

BEIJING – In China, the announcement of murder charges against the wife of one of China's most prominent politicians left many unanswered questions about a case that remains highly sensitive.

News of murder charges against Gu Kailai, wife of Bo Xilai covered the front pages of Chinese newspapers Friday. Gu is charged with murdering British businessman, Neil Heywood. While news articles hail the trial as progress in establishing rule of law in China, Internet searches for Gu and her husband's names remained blocked on Chinese microblogs.

Censorship

□□ Commenting was also disabled on Chinese websites that carried news of the charges, and analysts like David Kelly, director of the Beijing-based research firm China Policy, say the trial is not a step forward for rule of law, but rather an attempt to take down a politician who had fallen out of favor with China's leadership.

"The trial itself is widely perceived to be politically motivated, to incriminate him by implication," Kelly said.

Bo Xilai was a member of China's Politburo and a rising political star. The handsome politician was a so-called "princeling", the son of one of Mao Zedong's top allies. He quickly rose through the ranks of the Communist Party leadership as mayor of the northeastern city of Dalian; governor of Liaoning Province and positions in the Ministry of Commerce before taking over as Party Chief of Chongqing in 2007.

While his bold leadership style drew strong support from some quarters, there were also stories of corruption, including Bo's alleged attempts to punish his political enemies and buy off Chinese scholars.

Motivation

Timeline of the Bo Xilai Scandal

- Feb. 2: Bo's key ally and Chongqing police chief Wang Lijun is demoted
- Feb. 6: Wang visits U.S. consulate in Chengdu, reportedly to seek asylum
- Mar. 2: Xinhua says Wang is under investigation
- Mar. 9: Bo defends himself and his wife, Gu Kailai, at a press conference at the National People's Congress
- Mar.15: Bo dismissed as Chongqing party chief

Mar. 26: Britain asks China to investigate November death of Briton Neil Heywood in Chongqing

Apr. 10: Bo suspended from Communist Party posts. China says his wife is being investigated for Heywood's death

Apr. 17: New York Times reports U.S. officials held Wang so he could be handed to Beijing authorities instead of local police.

Jul. 26: Bo's wife, Gu kailai, charged with the murder of Briton Neil Heywood

Zhang Ming, a Professor at Renming University, says these stories may have also motivated the government to investigate Bo and his wife.

□□ He says Bo Xilai has possibly violated many many regulations, he acted illegally so it was his existence that created a sense of insecurity to make people [in the leadership] feel uneasy and therefore unsafe. He says the fact that Bo Xilai's actions will be dealt with makes the leadership feel safe.

Chinese authorities have not implicated Bo Xilai in the murder of Heywood, 41, whose body was found in a Chongqing hotel room last fall.

Details on Heywood and his relationship with the Bo family remain sketchy. A report in China's state news agency, Xinhua, quoted unnamed investigators who alleged that Gu poisoned Heywood after a business conflict involving her son. At the time local police in Chongqing attributed Heywood's death to alcohol poisoning, and his body was cremated before an autopsy could be performed.

Trial

Kelly says that while the case may be meant to show the Chinese public that all people, including top government leaders are equal before the law in China, the trial may prove the opposite.

"The odds of a guilty finding are close to 100 percent, but the sentence is up for grabs and that's because there is no rule of law here," Kelly said.

He says Chinese legal scholars often refer to what they call "the hidden rules" of the Chinese judicial system.

"Law is used generally by the government basically as a tool of government," noted Kelly. "Law is always stacked in the government's favor and that is why it is called the hidden rules. The hidden rule is that they will get you. You can't fight city hall in the old American saying because city hall has got all the cards and you have none."

Chinese leaders will likely want the trial and investigation to be wrapped up before the leadership transition this fall.

He Baogang, Chair of International Studies at Australia's Deakin University, says that transition is likely to be unaffected, but what may change is the public's faith in the Chinese government.

"If the trial is more open then that may boost people's confidence, but it is probably more likely that it will increase Chinese public skepticism of the rule of law, skepticism about this kind of judicial process," He said.

Bo was removed from the Politburo after the murder investigation began, and some analysts say any charges brought against Bo will be light. Meanwhile Gu Kailai and an aide to the family will be tried for murder in regular criminal court. Both face the death penalty.