

ISAS Brief

No. 560 – 6 March 2018

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More Power for President Xi Jinping: A Return to Authoritarian Rule in China?

China is going through another political transformation. With President Xi Jinping given another term in office, the country appears to have reverted to authoritarian rule. This paper examines the past to put the recent developments in Beijing in a historical context.

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There was euphoria in the western world when the Soviet Union collapsed and communism, as an ideology, died in Europe. Francis Fukuyama, a renowned American sociologist, wrote a book, *The End of History*, in which he maintained that, in the future only one ideology, western-style democratic liberal order, will prevail.² The ideological conflicts that had taken such a large human toll in the wars of the 20th century will no longer figure in global politics. Even the developing world would gradually move towards this system of governance.

Those who pursued other disciplines also moved in with their own positive predictions. Several political-economists used equations and regression analyses to conclude that, as

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² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 2006.

societies develop economically, they will also modernise their political systems. 'Modernisation' was defined as the adoption of liberal democracy. Some quantitative analyses, based on historical data, came up with US\$6,000 (\$7,900) per capita income as the point at which old governing systems were dispensed with in favour of representative forms of government. Known as the 'modernisation theory', it says that, once citizens reach a certain level of wealth, they will demand things like public accountability, free press and free speech, and increasing role in governance. This implies a move towards democratic norms and, ultimately, democracy. However, the change will be gradual since it takes time to develop durable institutions. Rapid change means revolution and history tells us that it takes a long time to achieve stability in the post-revolutionary period.

This expected change, however, is not happening in China. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has decided on an important change in its constitution. It has removed the restriction that the president can serve for only two consecutive terms. That restriction was introduced into the party's constitution in 1982. Since then, there was an orderly transfer of power from one group of leaders to another. In 1983, Jiang Zemin became the party's Secretary General and, a few months later, was elected to the presidency. Ten years later, he was succeeded by Hu Jintao who governed from 2003 to 2013. He was succeeded, in turn, by Xi Jinping who was expected to hand power over to his successor.

One important consequence of this power was in the development of the Chinese political system. The party was put in front of the individual. In other words, it was collective leadership rather than the rule by one person. However, soon after Xi assumed power, he began a process of major political and institutional change aimed at doing away with the constraints on the use of authority accepted by Jiang and Hu. There was speculation that Xi may not surrender power in 2023 upon the completion of his two terms in office. On 25 February 2018, the CPC announced that it was removing the two-term limit from its constitution. This means that Xi could serve in the position he currently occupies until he dies. He will be in office at least until 2028, completing three terms. He may stay beyond that date.

This is a momentous change. In order to understand the significance of this change, one needs to go briefly into the history of governance in China.

That history seems to suggest that, in at least one respect, the Chinese were moving in what was seen generally as the right direction. They had put in place a system that was aimed at preventing the rise of the Maoist type of authoritarian rule. The two-term limit was imposed by Deng Xiaoping, China's Supreme Leader, who, after the death of Mao Zedong, served as the CPC's Secretary General. He chose not to become the country's president, appointing political non-entities to that job. Deng had learned from bitter experience that too much power concentrated in one pair of hands leads to authoritarianism, attendant by uncertainty, unpredictability and whimsicality.

Mao was able to exercise that power because of the god-like status he enjoyed in the country. He was the founder not only of the Chinese communist state but had also brought about social and economic change that laid the ground for modern-day China. He brought universal literacy and universal healthcare to the country and freed women from slavery-like conditions. However, he made several costly mistakes.

While working under Mao, Deng attempted to apply some constraints on the leader. Mao was the author of the disastrous 'Great Leap Forward' move inaugurated in 1958 and of the Cultural Revolution launched seven years later in 1965. The first was meant to defy the laws and logic of economics. State action could quicken – double, triple, even quadruple – the rate of economic growth by forcing people to move out of low productivity agriculture into high productivity industry. The establishment of backyard steel furnaces was the most egregious part of this move. The second was the founding of rural communes in which the state took ownership of all land and moved the owners of the land and its cultivators into communal living. The result was a disaster. China suffered one of its worst famines in the late 1950s and the early 1960s in which tens of millions of people died of starvation.

The Cultural Revolution came after Mao felt that his people were losing the revolutionary fervour and zeal that had resulted in the establishment of the communist state in 1948. A new elite had emerged that needed to be cleansed of the values it had acquired and the social practices it had adopted. An army of young men and women was recruited to lead the new revolution. When the author first went to China in the summer of 1965, along with two other officials from Pakistan, to study the system of Chinese communes, the young red guards could be seen parading in the streets of all major cities. They could be identified by the red scarves they wore around their necks. Their main task was to identify the renegades, pick

them up and send them to the countryside to do hard labour in agriculture. Millions of young men and women were forcibly moved from schools, colleges and universities and sent to do work in the villages. This massive dislocation significantly set back China's economic progress.

The leadership group was also affected, including Deng who lost his influence and essentially disappeared from sight. However, he had a large following in the CPC that took control after Mao's death in 1976. By 1978, Deng was being identified as the 'Supreme Leader'. Once in power, he turned Maoism on its head. One of the most telling of his many often-quoted sayings was that "It is glorious to be rich". Deng opened the country's closed economy to the world outside. The result was increasing the rate of growth that touched more than 10 per cent in several years. In the quarter century between 1980 and 2005, the Chinese economy increased 32-fold, becoming the second largest in the world after the United States.

One of Deng's major reforms was in political management. As already indicated, he changed the party's constitution to place a two-term limit on the presidency and the leadership of the party. That has now been dispensed with. This is a development that has great significance not only for China, but also for the rest of the world. China now casts a long shadow on the world. How it is governed will matter for the world, in particular, the Asian continent.

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