

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) political structure fosters political rivalry

Some Western observers feel that Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign is somehow confusing. It seems to them that, in addition to containing the widespread corruption in China, Xi also uses this campaign to purge officials who rival him politically.

That is likely to be the case. The structure of officialdom in China is quite different from that in the U.S. Xi is doing what he can do under the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) political system.

Let's take a look at the process to appoint and remove officials.

The U.S. has a political appointee system that was designed to enable the President to implement his policies. A 2012 Congressional Research Service study estimated that approximately 1200-1400 positions require Senate confirmation (advice and consent). Considering only political appointee positions in the Federal government, the number is over 7,000. [1] They are vested with the policy making or policy related duties to carry out the President's agenda.

These political appointees normally serve the same term as the President. They are appointed after the President takes office and leave when the President leaves. The systemic swap of the large number of political appointees gives the new President full control of the executive branch and thus makes it easier for him to implement his policies. Of course, the President can change his political appointees within his term.

The CCP's system is quite different

The top leader is selected through internal manipulation instead of public election. Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping became uncrowned "kings" due to their personal prestige, experience, and wide support. After that, the top leaders were picked. Deng appointed Jiang Zemin, and also appointed Hu Jintao as Jiang's successor. Hu and Jiang picked Xi as the next leader. Each of them serves two five-year terms before handing power to their successor.

Since the top leader is picked instead of elected, at the point of taking office, he lacks the legitimacy to claim full power. The members of the Politburo and its Standing Committee are all chosen at the same time by the incumbent members and the Party heavy-weights. The new leader may have some say about the candidates, but others also speak and they may speak louder.

Besides, the retired incumbent top leader may not adjust easily to being fully retired.

For many of the lower level officials, they are tenured. The only thing that restricts them is the mandatory retirement age.

When the new Chinese top leader steps into the leadership position, he does not have a way to install his own people in all of the key government positions as the U.S. President does.

Furthermore, the leader does not make the official appointments. They are chosen through a joint decision of the supervising Party Committee.

Under the CCP's "Democratic Centralism" system, the Party Secretary, the number one person of the Party Committee, has a lot of power and can overshadow other Party Committee members on daily activities. Still, he cannot control official appointments by himself. The Party's Organization Department or its local office nominates the candidates and the Party Committee, whose member count varies, but typically ranges from a few to a dozen, makes the decision. The Party Secretary has only one vote in the decision process.

It is also the Party Committee that decides on the removal of an official. If there is no convincing reason, it is hard to take an official out.

This approach applies from the top level, the Politburo Standing Committee, all the way to the lower level Party organs.

This structure can result in the government being ineffective. For example, a provincial Party Secretary may find that his initiative is not implemented because some subordinate county and city officials choose not to support him. If those local officials have strong backers in the provincial Party Committee who keep protecting them, the Party Secretary may not be able to do much about the local officials' lack of support.

In reality, official appointments may play out as horse trading among Party Committee members. They form alliances or borrow favors (to be returned later) to get their loyalists appointed.

This system creates a different kind of "checks and balance" in China's officialdom.

The Chinese officialdom thus exhibits its own characteristics:

1. An official always tries to secure one or more backers at higher levels. If nobody from a higher level Party Committee backs him for his promotion, he gets nowhere.
2. This official will then stay loyal to his backers but not to other high level officials.
3. An official at a higher level tries to promote people from his team or faction as often as he can so that he and his team or faction can attain greater influence.
4. An official at a higher level may not be able to replace his subordinate even if he does not like him.

For example, Jiang Zemin promoted Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou to be the Vice Chairmen of

the Central Military Commission (CMC). After Hu Jintao attained the leadership role, Guo and Xu stayed loyal to Jiang and largely ignored Hu though officially Hu was the new CMC Chairman. After the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008, Hu and his close ally, then Premier Wen Jiabao, asked the military to go to the site right away to start the rescue mission. The military, however, under Guo and Xu's control, didn't show up until the fourth day, missing the most critical initial window to save lives. All Wen could do was to curse.

When Jiang, Hu, and Xi took the top CCP post, they all faced the problem that they didn't have full control of the Party.

'Buying' officials

Jiang Zemin solved this problem by buying officials. He granted officials the privilege of being corrupt in exchange for their loyalty. He later conducted a nationwide campaign to suppress Falun Gong and promoted officials who actively implemented his suppression policy. Their corruption and their shared political liability weaved those officials closely into his net.

Hu Jintao was not so lucky. By the time Jiang transitioned power to Hu, the faction he had built was quite large. In Hu's first five-year term, Jiang's faction controlled seven out of the nine seats in the Politburo Standing Committee. In Hu's second term, Jiang's faction controlled six out of the nine. A saying that spread widely during the era of Hu and Wen (Jiabao) was that their policy orders could not reach beyond Zhongnanhai (the CCP's headquarters).

Over time, Hu kept promoting people with Communist Youth League experience (Hu served as the General Secretary of the Youth League from 1984 to 1985) and gradually built up his faction. It took almost his two full terms (nearly 10 years) for Hu to reach the peak of power.

When Xi Jinping took office in 2012, he faced these two powerful political groups: Jiang's faction and Hu's faction. Xi didn't have a team in place yet.

Jiang continued the same strategy that he did with Hu. He fought hard to push three of his people, Zhang Dejiang, Liu Yunshan, and Zhang Gaoli, into the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee, despite the fact that they had little support from the CCP Congress.

Jiang's loyalists Zhou Yongkang, Bo Xilai, and Xu Caihou even attempted to organize a political coup to overthrow Xi. Later, after their attempt was revealed in early 2012, Xi took them down one by one.

Hu, on the other hand, was supportive of Xi. He handed over his three titles to Xi all at once. During Jiang's transition to Hu, Jiang gave Hu only two titles (General Secretary of the CCP and President of China) and kept the Chairman of the CMC to himself for two more years.

It was clear to Xi that Jiang's faction was his political rival while Hu's faction could be his ally.

Xi had to find a way to root out officials disloyal to him and build up his own support group.

Anti-corruption campaign

Different from Jiang's buying loyalty and Hu's slow buildup, Xi took another approach: the anti-corruption campaign. It is hard to remove an official under the CCP system. First, the CCP does not normally hold officials responsible for mistakes in their work (Xi is now trying to change this). Second, the removal has to pass the Party Committee. The corruption charge is an indisputable reason that can end an official's political life right away.

Nonetheless, in the officialdom in China, corruption has become a cancer that must be treated. The public has been saying, ***"Having an anti-corruption (campaign) will lead to the fall of the (Communist) Party; having no anti-corruption campaign will lead to the fall of the country."***

From the effect of the campaign, one can see how bad the corruption has been: Xi took back assets worth at least 90 billion yuan (US \$14.5 billion) from family members and associates of Zhou Yongkang [2]. It took 12 trucks to haul away cash and precious gems (including a lot of gold) from Xu Caihou's home [3]. Also there is a report that Zeng Qinghong's son Zeng Wei used 70 million yuan (US \$10.8 million) to buy the state owned Shandong Luneng Group, which had 73.8 billion yuan (US \$11.4 billion) in net assets on book and 110 billion yuan (US \$16.9 billion) in value.

With his "China Dream," Xi might feel a certain responsibility for doing something good for China. The anti-corruption campaign thus presents him with the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: fix the corruption problem for China and also root out his political rivals.

This strategy seems to be working because Jiang's people had indulged themselves too much in corruption. The only thing left for Xi to do was to provide evidence, which could take up to a few years to gather. Xi's ally Wang Qishan led the disciplinary inspection team. It started with businessmen who had close ties to those officials and those officials' assistants and family members. After they amassed enough evidence, they then presented their case to the Politburo or the local Party Committees. The corrupt official was taken down and Xi appointed his own person to fill the post.

As Xi has continued installing his own people to replace the corrupt and disloyal officials, his power base has become more and more secure. Previously, Xi had stated that there had been a "stalemate" for the past few years. Starting this year, however, Xi declared that "an overwhelming form of suppression (of corrupt officials) is taking shape." [4]

In addition to the anti-corruption campaign, this year Xi has also started talking with confidence about political discipline. "Party officials who have political problems have caused harm to the Party in the same way that corruption has. In some cases, the harm has been even more damaging than corruption." [5]

This hints that, moving forward, Xi might use the political disciplinary violation to root out more of his political rivals directly.

To summarize, it is understandable that the new top leader wants to install his people in key posts in the government so he can implement his policies. The U.S. system is designed to facilitate such appointments but the CCP's system is not. Besides, the CCP's system fosters factions. The new leaders in China are forced to find "innovative" ways to fight their political rivals and to promote their supporters.

Xi started the anti-corruption campaign for that purpose and also to make substantial progress in rectifying the corruption problem in China.

As this series continues, it will elaborate on some of the political rivalry that Xi has faced.

Nathan Lee/Chinascopes

Endnotes:

- [1] [Political Appointee Project: Presidential Appointments](#)
- [2] [Reuters, "Exclusive: China seizes \\$14.5 billion assets from family, associates of ex-security chief: sources," March 30, 2014.](#)
- [3] [Financial Times Online, "Chinese general caught with tonne of cash," November 21, 2014.](#)
- [4] [Chinascopes, "People's Daily \(Overseas Edition\): Zhou and Ling Were the 'Significant Potential Political Danger.'"](#)
- [5] [Chinascopes, "Xi Jinping on Political Discipline."](#)