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China

Xi Jinping sings his praises to the CCP Central Committee

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The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) met in plenary session from 8 to 11 November. It provided the opportunity for Xi Jinping to sing loud and clear his own praises and further marginalize the oppositions within the party, a year before its Twentieth Congress.

According to the resolution adopted by a central committee under orders, the present times represent “the most magnificent epic in the history of the Chinese nation for thousands of years”, “socialism with Chinese characteristics [having] entered a new era” since 2012 (the accession to power of Xi Jinping) whose “thought is the quintessence of Chinese culture and soul” and whose presence at the “heart” of the party “is of decisive importance (...) to promote the historical process of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. [1]

Unprecedented concentration of power

Xi holds the positions of General Secretary of the CCP, President of the Republic, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. He amended the Constitution so that he could remain in office for life if he so wished. He imposed a homogeneous leadership team composed of members of his own clique, something which goes against any collegial functioning. At the Nineteenth Congress of the CCP (in 2017), he had changed the mode of governance of the country, which was previously shared between the party, the government administration and the army. Even though the party, at the heart of the state, retained the monopoly of political control, this system ensured a certain flexibility in the running of current affairs in a country-continent. His cult of personality is armed with all the means of social control that modern techniques make possible (which China is not alone in using).

To avoid such a concentration of power by one man, Deng Xiaoping had set up a method of appointing the political bureau that allowed several fractions and generations to be associated within it, so as to ensure the renewal of the leading bodies every five to ten years. This is no longer the case with Xi.

Xi Jinping's grip on power has not been consolidated without violent settling of scores, purges and liquidations. It was accompanied by an ideological campaign with feudal connotations that refers to pre-imperial China. One cannot accede to the highest functions without belonging to a great family lineage, without being of “red blood”, the son of a “red prince”, one of the historical leaders of the Chinese revolution. The vast majority of the party's cadres thus see themselves removed from power from the outset.

In doing so, Xi Jinping has made many enemies that he has not been able to eliminate or neutralize in a party that has some 80 million members. He is condemned to a perpetual headlong rush to prevent his opponents from regrouping and to cut them off from the population. Thus, he is apparently considering recreating at the Twentieth Congress the post of president of the party, which had been abolished.

Xi, a new Mao?

Xi Jinping compares himself to Mao Zedong (in the sense of being better than him) and the media generally validates the analogy, forgetting that between the reigns of the two men, history has passed by, with its succession of

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revolutions and social or political counter-revolutions. [2] Yet they belong to two different eras: the long revolutionary wave initiated by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and ending in Asia at the end of the 1970s, which culminated in the Chinese (1949) and Vietnamese (1975) victories; and then the long counter-revolutionary wave, which became generalized in the 1980s and whose price we are still paying today, culminating in Asia in the Sino-Vietnamese conflict (1979) and, for China, the crushing of popular movements in 1989 (massacres occurring in many cities of the country and not only in Beijing, around Tiananmen Square).

As Au Loongyu points out [3]:

It is obvious that Xi has tried to imitate Chairman Mao in many aspects, first and foremost to emulate his personal cult to the extent that even movie star fans and kids playing online games are now treated as harming the state religion of “Xi’s Thought”. But the resemblance of the two invoked as infallible leaders does not go beyond this point.

Mao’s China never advanced to “socialism” or “communism”, and his “Cultural Revolution” was destruction of culture. His regime by then was, however, definitely anti-capitalist, or even anti-market to the extent that even small and sole proprietors were banned. [...] Xi is a capitalist roader who might make Chairman Mao turn in his grave.

An article at the business media Bloomberg has this to say about Xi’s supposed crack down on the capitalist class [4]:

“The evidence.... suggests that on economic matters Xi is not Mao, in the sense that he wants to redirect the energies of entrepreneurs, not eliminate them as a class..... Nor does Xi fully embrace Mao’s egalitarianism. On welfare, his top lieutenants are closer to neo-liberals than socialists; in their view, handouts to the poor only promote indolence.”

[...] The crux of the matter, however, is that while Mao was a charisma, Xi is only a dwarf.

Xi is just a dwarf. Mao’s idea and praxis of “revolution” contained strong doses of the classical Chinese idea of Yixing geming, or “a revolution whose sole purpose is to replace an old dynasty with a new one”. This was why he was obsessed with grasping absolute personal power. Still he was a revolutionary with great vision and talent, and he enjoyed great popularity because of his achievement. Xi, on the other hand, is merely a head of the state bureaucracy, and one who is unimaginative. Reading his works is torturously boring. This huge difference in talent and temperament also reveals a wide gap in their respective actions. While Mao was confident that when he called upon the young people to make a “revolution” on his own Party in the second half of the 1960s, the latter would not turn on him. Xi would never dare to even try such a maneuver. The state apparatus is the only force which Xi feels comfortable with. Demonstrations in the street is the last thing he wants. With this stark contrast, any comparison between Xi’s policy with Mao’s Cultural Revolution seems absurd.

One can use the term clique to refer to the Xi Jinping leadership, because it is made up of yes-men. This was not the case for the new Maoist leadership when it gained ascendancy over the party during the Long March (1934-1935). Mao was the dominant figure, but he was able to surround himself with strong personalities with very varied political backgrounds within the CCP (some of them had previously opposed him) and with diverse experience: Chen Yi, Chen Yun, Deng Xiaoping, Dong Biwu, Lin Biao, Liu Bochong, Liu Shaoqi, Peng Dehuai, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De (all men). [5]

If such a grouping of key cadres occurred, it was because it responded to a central issue: to break the CCP's subordination to Moscow – a subordination that had led to disaster in 1927 and the following years. The Communist International had become the channel of Moscow and the cult of Stalin the ideological cement. Within the CCP, the Wang Ming faction was its agent. At the origin of what became Mao Zedong's cult of personality, there was the desire to counterpose an authority of Chinese thought and action to the Soviet “big brother”. This cult eventually took on “delusional” aspects when, in the mid-sixties, the party leadership shattered and Mao called on the youth to mobilize against his opponents.

Instability factor

The Xi Jinping clique represents only a fraction of the ruling classes in China. Its reign is fragile. It is likely that it will not be called into question as long as the standard of living of the population increases, as long as parents think that their children will live better. There is no guarantee, however, that the country will escape a recession for much longer. The real estate crisis is at an all-time high, with a threatening general debt crisis in the background. The pilot-state of the economy has so far managed to avoid the bursting of the debt bubble, but will it always be so?

While distributing good points to deserving citizens and making Great Power nationalism one of the main cements of the regime, the CPC is waging campaigns of repression against targets that are sometimes more symbolic than dangerous: LGBT+, feminist figures, so-called traitors to the homeland, who have allowed themselves too much irony on social networks ... Under Xi, the party is thus in a perpetual mode of pre-emptive strike, in order to nip in the bud any movement for democracy and equality. This is an extreme conservative reaction, for fear of a plebeian revolt from below.

As the political bureau preceding the CC plenum had announced, the rewriting of official history voted by the Central Committee had a single purpose: to strengthen the position of the regime's strongman: “[it is] necessary to support the central position of General Secretary Xi Jinping. (...) The whole party should try to understand the reasons for the CCP's success over the past hundred years and how it can ensure success in the future, following the principle of historical materialism and through a correct perspective of the CCP's history.” [6]

For Chloé Froissart, “The challenge is to rally ‘the people, the party and the army’ behind the national myth, erected to the rank of a religion. The resolution is part of the CCP's ongoing efforts to establish an orthodoxy that has been based since 2013 on denouncing any alternative interpretation of history, referred to as ‘historical nihilism’.” [7]

Xi Jinping's position, however, does not yet seem to be consolidated. Chloé Froissart notes that this resolution does not appear “to be received with as much enthusiasm as expected within the party: it has not yet been published four days after the end of the plenum”. Moreover, although “Xi Jinping's stature is clearly enhanced and singled out, this plenum does not make him Mao's equal. The statement said the first party secretary “has made a new leap into the Sinicization of Marxism,” undermining his ambition to be recognized as the theoretical equal of the regime's founder. In fact, his thinking is still referred to by the convoluted phrase “Xi Jinping Thought for a Chinese Style Socialism with in a New Era.” The fact that it has not been abbreviated to “Xi Jinping Thought” indicates that it has not yet attained the legitimacy of “Mao Zedong Thought”.[...] The absence of the abbreviation of the president's thinking and delays in the release of the final text of the resolution most certainly indicate that Xi still faces some reticence at the top to fully impose his power.”

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