



## **Wither Transparency Mask in Impending Chinese Leadership Change**

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### **Abstract**

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The 18th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of China beginning November 8, 2012 shall go down in the annals of the People's Republic of China as a latent game changer with the fifth and sixth generation political leadership in saddle, though in a limited way. This is since thanks to the success of the Chinese ruling elite in silencing the opposing voice. Stamping out Bo Xilai line in China's characteristic way is a case in point.

The analytics of the paper unravels a great deal of truth on China's political culture in offering. Adhering broadly to the tenets of social exploratory research design, the analytics schematically focuses on:

- system dynamics of leadership change,
- catalyst role and impacts of electoral laws and procedures, and
- plausible horizon of continuity and change in political fabric.

Though inconclusive, the findings suggest that the Chinese political system and practices in the present form hold little promise for the tenets of democracy to prevail over otherwise autocratic system ruling the roost.

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## ANALYSIS

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### Introduction

*Xīnhuáshè* (New China News Agency) broke the long silence over the schedule of upcoming 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (*Zhōngguó Gòngchǎndǎng Dìshíbācì Quánguó Dàibǎo Dàhui*) on September 28, 2012.<sup>1</sup> Veil of secrecy being the inalienable component of China's strategic culture, this otherwise innocuous political event have had invited numerous speculative write up around the world.<sup>2</sup> Those who have been wrong in their prognosis included *Jaime FlorCruz* (CNN, August 16, 2012) who had then put it for September 20 - 25, 2012.<sup>3</sup> It is now slated for November 8, 2012. As per the convention, authoritative official announcement to this effect will come out only at the conclusion of the 7th Plenary Session of the outgoing 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on November 1, 2012. All studied estimates turned awry just since the esteemed China Watcher Community around the world put too much weight on extraneous factors such as the reshuffle of 101 key officials of Beijing Municipal administration and arrival of all the nine members of the Politburo straight from Beidaihe conclave.<sup>4</sup> Securing control over Beijing, the seat of authority for the CPC has been normal event for the Chinese ruling elite and hence, nothing unusual.<sup>5</sup> The resolutions of the Sixth Plenum of the 17th Central Committee, convened in Beijing earlier in October 2011, spoke of the "latter half 2012" as the plausible broad period.

In its perspective, the impending 18th Party Congress is slated to witness a major leadership transition. With Bo Xilai and his ilk having shown their doors, the form and shape of politics in China was least likely to take "New Left" line.<sup>6</sup> Going by the resolutions of the said meeting of the Politburo on September 28, the policy line of the CPC shall remain intact.<sup>7</sup> It is yet not likely to be a new label on old bottle either. The transition is massive in volume and critical in nature. It shall run through all the Five Pillar agencies of China's political system: the Party; the Government; the Military; the United Front; and, the Mass Organizations. Institutionalizations apart, transition of power in the People's Republic of China (PRC) largely remains a function 'backroom deals, alliances building, manoeuvring against rivals, power shifts among individuals and alliances, compromises among

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<sup>1</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/englishchina/2012-09/28/c\\_131880076.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/englishchina/2012-09/28/c_131880076.htm) (accessed on September 29, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> The Communist Party of China (CPC) had held its 1<sup>st</sup> Congress in 1921. It has been quite irregular until the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress held in 1982. *Zūnyì* conference of Jan 1935 and until the passing away of Mao Zedong, the leadership succession in communist China was an extremely opaque and contentious process, with the decisions being taken by leaders in a very small circle, often indeed by a sole individual. Deng Xiaoping set the tone and tenor for the present epoch which included tenure and age limits for the leadership.

<sup>3</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/16/world/asia/china-next-leaders/index.html> (accessed on Aug 18, 2012)

<sup>4</sup> Beidaihe conclave was the venue of a rather secretive meeting of the top Chinese leadership to finalize plans for power transfer to the new generation leadership at the 18<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress. The conclave assumes significance in the wake of inner party squabbles in the post-Bo Xilai dismissal row.

<sup>5</sup> The changeover since included dismissals of Shougang Group's Party secretary Zhu Jimin and Beijing Daily community Party secretary Mei Ninghua, believed to be favourites of security czar Zhou Yongkang faction.

<sup>6</sup> In China, the terms "left" and "right" or "radical" and "conservative" produce somewhat different associations in the popular mind than what we are used elsewhere in the world, specially in the west. In China's context, "New Left" connotes the ones who defend many aspects of the pre-1978 Maoist system and oppose state-driven market policies.

<sup>7</sup> The resolution of the Politburo meeting on September 28, 2012 was rather hackneyed. It stated, The congress will hold high the banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, be guided with the Deng Xiaoping Theory and the important thoughts of "Three Represents," and thoroughly carry out the Scientific Outlook on Development".



enemies, and purges'. In their best estimates, the scholarship in the field expects little change for better than what it happened last in 2002 - 03.<sup>8</sup>

The Chinese and foreign media reports including studied papers have since shed some light on plausible faces of political leadership. By implications, they speak of political vicissitudes in offing. As China is now global player, there is bound to be policy implications at quite a wider scale. The paper, in its perspective, explores the nature and character of machination, stemming from the backroom deals and shifting alliances amongst party members and having plausible impacts on emerging leadership mix.

Adhering broadly to the tenets of social exploratory research design, the analytics schematically focuses on: System Dynamics of Leadership Change; Catalyst Role and Impacts of Electoral Laws and Procedures; and, the Plausible Horizon of Continuity and Change in Political Fabric. Adhering broadly to some of the standard theoretical positions on change management of political leadership including Kurt Lewin model with a difference, the assumptions of the study take into account the pulls and pressure of 'interest groups' of varied hues and dispensations. In their quintessence, the assumptions of the study subscribes the stand that the upcoming generational change in political leadership in China may not go beyond more skin deep levels on either planks of 'cognitive' or 'action' change. Strangle hold of the CPC outfits on one and all domains of political, economic and social domains of Chinese life could ensure tensions of transition to be kept within manageable, if not fully smooth and orderly extents. The study design broadly adheres to the social sciences exploratory research approach and draws on otherwise unassailable secondary data.

### System Dynamics of Leadership Change

The upcoming 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China upcoming holds prospect of yielding place for the Fifth and Sixth Generation of political leaders of China.<sup>9</sup> In the annals of the PRC, this is the just third time that the generational change of political leadership is taking place. First time, it was all tragic. The aftermath of the dreadful Great Cultural Revolution (*Wénhuà Dàgémìng*) was the villain of the piece. The scar of the Tiananmen Square Crisis of June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989 had cast shadow on the second transition. The third generational transfer of power took place a decade back in 2002 at the 16th Party Congress, which can be said to be peaceful, institutionalized, and orderly to a large extent. Impending change is an inter-mix, where the ruling elite of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has sidelined and silenced the New Left voice. In a way, the down

<sup>8</sup> Cheng Li, 中国领导层的中期角逐: 加速备战2012 (China's Midterm Jockeying: Gearing Up for 2012 -Part 1: Provincial Chiefs; Part 2: Cabinet Ministers; Part 3: Military Leaders; and, Part 4: Top Leaders of Major state Owned Enterprises), 中国领导层季刊(China Leadership Monitor), [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/02\\_china\\_leadership\\_li.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/02_china_leadership_li.aspx) (accessed on Sep 28, 2012); [http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2010/0517/\\_china\\_cabinet\\_members\\_li.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2010/0517/_china_cabinet_members_li.aspx) (accessed on Sep 28, 2012); [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0629\\_military\\_leadership\\_li.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0629_military_leadership_li.aspx) (accessed on Sep 28, 2012); and, [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2011/02/\\_china\\_leadership\\_li.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2011/02/_china_leadership_li.aspx) (accessed on Sep 28, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Vertical mobility to the position of power and privileges in the Communist Party of China and the People's Liberation Army is largely based on seniority. Founding fathers of the PRC such as Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, Chen Yun, and Peng Dehuai belonged to the First Generation. Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin as core with their fellow comrades to the Second and the Third Generations. Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao combine belong to the Fourth Generation. Now, Hu Jintao's Communist Youth League faction and the off springs of influential leaders, cryptically referred as Princelings constitute the Fifth Generation of the Chinese leadership in offing.



fall of once star performer Bo Xilai to the doghouse and the dynamics thereof scintillates the very Chinese characteristics of 'political dissidence management'.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike in the past, this Fifth Generation Political Power Transition (FGPPT) in China is taking place without real and/ or notional legacy of paramount leader.<sup>11</sup> The preparations got into way right since the Central Committee of the CPC issued the communiqué to this effect on November 1, 2011.<sup>12</sup> As per the schedule, between April 2011 and June 2012, 30 million party cadres in China's 31 province-level administrations, 361 cities, 2,811 counties, and 34,171 townships had completed major turnovers of their party committees (*dangwei huanjie*).<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding, in the very first half of 2012, China's all the 31 province-level administrations, along with nine central organs in Beijing and special constituencies were to first elect their delegates and then form 40 delegations that will attend the 18th National Congress of the CPC.<sup>14</sup>

Going by the said Communiqué on the Election of Delegates for the 18th National Congress of the CCP, approved by the Sixth Plenum of the 17th Central Committee, there would be a total of 2,270 delegates to the 18th Party Congress, 57 more than the total number of delegates (2,213) to the 17th Party Congress. These 57 party members are, in effect, special delegates (*teyao daibiao*). They constitute retired veterans and as per CPC regulations, they have the same rights and privileges as the regular delegates. The increase in the number follows addition of over 10 million members since 2007. As a Xinhua dispatch on November 1, 2011 suggests, among the delegates, officials would continue to have lion's share of 68 per cent. This is while there is reduction by 2 per cent over the previous ones. While 10 per cent of the total number represent the public and private enterprises, the rest 32 per cent have to be drawn from grassroots party unit. They are to undergo qualification check to get final approval.<sup>15</sup> They are otherwise supposed to represent various interest groups-economic, science and technology, national defence, politics and the Chinese judicial system.

There is since increase in the number of electoral units. It has gone up to 40. There were just 38 in the preceding election of 17th Party Congress. The two new units meant to represent social management (*shehui guanli*) and public service (*gōngyì shìyè*) sectors. The election process at sub-national levels of the party hierarchy in

<sup>10</sup> Bo Xilai was appointed Chongqing's party leader in late 2007. He shared the fortune of being a 'Princelings' with quite a few Fifth Generation Chinese leadership including Xi Jinping. He worked Maoist revival. He organized 128,000 "Red-song" shows and 28,000 public recitations of Mao's writings. He is credited for sending about 130 million cell phone and computer text messages containing Mao's thoughts and mottoes. Notwithstanding, Bo launched a campaign against the intertwined corrupt relationship between triad gangsters, the police and party officials in Chongqing. It seemed to be a death nail for the Deng Xiaoping epoch and hence, the all hue and cry in the name of scandals.

<sup>11</sup> All the previous generations of the Chinese leadership, including the present Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao epoch of rather collective leadership nature basked under the umbrella of paramount leaders besides their own exposures to one or the other critical developments to their advantage which the Fifth Generation remain largely bereft. Nevertheless, not until the authoritarian, one-party rule system undergoes modifications and/ or change to give leeway to some sort of institutionalized plurality, the Chinese client-patron relationship in leadership transition did not have room for open contests.

<sup>12</sup> Communiqué on the Election of Delegates for the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China (关于党的十八大代表选举工作的通知), November 1, 2011. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64094/16100085.html> (accessed on Sep. 28, 2012)

<sup>13</sup> Focus on the 2011 Leadership Transition of Local Party Committees (聚焦2011年地方党委集中换届), China Internet TV (中国网络电视台) <http://news.cntv.cn/special/dfhj/dfdwhj/index.shtml> (accessed on Sep 28, 2012)

<sup>14</sup> The CPC presently has a total of about 82 million members and 3.89 million grassroots organizations. The change process thus, has to have mandate of all this.

<sup>15</sup> Election of regular delegates, as per press release of November 2, 2011, involved five steps: nomination; background check; announcement of the list; selection; and, the election of the particular candidate. The number of contestants for each seat at the Province or equivalent level election account for 10-15 per cent more. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-11/02/c\\_111141695.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-11/02/c_111141695.htm) (accessed on Sep 28, 2012)



ascending order involved the township (*xiàng*), county (*xian*), city (*shi*) and province (*sheng*). As various Chinese vernacular press stories bear out, the average age of the delegates for this party congress is 52. This is while 114 delegates are said to be of below 35 of age. 1990 born Jiao Liuyang, a gold medal winner in the 200-meter women butterfly swimming event in the London Olympics is one of them.<sup>16</sup>

### Catalyst Role and Impacts of Electoral Laws and Procedures

China watchers around the world hold mixed opinion about objectivity of the Chinese electoral practices. They find machination at every step. The dominance of 'Princelings' (*taize*) over the commoners (*laobaixing*) among the ruling elites speaks volumes.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the Chinese system of political governance provides little room for alternative perspective much less political dissent.

'Election laws' (*xuǎnjǔfǎ*) in the PRC is rather in place right since 1954. It followed adoption of resolution of to this effect at the 20th meeting of the Central People's Government Council in January 1953 and subsequent putting in force the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (*Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó Xiànfǎ*), the Organic Laws of the National People's Congress (*Quánguó Rénmín Dàibiǎo Dàhuì Zǔzhīfǎ*) and the State Council (*Guówùyüàn Zǔzhīfǎ*). The provisions more or less re-echoed '1936 Constitution of erstwhile Soviet Union. One could spot an array of change in the provisions of seven basic laws including the law governing elections to People's Congress adopted in July 1979 in the post-reform era.

The Chinese election laws, thus in force as Part of 1982 Constitution, have so far undergone five rounds of amendments.<sup>18</sup> The first amendments, adopted in 1982, got to reduce the threshold for victory in run-off elections to 33 % of votes cast, and assigned the task briefing voters on candidates to the election committee.<sup>19</sup> A second amendment undertaken in 1986 sought to eliminate primary election and reduce the requirement of minimum number of candidates from 3/2 to 4/3 of the number of deputies to be elected. In 1995, a third round of amendments adopted much more elaborate rules to determine the number of deputies in various People's Congresses and made modest adjustments to the rules governing run-off elections for Local People's Congresses. A fourth amendment package in 2004 re-established a limited primary system, one in which, unlike under the system introduced in 1979, the primaries were to be conducted only if election committee-organized "discussion and consultation" among voter groups. It did not allow candidates to campaign individually or to

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.womenofchina.cn/html/womenofchina/report/143941-1.htm> (accessed on Sep 28, 2012)

<sup>17</sup> 'Princelings' (太子 or 小王子) in the present context refers to the descendants of prominent and influential Chinese communist leaders. The term was coined in the early 20th century, referring to the son of Yuan Shikai and his cronies. When Jiang Zemin was close to the end of his term for his age, however, he put many members of the Crown Prince Party into important positions to appeal to senior leaders of the CCP as a way to win their support for continuation of his influence. There are over 230 top functionaries who have already enjoyed the fruits of their high birth. Among the top hopefuls in the changeover, [Xi Jinping](#) (习近平) happens to be the son of [Xi Zhongxun](#) (习仲勋). Other big wigs in China's political, economic and military leadership included: Son and daughters of [Deng Xiaoping](#)-[Deng Pufang](#) and [Deng Nan](#); Son of [Chen Yun](#)-Chen Yuan; Son of [Zeng Shan](#) - Zeng Qinghong; Son of [Huang Jing-Yu Zhengsheng](#); Son in law of [Yao Yilin-Wang Qishan](#); Son and daughter of [Li Peng-Li Xiaopeng](#) and Li Xiaolin; Sons of [Jiang Zemin](#)-Jiang Mianheng and Jiang Miankang; Son and Daughter of [Zhu Rongji](#)-Zhu Yunlai; Sons of [Wang Zhen](#)-Wang Jun and Wang; Son of [Liu Shaogqi](#): Liu Yuan; Son of [He Long](#)-He Pengfei; Son-in-law of [Liu Huaqing](#)-Pan Yue; Son of [Chen Yi](#)-Chen Haosu and the like.

<sup>18</sup> The 1982 Constitution is a lengthy, hybrid document with 138 articles. Large sections were adapted directly from the 1978 constitution, but many of its changes derive from the 1954 constitution. Specifically, this new Constitution deemphasized 'class struggle' and places top priority on development and on incorporating the contributions and interests of nonparty groups that can play a central role in modernization.

<sup>19</sup> Vide Article 67 (2) of the Constitution of China 1982, the power to amend as much enact it lay with the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on all aspects. This is except areas what exclusive domain of the National People's Congress is.



organize rallies or meetings on their own. The fifth set of amendments, adopted in March 2010, were comparatively high-profile and wide-ranging. It included bridging the urban-rural gap in representation. It got into way with the adoption of a resolution on the issue in the 17th Central Committee of the CPC held in 2007.

Seen critically, a significant portion of the amendments added just sections that formally clarify and seemingly pledge to regularize election committee's functions and responsibilities (such as determining electoral districts, registering voters, screening candidates, running elections, counting ballots and declaring winners) and to increase the accountability of these powerful and frequently criticized bodies (by placing them more clearly under the direction and control of People's Congresses' Standing Committees). Another set of changes go to address and arguably mandate greater equality among, the roles of the Party and other institutions and groups in nominating candidates.

Direct elections for representatives occur only at the county and township level People's Congresses. Indirect elections stand out the rule for the Provincial People's Congresses and the National People's Congress (NPC). In the direct elections, all adult citizens are eligible voters, with the exception of those formally deprived of political rights (a sanction that is sometimes imposed as part of a criminal sentence) or judged psychologically unfit to vote. Prior to each election, the registration group within each election committee (the state organ that oversees all phases of the electoral process at each level) attempts to achieve compulsory registration, with the goal of signing up over 95 % of eligible voters. Although official sources often declare success, the actual rates are usually much lower, with some informed assessments estimating between 40 % and 50 %.

Eligibility to run for deputy is in principle very broad, but in practice significantly narrower. In county and township People's Congress elections, any registered voter found mentally fit by the election committee is legally eligible to pursue candidacy. Ten or more voters have the right to nominate a candidate. In reality, voters' choices are much more constrained. Election committees often play significant roles as gatekeepers (as is illustrated by the county-level contests discussed below) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Committee makes most nominations.

Procedures for delimiting electoral constituencies and conducting elections are complex and opaque. These features raise additional concerns about the degree of connection between electorates' preferences and electoral outcomes. Voters can be divided into constituencies based on many demographic factors—rural or urban residence, work unit, other living conditions, and so on. Districts also may be represented by one, two or three deputies. Chinese election rules include dozens of bases for delineating constituencies.

Voting and counting procedures in vogue raise wide ranging concerns. Voters, for example, can cast their ballots in person at fixed or mobile polling station or, for voters absent from their home districts, through a designated proxy. Use of a secret ballot has not been strictly required in practice, notwithstanding a long-standing mandate in the election law. Counting of ballots often occurs with little meaningful oversight and no independent review. After the votes are tallied, the election committee often announces only the winning candidates' names. Vote totals and percentages are not consistently disclosed. This low level of transparency in elections and high degree of control by the CCP and election committees are among the indications that democratic reforms in China have remained limited, even for very low-level organs, despite the universal implementation of direct elections for Local People's Congresses.



### Plausible Horizon of Continuity and Change in Political Fabric

With election laws and system as they are, it is hard to imagine any thing diametrically different in outcome. The only legal party to part in the political process is the CPC those who can aspire to have a say at the best of times comprise 80 and odd million members. With scope of manipulation left free for all, who could expect expression of free will across various sections of citizens in China? This is while the fact that the system of 'open nomination' (*haixuan*) gradually coming in force in different parts of China carry the potentials instilling worth for democratic values in the hearts of masses at large.<sup>20</sup> At the end of the day, the exercise is just 'democratic in form'. It is out and out 'autocratic' in letters and spirit'.

In the absence of any worthwhile legal political opposition, the political process in China is handiwork of the CPC and China's pseudo political entities.<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding, the eligibility conditions to run for deputy looks broad while it is significantly narrow in practice. For example, in county and township People's Congress elections, any body found mentally sound could run for the elections. They just need nominations by ten or odd eligible voters. In reality, voters' choices to nominate remains limited and constrained by the 'gatekeeper' role of election committees. The degree of connection between electorates' preferences and electoral outcomes suffer limitations on various counts including rather quite opaque constituency delimitation process. Voters, for example, can be divided into constituencies based on whether they have had rural or urban residence. In the same vein, the nature and character of work unit, living conditions, and so on do as well be delimiting factors. In the gamut, manipulations at the hands of party bosses remain quite wide and open. But for handful of cases, the chances of independent candidates, as provisioned in the election laws, remain little more than symbolic.<sup>22</sup> In the higher echelons of political arena including the most powerful nine members Politburo, it is party nomination that matters. China's tryst for transparent democracy at levels of political arena remains farfetched.

On ideational level, the prospect of Neo-left politics as espoused by Bo Xilai is ruled out. With all the plausible shifts in leadership profile, the change in persona in the forthcoming generational transition shall remain a chip of the old block. There is projected retirement of 68 persons. Replacement of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao at the top level party and government hierarchy by Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang is foregone conclusion. Nomination of leaders at the Politburo shall remain a guarded secret until the last minute. For solid information, one has to wait until the holding of First Plenum of the forthcoming 18th Central Committee. However, it was not impossible to gauge the shape of things in offing. The ruling elite are most likely to have field day in putting their nominees in place.

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<sup>20</sup> Jilin and Fujian were first to have subscribed the system of *haixuan* in 1994 and 1996. Zhejiang and many other provinces have subsequently gone into adopting the practice.

<sup>21</sup> China is one of the seven single party states in the world. There are eight cohorts of the Communist Party of China, which are in effect its rank followers. They are:(a) Revolutionary Committee of the Kuomintang (民革); China Democratic League (民盟); China Democratic National Construction Association (民建); China Association for Promoting Democracy (民进); Chinese Peasants' and Workers' Democratic Party (农工党); China Zhi Gong Party (中国致公党); Jiusan Society (九三学社); and, Taiwan Democratic Self Government League (台湾民主自治同盟). There is little room for multi-party democracy.

<sup>22</sup> There is a characteristic case of Yao Lifu winning 1998 as an independent while he had run and lost amid opposition from their employers and local authorities in 1987, 1990 and 1993. Lu Banglie's success in 2003 and opposition posed to him in the process speak of the constraints.



**Remarks:**

Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors.

**About the Authors of this Issue**

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