

Continuous Purges: Xi's Control of the Public Security Apparatus and the Changing Dynamics of CCP Elite Politics

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This essay identifies three waves of purges in the Ministry of Public Security under the Xi Jinping leadership, and then focuses on the third wave, which, corresponding to similar measures beyond the public security system, featured the cleansing of those who rose to prominence due to their support of Xi's earlier anti-corruption campaign. Such a development whereby Xi turns his sword against his previous political allies indicates that continuous purges are becoming a new political dynamic in CCP elite politics. The essay finds that Xi's prolonged tenure in power and the governance challenges he confronts are the two leading factors that have helped to shape China's current proto-Maoist power struggles and elite politics. According to this line of reasoning, Xi's ongoing efforts to control the public security apparatus indicates that CCP elite politics is becoming increasingly dominated by internal repression and coercive means.

This essay will first investigate the recent elite changes in the Chinese Ministry of Public Security that can be described as three waves of purges under the Xi Jinping leadership, with each wave helping Xi to consolidate his control over the ministry and, more generally, the removal of some leading cadres and their replacement by those who are identified with Xi to establish his control over the political-legal system of the Party-state apparatus. It will then focus on the third wave of the purge that began in April 2020, which corresponds to similar measures affecting high-ranking officials beyond the political-legal and public security systems and features the cleansing of those who rose to political prominence due to their support of Xi's earlier anti-corruption campaigns. This latest development whereby Xi turns his sword against his previous political allies, the essay argues, indicates that continuous purges are emerging as a new political dynamic in CCP elite politics due to Xi's prolonged tenure in power and the governance challenges he confronts, resulting in proto-Maoist power struggles and elite politics. After a brief analysis of why this has occurred and how Xi's purges are similar to but also different from traditional Maoist purges, the essay shows that Xi's ongoing efforts to control the public security apparatus not only are indicative of his neo-totalitarian program in terms of state-society relations but also show that CCP elite politics is becoming increasingly dominated by internal repression and coercive means.

Firmly Grasping the Handle of the Knife: Xi's Men and Their Political Allies Enter the Public Security Apparatus

It is well-known that Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012–13 was accompanied by a political earthquake that greatly shook China's public security apparatus. Zhou Yongkang (周永康), once

the tsar of the Chinese police and, more generally, of the *zhengfa* system (政法, usually translated into English as “political-legal” but this translation does not capture the Chinese essence of the term), to which the police and the public security apparatus are subordinate, was purged together with many of his protégées who held various critical positions.¹ This was the first time since 1989 that a member of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), the supreme decision-making body of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), fell from power. The purge has profound relevance to Chinese politics to this day because since then, as this essay observes, three waves of purges of leading cadres in the political-legal system in general and in the public security sector in particular have taken place. In effect, the public security ministry has become the epicenter of Chinese elite changes under Xi Jinping’s leadership.

When he was inaugurated in the fall of 2012 in the office of party chief of the CCP and, later in the spring of 2013, as president of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping was a weak leader in terms of both his power bases. Control over the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the Chinese military force, was of course among his first tasks to consolidate power over the Party-state apparatus. However, his first priority for the purpose of power consolidation was to control the public security ministry, as indicated by the purge of Zhou Yongkang, which in fact was even more urgent than his efforts to control the PLA.

Xi began his powerful anti-corruption campaign with his December 2012 investigation into Li Chuncheng (李春城), a protégée of Zhou Yongkang, who was deputy Party secretary in Sichuan province, making Li the first high-ranking cadre to be purged under Xi’s leadership.² This move quickly led to a series of purges of ministers in the Ministry of Public Security, revealing that Li Chuncheng’s removal was not only a prelude to Zhou’s fall but also that Xi’s hidden purpose of purging Zhou was to increase his power to control the public security apparatus in particular and the *zhengfa* system in general. Together with a huge cleansing of PLA generals, the purges in the public security apparatus helped Xi kick off his efforts to concentrate power in his own hands.

How was the weak Xi able to accomplish the purges of Zhou and his accomplices and to actualize his control over the public security system? In addition to Xi’s nominal authority as Party chief and with assistance from Wang Qishan (王岐山), who was in charge of Party discipline inspection during Xi’s first term (2012–17), Xi’s political skills to mobilize personnel in the public security sector turned out to be decisive. In general, four groups of Party cadres within the public security sector supported Xi, thus allowing him to accomplish his purge of Zhou Yongkang and to bring about his consequent control of the public security system. In order of their increasing degree of perceived loyalty to Xi, these four groups included the following cadres:

- 1) Those who had been Zhou Yongkang’s protégées but who had then betrayed Zhou to seek patronage from Xi. According to CCP political tradition, the members of this group can be called “traitors.” The members usually include those who already had prominent careers in the public security system prior to Xi’s ascent to power. Fu Zhenghua (傅政华) is one such prominent figure in this group, who, when Zhou Yongkang was in power, occupied the key position of director of the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau (February 2010–January 2015), but then he was promoted by Xi to the number-two position in the public security ministry.³ Huang Ming (黄明), also a member of this group, was, under Zhou, promoted to be a vice minister of

public security. Huang, from Jiangsu province, Zhou's home province, had, as police chief of Jiangsu, taken care of Zhou's extended family. But Huang managed to survive Zhou's fall and was later promoted under Xi.⁴

2) Those who belonged to the pan-Shanghai gang, with close connections to former Party chief Jiang Zemin and PSC member Zeng Qinghong (曾庆红) rather than to Zhou Yongkang, even though Zhou was also widely regarded as a protégée of both Jiang and Zeng. Political figures in this group, often enjoying seniority due to their long careers following Jiang and/or Zeng, came to dominate national politics following the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, but their careers were generally not in the public security system. However, they were transferred to the *zhengfa* system to replace Zhou Yongkang and his followers. Meng Jianzhu (孟建柱), a Party official with a Shanghai background, replaced Zhou to become the new czar of the *zhengfa* system, though his position was downgraded within the Party hierarchy from a member of the PSC to a member of the Politburo.⁵ Nevertheless, Meng rapidly expanded his nationwide sphere of influence in public security affairs. Guo Shengkun (郭声琨), the current head of the Central Political-Legal Commission (CPLC, *zhengfawei*) who replaced Meng in 2017, also belongs to this group due to his close connections to Zeng Qinghong (it is said that they are relatives). He became minister of public security in December 2012.⁶

3) Those who belonged to the various factions of Xi's political allies: under Xi they were transferred from other Party positions to take leading posts in the Ministry of Public Security. Zhao Kezhi (赵克志), the current minister of public security, is one such case. When Zhao Kezhi was governor of Guizhou province, Xi's major political ally Li Zhanshu (栗战书) was Party secretary of the province. It seems that the two (Li and Zhao) got along well, and Zhao succeeded Li when the latter was promoted to Beijing to assume a key position. At the beginning of Xi's second term Zhao was appointed minister of public security.⁷ He might not have played a role in purging Zhou Yongkang, but his appointment to the public security ministry signaled a decisive gain by Xi to control the *zhengfa* apparatus.

4) Xi's long-time associates, especially those who had work experience in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, Xi's local power bases (Xi had worked in Fujian for 17 years climbing through the local Party-state hierarchy to eventually become the number-two leader of the province; he also had been the Party chief of Zhejiang province). Some of these associates are professional police, such as Wang Xiaohong (王小洪), who was quickly promoted after Xi assumed national office and is now number two in the Ministry of Public Security. (He likely will become minister of public security in 2023.)⁸ The growth of this group in terms of both the number of its members and their power is the most explicit and reliable indicator to measure Xi's increasing capacity to control the public security apparatus.

The three waves of purges in the public-security and *zhengfa* systems represent an ongoing process of power redistribution among the above four groups, whereby the latter groups replaced the former groups. The second purge wave started in 2018 following the Nineteenth Party Congress, during which time those "traitors" in the Zhou Yongkang faction either fell from power or were sidelined. In April 2018, Meng Hongwei (孟宏伟), a veteran vice minister of public security (2004–18), was removed from all government positions. (He retained only his

position as president of Interpol that he had assumed in 2016.) In October, after Meng had been secretly detained for weeks, the Chinese authorities announced that he was being investigated by CCP anti-corruption agencies.⁹ Also in spring 2018, Fu Zhenghua and Huang Ming were moved out of the public security ministry to take positions in other ministries that are usually perceived as being less important in the Party-state apparatus.¹⁰ Wang Xiaohong replaced Fu Zhenghua in the Ministry of Public Security to take charge of daily operations of the ministry.¹¹ In April 2020, Fu was also discharged from his position as minister of justice; his successor Tang Yijun (唐一军), with experience working under Xi in Zhejiang, was promoted five times between 2016 and 2020.¹²

Tang accordingly joined the CPLC, where he was reunited with a former colleague from Zhejiang, Chen Yixin (陈一新). As secretary-general, Chen has been in charge of the CPLC's daily operations since April 2018.¹³ Both Tang and Chen are new to the *zhengfa* system, and their job transfers to this umbrella leadership organization supervising the entire state coercive machine (except the military, but including the Ministry of Public Security) suggests that Xi's efforts to control the machine had not been completed with the second wave of purges in the system.

The Third Wave: Yesterday's Allies Become Today's Enemies

After a peaceful interval in terms of anti-corruption moves, in April 2020 the Chinese authorities announced that Sun Lijun (孙力军) was under investigation.¹⁴ As that time, Sun was the youngest vice minister of public security (born in 1969) as well as among the youngest vice ministerial-level cadres in China. He had risen to prominence mainly due to his extremely close connections to Meng Jianzhu, thus he should be included in the second group described above. His promotion to become a vice minister in March 2018 implied that the Xi leadership was giving its stamp of approval to his job performance, including his purge of Zhou Yongkang and Zhou's followers in the public security system. Sun's removal from office, however, indicated the unfolding of a new wave of purges targeting those who had once helped Xi consolidate power. In this essay, this is identified as the third wave of CCP elite purges under Xi Jinping.

The fall of a number of other powerful officials in charge of provincial-level public security bureaus took place after Sun's fall from power. They include: Deng Huilin (邓恢林) (born in October 1965), vice mayor and head of public security in Chongqing, who was placed under investigation in June 2020;¹⁵ Gong Daoan (龚道安) (born in November 1964), vice mayor and head of public security in Shanghai, who, it was announced, was under investigation in August 2020;¹⁶ and Wang Like (王立科) (born in December 1964), secretary of the Jiangsu Provincial CPLC and previous head of public security of the province, who was investigated in October 2020.¹⁷ All relatively young in terms of their official rankings, the members of this group formed a rising cohort in the public security system. Having been promoted when Meng Jianzhu was in charge of the *zhengfa* system, they, like Sun, are reported to have been close to Meng. The series of recent purges have thus stirred rumors that Meng Jianzhu, already retired in 2017, would be Xi's next target, and Zeng Qinghong, who is believed to be behind Meng, would also face trouble.

With the removal of Sun and the transfer of some other of Meng's protégées, the leadership of the Ministry of Public Security has been reshuffled. The current leadership of the Ministry of Public Security consists of nine persons, including the minister, five vice ministers, a Party discipline official, and two senior officers.¹⁸ It seems that all of those who hold these positions have some sort of personal connection with Xi Jinping or, in the case of those who are relatively junior, have connections with Xi's trusted associate Wang Xiaohong. In addition, the future leadership that is expected to succeed Wang Xiaohong is also already taking shape, as Lin Rui (林锐) from Xiamen (where Xi and Wang Xiaohong worked for years), now the youngest in the leadership (born in August 1967), is a hopeful to be in line for minister after Wang Xiaohong. Other young hopefuls for promotion to the leadership of the ministry are Feng Yan (冯延), the only female in the leadership who is in charge of the Political Department of the ministry, and Chen Siyuan (陈思源), who is in charge of so-called "political defense," which is regarded as the most crucial branch within the ministry. Both have experience working under Wang Xiaohong in Henan and Beijing, respectively. The Party discipline official in the ministry, Sun Xinyang (孙新阳), who is also expected to be promoted, is from Xi Jinping's hometown, Fuping county of Shaanxi province. When the new National People's Congress meets in March 2023 to appoint the next government, with Wang Xiaohong replacing Zhao Kezhi as minister of public security, the ministry will seemingly be fully and firmly in the hands of those who belong to the fourth group identified above.

Curiously enough, this wave that targeted Xi's former political allies also took place within a wider political circle beyond the public security apparatus, and it involved some protégées of Wang Qishan. Wang Qishan is widely regarded as the most powerful and, perhaps, the most trusted political ally of Xi Jinping. This was the case at least during Xi's first term, during which time Wang, as head of the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, played an indispensable role in cleansing Xi's enemies and other corrupt cadres. Therefore, it is truly difficult to believe that Xi will one day purge either Wang Qishan or his followers.

Perhaps that is why observers of Chinese elite politics do not pay much attention to the investigation of Li Wei (李伟), which was announced in August 2020.¹⁹ Li at the time was vice chairman of the Beijing Municipal Political Consultative Conference, a second-line position without much power. But Li had been a local official influential in Beijing municipality for decades, in the capacities of executive deputy-secretary of the municipal CPLC and secretary-general of the municipal government. On several occasions, Li's political career had crossed paths with that of Wang Qishan: When Wang was mayor of Beijing, during which time he was in charge of preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Li Wei was spokesperson under Wang. Wang once served as Party secretary of Hainan province, and Li worked as director of Beijing municipality's Hainan Liaison Office.²⁰

Nevertheless, a recent investigation of a high-ranking associate of Wang Qishan has shocked the circle of China watchers. Announced on October 1, 2020, China's National Day and this year coincidentally coinciding with the Mid-autumn Festival, the investigation of Dong Hong (董宏) should be considered extremely meaningful.²¹ A retired vice ministerial cadre, Dong's political weight is far more significant than it appears. His political career began when he worked in the

office of Bo Yibo (薄一波) in the late 1980s. At that time, Bo functioned as a liaison between paramount leader Deng Xiaoping and the CCP Party chief, first Hu Yaobang and then Zhao Ziyang. Dong joined Wang Qishan in the mid-1990s, and since then he has served as Wang's right-hand man, following Wang's stellar career across Guangdong, Hainan, and Beijing, and in the State Council. During Wang's tenure as chief of the Party's Central Discipline Inspection Commission during Xi's first term, Dong led a number of investigation teams to help purge Xi's and Wang's political enemies.

Thus far, it is not clear if the investigation of Dong is a strategic move that will eventually lead to a clash between Xi and Wang Qishan. Two points are clear, however. First, although Wang was allowed to postpone his retirement and to stay on in the leadership of the PRC as vice president during Xi's second term, his power and influence have declined. Second, in recent years some of Wang's men have bitterly criticized Xi, for which they have received serious punishment. This is indicated by Ren Zhiqiang's (任志强) case, though the connections between his criticism of Xi and his role as a protégée of Wang remain unclear.²² Moreover, the previous downfalls of high-ranking leaders during the Xi era always began with the leader's "butler" being investigated – "butler" (管家) is a borrowed term to describe a cadre's butler-like role for his/her political boss, which is also the term used in the Chinese mass media to describe Dong's role in the Wang Qishan clique.²³

The Great Leader, the Great Purges: The Changing Dynamics of CCP Elite Politics

It is too early to conclude that Xi is now targeting either Meng Jianzhu or Wang Qishan in his latest purges, but it is unquestionable that Xi is already purging some of those who formerly supported him during his previous consolidations of power and who are (former) protégées of his major political allies in the leadership. This essay suggests that such a strategy of cleansing yesterday's allies may become a pattern under Xi's reign. This is due to many factors that have been emerging in the wider picture of Chinese politics and governance. Some of these factors will be analyzed below.

The first factor that should be highlighted is Xi's overall political programs to govern China that have caused increasing tensions among CCP elites. Xi's ambitious plan to reframe the post-reform Chinese socioeconomic reality with a refreshed totalitarian political configuration contradicts the personal interests of many CCP elites who were nurtured by Deng Xiaoping's post-Tiananmen model of granting elites huge opportunities for rent-seeking by trading their political power for market benefits. Therefore, profound political discontent exists in Xi's China, and, unlike the situation that existed during the previous CCP leaderships under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, elite discontent seems to be growing faster than social discontent.²⁴ Elite expressions of discontent, just like the expressions of social discontent, are powerfully repressed under normal sociopolitical circumstances in China, but they can rise to the fore when a crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, arises. It was during the first weeks of the Wuhan lockdown that Ren Zhiqiang circulated his harsh criticism of Xi; it is rumored that Sun Lijun's removal was somehow connected to his misconduct concerning the pandemic. Furthermore, it is said that Dong Hong had tried to help Ren Zhiqiang after Ren was detained. In any case, differences in elite preferences concerning a policy choice can easily become a reason behind a power struggle

in Communist China, and the reincarnation of Maoist totalitarianism in Chinese politics simply reinforces this trend.

One of Xi's political programs is to extend his tenure as Party chief and PRC president longer than the norms that his predecessors followed. With the PRC constitutional amendment in 2018, Xi has already partially accomplished this goal as now there is no term limit applied to the state presidency. As the CCP charter has never had a term limit for Party leaders, including the Party chief, Xi's goal of prolonging his tenure for as long as possible, or actualizing a trend toward life-tenure, is now only a political issue rather than a constitutional issue. This is the second prominent factor that encourages continuous elite purges.

When the retirement age of high-ranking leaders becomes flexible but leadership reorganization appears on the agenda, the difficulties of redistributing power among the top layers of the regime increase. During the pre-Xi periods, for those at and below the rank of vice minister or equivalent, 60 years-old was the ceiling for retirement; for those at ministerial or equivalent levels, age 65 was the ceiling for retirement. For those at higher levels, however, the rules follow a different rationale without the fixed ceiling of retirement, but the norms were: those who were 67 still eligible to join a new leadership when the new leadership was under reorganizing, and they would retire after they completed the term, but those who reached 68 at the time of inaugurating the new leadership were required to retire. Xi has already silently violated the norms for ministerial-level cadres, with his discretionary power apparently increasing at the cost of institutional norms. For example, provincial party secretaries Che Jun (车俊, born in July 1955) in Zhejiang and Chen Qiufa (陈求发, born in December 1954) in Liaoning retired in September 2020; governor of Guangxi Chen Wu (陈武, born in November 1954) retired in October 2020;²⁵ provincial Party secretaries Chen Hao (陈豪, born in February 1954) in Yunnan, Sun Zhigang (孙志刚, born in May 1954) in Guizhou, Du Jiahao (杜家毫, born in July 1955) in Hunan and Bayi Chaolun (巴音朝鲁, born in November 1955) in Jilin retired in November 2020.²⁶ Some of them had been with obvious prolonged tenures. By contrast, their peers such as provincial party secretaries Liu Cigui (刘赐贵, born in September 1955) in Hainan and Yu Weiguo (于伟国, born in October 1955) in Fujian are still holding their positions. A similar case has occurred in the case of governor of Xinjiang Shöhret Zakir (雪克来提 扎克尔, born in August 1953), who has also retained his position even though he is already 67 years old. As already noted, Fu Zhenghua (born in March 1955) retired as justice minister in April 2020, while a number of ministers in the State Council remain in their positions even though they are older than Fu.²⁷ Xi will definitely further change the norms for reorganization of the top leadership at the forthcoming Twentieth Party Congress in 2022, as he himself will have turned 69 years old by then but he will definitely stay on in power unless some unforeseeable factors emerge. As the retirement of leading cadres becomes politically selective, forced retirements can be used by Xi as a convenient tool to overcome any difficulties to actualize his political purges. As in Fu's case and in some earlier cases involving high-ranking officials, retirement can serve as a "soft" measure for a political cleansing.

In the long term, a third factor, that is, the unpredictability of power succession after Xi, will inevitably also intensify elite political purges. Assuming that the first factor cited above (Xi's totalitarian control) becomes less important, as Xi's hold on power strengthens leading to

effective repression of elite discontent and as Xi gains the projected accomplishments of his programs, elite competition over succession to Xi will emerge during Xi's third term (2022/23–2027/28) and during whatever terms that may follow. When power struggles around the issue of succession unfold, the pattern of targeting former political allies will prevail as the major contenders for succession will all be Xi loyalists who had once worked with him to purge common enemies during previous terms.

There are some other factors that may intensify elite purges in CCP politics under Xi, but space does not allow for further discussion. Taken together, however, the above analysis suggests that continuous purges have already occurred as a pattern in elite politics under the leadership of Xi Jinping, and similar purges will repeatedly take place in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, such continuous purges have been altering the dynamics of Chinese elite politics, marked by certain significant features, such as the decline of post-Mao norms of elite politics, the rise of a cult of personality around Xi Jinping, and the mode of “jungle politics” prevailing among CCP comrades.

Concluding Remarks

Returning to the discussion of purges in the public security apparatus, the suggestion made in the previous section sheds light on the question of why Xi and his followers pay such extraordinary attention to the public security apparatus. In other words, for what purpose does Xi try so hard to firmly grasp the handle of the knife in the public security apparatus? The answer is clear: Xi needs the knife to help purge his enemies in the Party-state system. This appears to be tautological, but the political logic is indeed self-strengthening, and the point is that the repeated purges in the public security apparatus are indicative of the emergence of a new pattern in elite politics which is characterized by continuous purges. However, such continuous purges of elites during the Xi era are not exactly the same as the Maoist purges of elites that took place prior to the late 1970s. Unlike the Maoist purges, Xi-style purges are not overwhelmingly ideology-oriented, and they do not penetrate the grassroots levels of the Party-state hierarchy. More importantly, as related to this essay, the tools of the Maoist purges, that is, the mass campaigns, are no longer used. Xi's purges of his political enemies rely heavily on his control of the coercive machine, with the public security apparatus even more critical than the military because the former functions in daily political operations whereas the latter serves only as a political deterrence and as a last resort in power struggles. Many experts have already highlighted the role that the public security apparatus plays in repressive state-society relations in China; this essay shows that Xi's ongoing efforts to control the public security apparatus are not only indicative of his neo-totalitarian program to control societal actors but also imply that CCP elite politics is becoming increasingly dominated by intra-regime repression and coercive means.

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<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=81200915>

Notes

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- ²⁵ “辽宁浙江省委主要负责同志职务调整,” <http://renshi.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0901/c139617-31845132.html>; “蓝天立任广西壮族自治区政府代主席, 陈武辞去主席职务,” http://www.xinhuanet.com/renshi/2020-10/19/c_1126629437.htm. For personal information on the cadres listed here, see “人民网-地方领导资料库”: <http://ldzl.people.com.cn/dfzlk/front/firstPage.htm>, accessed October 31, 2020.
- ²⁶ “吉林等 4 省省委主要负责同志职务调整,” http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-11/20/c_1126765656.htm. For personal information on the cadres listed here, see “人民网-地方领导资料库”: <http://ldzl.people.com.cn/dfzlk/front/firstPage.htm>, accessed November 20, 2020.
- ²⁷ See fn. 12.