, 2018. Some alumnus of the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing published a letter calling for the dismissal of another Professor, Hu Angang, for “misleading policy making”. Born in 1953, Hu Angang is an Economics Professor at Tsinghua University and a known strong supporter of socialism and the CCP. The call for Hu Angang’s dismissal can be viewed as criticism of Xi Jinping’s policies especially on the economy. Protests have not, however, been confined to universities and students. There has been at least one indication of a faculty member of the Central Party School in Beijing recalling, in a thinly-veiled criticism, Deng Xiaoping’s policy of ‘lie low, bide your time’. In September 2017 just prior to the 19th Party Congress, Luo Jianbo, Head of the China Foreign Policy Center at the Central Party School in

Beijing cautioned against over-estimating China's strength and said the people need to guard against "arrogance" and "conceit". He recalled that though the GDP of the US had already surpassed that of Great Britain in 1900, but it had waited patiently till the middle of the century when it fully took on its role as world leader. He made particular mention in this context of the nationalist fervour generated by the Belt and Road Initiative and the BRI Forum in April 2017.

There are other pools of discontent and dissatisfaction in China too. A WeChat group named "Changsha tower crane operator federation" posted an "open letter" on April 25 asking construction, crane, and mechanical equipment operators and engineers in China to trigger a wave of simultaneous strikes among crane operators around the country. It issued a call for a united strike on the eve of International Labor Day of May 1, in Changsha's May First Square. On April 26, the spokesman for crane operators in Hainan published a video on Weibo calling on all operators in the province to join the national strike on the morning of May 1. On the same day, crane tower workers in Zigong, Sichuan Province, held a demonstration demanding wage hikes. The following day, workers in the following eight cities in eight provinces also held banners and circulated photographs of their protests online. Protests were held in : Nanchang in Jiangxi, Tianshui in Gansu, Zhumadian in Henan, Xiantao in Hubei, Qingzhen in Guizhou, Huaian in Jiangsu, Hengyang in Hunan, Xiamen in Fujian. By April 30, crane operators staged demonstrators, held banners, called slogans with their demands, and shared photos or footage online, in 19 provinces, with protests in between 27 and 30 cities.

On June 11, 2018 mass protests were staged by truck drivers across 9 provinces and municipalities in China to voice their anger over high costs, decreasing wages, excessive highway tolls, changing government policies and police harassment. Reports said some truck drivers shouted "overthrow the CPC".

Worth note in these strikes were not the protests themselves, but that they were able to coordinate and organise the nationwide strikes. Considering that China's security apparatus is pervasive and the CCP Central Committee's Propaganda Department claims it can remove all offending posts within minutes, it is certainly of interest that both the organisations were able to organise the strike and communicate via WeChat. This suggests that elements in the CCP apparatus either connived with the strikers or were indicating passive resistance.

That opposition to Xi Jinping exists was hinted by Ding Xuexiang, Director of the CCP CC General Office and close aide to Xi Jinping at a meeting attended by departments under the Party Central Committee in February 2018. Ding Xuexiang said that almost all the officials who were investigated after the 18th National Congress had "political issues" and some even had the intention to "usurp the party and seize power." He revealed that over the past five years more than 440 provincial level officials were the subject of investigations and most of them belonged to Jiang Zemin's faction.

Xi Jinping's policies have undoubtedly distressed numerous sections of Chinese society. People born around 1974 would know, including from accounts whispered by family members, how millions suffered in the tumultuous Cultural Revolution decade and those born earlier fear the recurrence of disorder and chaos. In present times the PLA has seen more than 40% of its officer strength depleted due to arrests on charges of corruption. Political Commissars, who have been given enhanced powers, and auditors have ensured more stringent adherence to rules. Academics, students and Party members are subject to Party controls and supervision even in classrooms. The social credit management system has bluntly infringed the personal lives of people and is a constant reminder of the Party's supervisory presence in their daily life. After 30 years of relaxed controls and open door policy, the imposition of such strict controls by the Party will face resistance from the Chinese people who will be reluctant to be again put into an ideological straitjacket. The current trade war

and strained relation with the US threaten to accelerate the slowdown of the Chinese economy. If that happens, Xi Jinping and the CCP leadership will face difficult times.

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