

This essay investigates CCP dynamics with respect to the leadership reorganization at the forthcoming 20th Party Congress by exploring the following puzzle: Why was there no elite attempt to oppose Xi Jinping's constitutional amendment for removing term limits for the PRC President in 2018, but recently Xi's actualization of a third term seems to be meeting powerful resistance from those same elites? In emphasizing the interactions between party norms and elite politics, we highlight the norms revealed in the recent reorganization of provincial leaderships that took place in the winter 2021, and we argue that these norms have intensified the institutional dilemmas created by Xi's 2018 constitutional amendment, and, accordingly, they have fueled intra-elite power struggles. Such struggles will become decisive during the summer of 2022, and Xi's crackdown on elite resistance will, at that time, enter a higher stage.

Scheduled to be held in the latter half of 2022,¹ the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will reorganize the CCP's central leadership, primarily the Central Committee and the Politburo and its Standing Committee. The incumbent party chief, Xi Jinping, has already indicated his intention of remaining in his position, despite the fact that this move will contravene the norms for party leadership transition that have been followed in the past decades. However, there have been some unusual political developments since December of 2021, signaling a rise of dissident voices among party elites,² and alerting observers that Xi's plan might not be realized as smoothly as is often supposed.³ The issue of leadership

¹ “中国发布：中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会 2022 年下半年召开，” 中国网，http://news.china.com.cn/2021-11/11/content_77866842.html.

² In international media, there have been several reports and analyses regarding such signals and voices. See, for example, Katsuji Nakazawa, “When China's Leading Paper Ignores Xi, All Bets Are Off,” *Nikkei Asia*, December 23, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/China-up-close/Analysis-When-China-s-leading-paper-ignores-Xi-all-bets-are-off>; Atul Aneja, “Finally, Are Followers of Deng Xiaoping Ready to Challenge Xi Jinping?” *Daijiworld.com*, December 25, 2021, <https://www.daijiworld.com/news/newsDisplay?newsID=908148>; Kevin Rudd, “China's Economic Downturn Gives Rise to a Winter of Discontent: With Xi Likely Seeking a Third Term, His Critics May Have More Leverage Than They Have Had for Years,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-economic-woes-give-rise-to-a-winter-of-discontent-president-xi-jinping-cewc-common-prosperity-11642777025>.

³ For the latest example, see George Soros, “China's Challenges,” Project Syndicate, January 31, 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/china-and-xi-jinping-facing-growing-challenges-at-home-by-george-soros-2022-01?barrier=accesspaylog>, and Matthew Cranston, “George Soros Says Xi Could Be Toppled,” *Financial Review*, February 1, 2022,

reorganization in the lead-up to the 20th Party Congress thus becomes increasingly intriguing and confusing.

One significant puzzle increases our confusion about CCP power struggles with respect to Xi's third term. When, in March 2018, the 13th National People's Congress passed an amendment to the PRC Constitution to remove the term limits for PRC President, Xi's ambition to remain in power already became clear, as many observers believed that through this amendment, Xi would actually seek life tenure.⁴ There was "rare dissent," according to BBC,⁵ among party elite to Xi's such move at that time, in a contrast to a great deal of social criticism arising both at home and overseas. The puzzle is: Why was there no obvious attempt in March 2018 to block Xi's constitutional amendment but now Xi's plan toward the third term seems to be facing resistance from the same elites?

To explore the answers to this puzzle, this essay seeks to understand CCP dynamics with respect to the forthcoming leadership reorganization at the 20th Party Congress by emphasizing interactions between party norms and elite politics. It assumes that, as this author argues elsewhere, that the Party Congress serves as a political theatre in which the norms are institutionally manipulated by politics to display a collective endorsement of the incumbent party leadership's decisions regarding the party platform and on the reorganization of the Central Committee and its Politburo.⁶ Empirically, the essay highlights the recent reorganizations of provincial leaderships that took place from late October to early December as a reliable indicator of what has been happening, mostly behind the doors, as a predictor of the power redistribution norms to be implemented at the 20th Party Congress.

Below the essay will, first, review how the norms regarding the congressional electoral mechanisms in the CCP-PRC party-state system have changed in recent years, and how such changes have paved the way for Xi's quasi-life tenure. The changes, however, have yielded a series of institutional dilemmas, and Xi now must confront discontent, and even resistance, from among the elites, in particular with regard to the ages for retirement. The second section will analyze these new institutional dilemmas. The third section will examine the latest series of party leadership reshufflings that have taken place at the provincial level for keys about the norms that might be actualized with respect to the national leadership at the 20th Party Congress. The concluding section will bring the earlier discussions together to further explore how politics and

<https://www.afr.com/world/north-america/george-soros-xi-is-vulnerable-to-being-toppled-20220131-p59si8>.

⁴ See, for instance, "China's Xi Allowed to Remain 'President for Life' as Term Limits Removed," BBC, March 11, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43361276>; James Doubek, "China Removes Presidential Term Limits, Enabling Xi Jinping to Rule Indefinitely," NPR, March 11, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/11/592694991/china-removes-presidential-term-limits-enabling-xi-jinping-to-rule-indefinitely>.

⁵ "China's Xi Allowed to Remain 'President for Life' as Term Limits Removed," BBC, March 11, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43361276>.

⁶ Guoguang Wu, *China's Party Congress: Power, Legitimacy, and Institutional Manipulation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

norms have interacted in the latest round of provincial leadership transition and how such interactions might possibly affect the 20th Party Congress.

Change of Norms to Favor the Party Chief: Xi Jinping Seeks a Third Term at the 20th Party Congress

When the last round of national leadership reorganization came to close at the 13th National People's Congress in March 2018 (which followed the 19th Party Congress in October 2017), Xi Jinping had already made significant preparations for the round of power redistribution to take place at the 20th Party Congress and the 14th NPC (scheduled for March 2023). Observers believed that the amendment to the PRC Constitution in March 2018 paved the way for Xi Jinping, the incumbent state head while concurrently the CCP party chief, to extend his tenure as PRC President to a third term (2023–2028) and, theoretically, to perhaps more terms following 2028.⁷ In recent decades, it has always been the CCP party chief who has concurrently occupied the position of PRC President. Under China's political system, where the Communist Party overwhelmingly dominates the state and all public power, it is difficult to imagine that in 2023 Xi will give up his position as party chief to assume only the position of PRC President.⁸ This constitutional amendment, therefore, is widely seen as a reflection of Xi's intention to maintain his paramount position within the party-state leadership at the 20th Party Congress, and even his ambition, beyond the 20th Party Congress, to remain in power for life.

This is a fundamental change from CCP leadership-reorganization norms in recent decades. After Mao's death in 1976, none of the succeeding CCP party chiefs held the position of party chief for a particularly long time. In the 1980s, three party chiefs were purged by Deng Xiaoping, who controlled the military and claimed himself to the "core" of the post-Mao leadership, dwarfing party chiefs Hua Guofeng, Hu Yaobang, and Zhao Ziyang, as either lightweight rivals or unruly puppets. Additionally, in the remaking of the PRC 1982 Constitution, under Deng's leadership term limits for most state leadership positions were introduced for the first time in PRC history. These limits applied to both the President and the Premier.

At the same time, the CCP did not introduce any explicit term limits for party leadership positions, but a cadre retirement system was implemented to substitute for the Maoist life-tenure arrangements for all officials, and some implicit norms were introduced for the leadership transitions at the top level of the regime. In accordance with such norms, Jiang Zemin, who came

⁷ “中华人民共和国宪法修正案（2018年3月11日），” 中国政府网，
http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/xinwen/2018-03/12/content_2049190.htm. Also, see note 4 above.

⁸ For many years, the position of PRC President was relatively insignificant in Chinese politics, primarily evidenced by the fact that the position was entirely eliminated during the late Mao years until 1982, when a new post-Mao PRC Constitution was put in place. When the office was restored in 1982, however, this was not accompanied by its earlier significance; instead, it became a ceremonial position for a less powerful leader within the top echelon of CCP leaders. The situation changed in 1993 when Party Chief Jiang Zemin assumed the position, concurrent with his position as party chief. This arrangement has remained in place to the present.

to power as party chief in 1989 following the Tiananmen crackdown, stepped down in 2002 at the 16th Party Congress, handing the position over to Hu Jintao. After two 5-year terms, Hu Jintao followed suit and handed power over to Xi Jinping in 2012 at the 18th Party Congress.

As the past two leadership transitions took place on the occasion of a Party Congress, post-Maoist congressional norms for the redistribution of power seem to have been established. Here, there are some significant differences between the post-Mao congressional norms and the Maoist institutions regarding the Party Congress. But the measures that Xi Jinping has put in place in recent years regarding the CCP-PRC electoral system reveal a return to the earlier Maoist institutions. Table 1 summarizes and compares these changes in norms.

Table 1. The Party Congress Electoral System: Maoist Institutions, Post-Mao Change and Continuity, and Xi Jinping’s Revitalization

Maoist institutions	Post-Mao change/continuity	Xi’s revitalization
Irregular and prolonged intervals between elections	Regular and periodic in units of years, but still no pre-fixed date for voting	Same as in the post-Mao era
Case-by-case discretion for elected posts	Virtually no change	No change
Case-by-case guidelines for each election	No change	No change
Pre-nomination investigations of candidates	Virtually no change, but more extended, intense, and wide-reaching as a significant step in consensus building	Same as in the post-Mao era
Nominations by the leadership	No change, but lower-level cadres are more involved in feedback at early stages	Same as in the post-Mao era
“Fermentation” for consensus-building	No change	No change
Prohibition of campaigning by candidates	No change, but challenges by candidates’ “unlawful” lobbying of various participants through the nomination process to the voting	Same as the post-Mao era
Campaigning from above	No change, though forms of campaigning may be different	No change

Preview elections (<i>yuxua</i>)	No change as a necessary procedure, but <i>cha-e xuanju</i> (elections with more candidates than posts) replacing <i>deng-e xuanju</i>	Same as in the post-Mao era
<i>Deng-e xuanju</i> (non-competitive elections, one candidate for one post) in the preview elections to choose the candidates in conjunction with the number of posts available, i.e., formalization of the slate of candidates)	Reform to the <i>cha-e xuanju</i> system	Same as in the post-Mao era
In preview elections, ballots cast within the delegation	No change	No change
<i>Zuo gongzuo</i> (political pressure) after the preview elections	Became unnecessary, but still applied on occasion, especially in the earlier stages of the electoral process	Same as in the post-Mao era
<i>Deng-e xuanju</i> for the final elections	No change	No change
Secret ballots, or sometimes a show of hands	No change	No change
Higher authorities' rectification of electoral outcomes (nonapplicable to elections of central leaderships)	No change	No change
Life tenure	Different retirement ages applied discriminately to posts at different levels of the power hierarchy	Same as in the post-Mao era, but signals of a return to life tenure for the party chief
Absence of term limits	Virtually no change in party charter, but some implicit term limits for party positions and constitutionally defined term limits for major state offices	Same as the post-Mao era, but term limits for the PRC President were removed, which indicated the implicit term limits for the Party Chief invalid

Post-election job transfers with no consideration of the preferences of the constituency	No change	No change, but more frequency and more strength to carry out transfers
Purges despite elections	Substantially reduced in scope, frequency, and strength of the punishment	Substantial increase in scope, frequency, and the strength of punishment

Source: Table 6.3 in Guoguang Wu, *China's Party Congress: Power, Legitimacy, and Institutional Manipulation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 289, and the author's further research extending to cover the Xi Jinping era. For further explanation of the Chinese terms, such as *cha-e xuanju*, *zuo gongzuo*, etc., see Wu, *China's Party Congress*, esp. Ch. 6.

Elections matter because the CCP leadership is nominally elected by delegates to the Party Congress. The above changes in norms governing the congressional elections, therefore, are meaningful for analyzing the forthcoming politics of the 20th Party Congress. As the above table clearly shows, relevant changes have mainly occurred in three aspects, namely, regarding term limits, life tenure (for the position of the party chief), and elite purges. What are the political and institutional implications of such changes, especially for the leadership reorganization toward the 20th Party Congress?

Overcoming Institutional Inconsistencies? The Politics of Norm Changes for the Redistribution of Power

The 2018 amendment to the PRC Constitution retains the clauses regarding term limits for all other state leadership positions when the term limits for PRC President have been removed. This yields an institutional inconsistency in Chinese leadership politics, namely, the norms for the leader who holds the office of head of state are fundamentally different from the norms for all other leaders. Since 1993 the CCP party chief has, without exception, held the position of head of state; except this arrangement is changed in the next round of leadership reorganization, it implies that the party chief will stay in power without term limits while his comrades in the top echelons of the party-state leadership are bound by the rules for retirement.

In a similar vein, such an institutional inconsistency also occurs in a wider sense, as all party-state cadres at lower levels must follow the post-Mao rules regarding retirement at a certain age, even though the party head may remain in power despite his age.

Reorganization of the national leadership during the past decades followed norms of so-called “seven up but eight down” (七上八下), implying that reorganization of the national leadership excludes those leaders who reach the threshold of 68 years old, while the younger leaders, including those who reach the age of 67, can remain in office or join the ranks of the new leadership.

For cadres at the provincial level, including those who hold the positions of provincial party secretary and provincial governor, the retirement age is 65, but when a new leadership is formed, those reaching the age of 63 are excluded.

A further discriminatory norm regarding age in terms of qualifications for office, however, applies to the provincial leaderships. Except for the party secretary and governor, all other standing committee members of the CCP provincial committee are ranked as vice-provincial cadres and their retirement ceilings are the age of 60, so they are not eligible to join the ranks of the new leadership at the age 58.⁹ In the latter sense, this is also a norm of “seven up but eight down,” though in an age context that is different from that for the national leaders.

There is a further difference in terms of retirement norms between the national leadership, on the one hand, and the provincial and lower levels, on the other. A cadre at the provincial level must retire at age 65, but a cadre at the vice-provincial and lower levels must retire at age 60, even if there is no leadership reorganization; a national leader, however, stays on in his/her position until the next leadership reorganization takes place, even though he/she might have already reached retirement age.

These complicated norms for cadre retirement are confusing, and they have never been announced to the public.¹⁰ But the following points are clear. First, retirement has been a fundamental norm for Chinese party-state cadres since the 1980s;¹¹ second, norms for the age of retirement are hierarchically constructed within the party-state system, allowing privileges for the higher-level cadres, especially the top-level leaders.

In addition, for all CCP leadership positions, term limits have never been announced, and term limits only apply to PRC state positions. Furthermore, term limits have never applied to the position of chairman of the PRC Central Military Commission.

Returning to the above issue of how in 2018 Xi Jinping was able to easily remove the term limits for PRC President. The above points may help to explain why dissent was rare. The expectation among leading cadres, consistent with Xi’s longer term in power, was that they too would remain longer in power, thus reducing the likelihood that they would block Xi’s removal of term limits. At the same time, their willingness and ability to oppose Xi’s attempt to amend the constitution might also have been greatly reduced by Xi’s ongoing purge of elites, as indicated in Table 1.

⁹ An exception to this ranking is for members who are concurrently in charge of party discipline inspection. For such positions, 63 is the age of retirement, and 61 is the age ceiling for joining the new leadership.

¹⁰ The norms stated above, therefore, are summarized based on observation. There are discussions of such norms in overseas mass media, of course. See, for example, Radio Taiwan International, “新闻辞典：七上八下,” Radio Taiwan International, October 17, 2017, <https://www.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/374508>; and, more recently, Eduardo Jaramillo, “What Role Will Age Limits Play at China’s 2022 Party Congress?” <https://supchina.com/2021/12/08/what-role-will-age-limits-play-at-chinas-2022-party-congress/>.

¹¹ Melanie Manion, *Retirement of Revolutionaries in China: Public Policies, Social Norms, Private Interests* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Will this expectation also hold for the leadership reorganizations in the run-up to the 20th Party Congress? It depends on if the general norms regarding age limits be relaxed for the composition of the CCP 20th Central Committee, Politburo, and Politburo Standing Committee. For a period of time prior to 2021, there were signs that the retirement-age limits for provincial cadres would be extended. A number of provincial party secretaries did not retire after their 65th birthdays, including, for example, Chen Hao (陈豪, born February 1954) of Yunnan province, Sun Zhigang (孙志刚, born May 1954) of Guizhou province, and Du Jiahao (杜家毫, born July 1955) of Hunan province all stayed on in their positions as provincial party secretary for prolonged periods until November 2020.¹²

In addition, the Chinese authorities indicated in spring 2021 that the compulsory retirement ages for ordinary people would be incrementally extended over the next five years so as to deal with the various issues related to China becoming an aging society.¹³ China's current compulsory retirement age for males is 60, the same as that for cadres at the vice-provincial and lower levels.¹⁴ In a country where party-state cadres enjoy many privileges, it is difficult to imagine that cadres would not be willing to extend their age of retirement and that they have to retire in a younger age than an ordinary person does.

An extension of cadre retirement age would help to overcome, or at least to reduce, the institutional inconsistencies created by Xi's constitutional amendment, but it would have a serious impact on the reorganization of the leadership at the 20th Party Congress. Although we are not sure what will happen, the reshuffling of the provincial leaderships in late 2021 does provide some clues.

Norms Maintained for Party Elites: Signals Revealed by the Reshuffling of Provincial Leaders

The substantive process of leadership reorganization in the run-up to the 20th Party Congress began with the nationwide reshuffling of the CCP provincial leaderships in late 2021. During the weeks from late October to mid-December 2021, ten provinces and four autonomous regions (hereafter, all fourteen units will be referred to as "provinces") completed a reshuffling, or *huanjie* (换届), of their Party Provincial Committees and Standing Committees. These provinces include (roughly in order of the date of the reshuffling): Xinjiang, Shanxi, Anhui, Henan, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Jiangsu, Fujian, Jiangxi, Hunan, Guangxi, Tibet, Yunnan, and Liaoning. The other seventeen provinces (including twelve provinces, one autonomous region, and four municipalities) will undergo a leadership reshuffling between April and June 2022.

According to recent practice in the past two decades, a newly "elected" Party Provincial Standing Committee will consist of thirteen members, including the committee secretary and two

¹² 新华网, "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.

¹³ 新华网, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-04/13/c_1127322308.htm.

¹⁴ 百度百科, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/法定退休年龄/9434819>.

deputy secretaries.¹⁵ As indicated earlier, the provincial party secretary and the provincial governor (who, as deputy party secretary, is always No. 2 on the Party Provincial Committee) are different from the eleven other members in terms of ranking within the party-state hierarchy. They are “full” provincial-level leaders, as opposed to the rankings of the eleven other members on the Party Provincial Standing Committee who are ranked at the vice-provincial level. Their respective retirement ages, as appeared in the recent reshufflings, reveal at least two norms that we may expect to also see in the leadership reorganization for the 20th Party Congress.

First, the norm of “eight down” has been strictly followed for the vice-provincial positions, including for most members of the Provincial Standing Committees.¹⁶ In fact, the norm for the provincial reshufflings corresponds precisely to the correct month and year for retirement. This means that the incumbent vice-provincial leaders who reach the age of 58 in the month of the reshuffling will have to retire, and, in general, those who are younger will be able to retain their positions on the Standing Committee.

In Shanxi province, for example, when the Provincial Standing Committee was reorganized in October 2021, Luo Qingyu (罗清宇, born October 1963) was not included on the new committee, but his former colleagues Shang Liguang (商黎光, born November 1963) and Chen Anli (陈安丽, born December 1963) remained in office. In Jiangsu province, a similar reorganization took place in November 2021, where a difference of three months in age led Fan Jinlong (樊金龙, born November 1963) to retire from but his former colleague Zhang Aijun (张爱军, born February 1964) to remain in the the Provincial Standing Committee. Incumbent members who were forced to retire included Zhuang Jiahua (庄稼汉, born October 1963) in Fujian (reorganized in November 2021), Li Xiaosan (李小三, born November 1963) in Yunnan (reorganized in December 2021), and all those whose ages exceeded the retirement age (except, of course, those in charge of party discipline inspection).¹⁷

The norm of “seven up,” however, was relaxed in the sense that an incumbent leader at the age of 57 or younger could be dropped from the new leadership. In Jiangsu province, Yang Yue (杨岳, born July 1968), who had once been the youngest among all vice-provincial cadres, lost his seat on the Jiangsu Party Standing Committee when the committee was reorganized in November 2021. In Tibet, two incumbent members on the CCP Tibet Autonomous Region Standing Committee who were born in 1965 and 1967, respectively, were dropped from the new committee. This is not an insignificant phenomenon since there were similar cases in Jiangxi, Guangxi, and Henan.

The above facts seemingly indicate that the forthcoming reorganization of the national leadership will also maintain the norm of “eight down,” though “eight” in the context of the national

¹⁵ Xinjiang, Tibet, and Qinghai, where there are either fourteen or fifteen members of the Provincial Standing Committee.

¹⁶ An exception exists, as explained in note 9 above.

¹⁷ Data cited in this section are from the author’s own database, and the bio information and the outcomes of the provincial leadership reorganization can be found in relevant news reports. To save space, the sources of the information are not listed here.

leadership means 68 years old, and being younger than 68 might not be a sufficient condition for incumbents to continue on in their positions. The Provincial Party Committee reshufflings in late 2021, which should be indicative of Xi's strength, portend a similar scenario occurring later at the national level.

A second signal might be indicative of the age limits for Provincial Party Secretary and Provincial Governor. The norm at the previous reshufflings was that a leader who reached the age of 63 would not be renominated. However, the latest round of provincial reshufflings revealed some flexibility, as several cadres stayed on in office even though they had already reached the age of 63. They include Wang Dongfeng (王东峰, born February 1958) in Hebei province and Shi Taifeng (石泰峰, born September 1956) in the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia.

In addition, the ages of a number of provincial party secretaries who stayed on in late 2021 were getting very close to the age limit of 63, including that of Yi Lianhong (易炼红, born September 1959) of Jiangxi, Lou Yangsheng (楼阳生, born October 1959) of Henan, and (with a post-election appointment) Ma Xingrui (马兴瑞, born October 1959) of Xinjiang.

All provincial party secretaries and governors will be appointed members of the forthcoming CCP Central Committee.¹⁸ In terms of age limits for full membership on the Central Committee, the precedent at the 19th Central Committee seems to be a birth year of 1954, or 63 years old,¹⁹ except for those entering the highest echelons of the leadership, namely, the Politburo, the Central Secretariat, the Central Military Commission, and, as of the following year, state national leaderships. So far, as revealed by the provincial leadership reshufflings of late 2021, it seems that this norm will be applied to the composition of the 20th Central Committee, which means that only those born in 1959 or later will be eligible in terms of age to become members of the new Central Committee,²⁰ and any of those who are older and who remain in their positions will likely join the higher echelons of the leadership.

Party Chief vs. Party Elites, Politics vs. Norms: Conclusion

It seems clear that changes in norms regarding the leadership reorganization in the run-up to the 20th Party Congress will be limited in scope but politically significant: the party chief may stay on in power without term limits, even perhaps for life, while the same norms in terms of age limits we have seen in recent decades will remain in effect. If there was any expectation that other high-ranking party-state leaders will also extend their tenures, the signals from the 2021 provincial leadership reshufflings suggest that this will not be the case. Thus the weak opposition by CCP elites to the 2018 PRC constitutional amendment, if there was any, seems now to have turned into discontent that has been expressed through praise of Deng Xiaoping and his “reform and opening” policies. That is to say, the institutional inconsistencies yielded between Xi

¹⁸ This has only been a norm during the post-Mao era, not during the Mao era.

¹⁹ It did not apply to those full members who were designated to become leaders above the provincial level.

²⁰ This is the case in terms of year rather than in terms of month, slightly different from practices in the provincial leadership reshufflings.

Jinping's 2018 constitutional amendment and the retirement age for CCP elites, especially between Xi and his Politburo colleagues, will play a role in the politics of the leadership reorganization at the 20th Party Congress.

That is why, to this author, since December 2021, following the first wave of provincial leadership reshuffling, voices of CCP elites emphasizing the legacy of Deng Xiaoping have been energized to an extent rarely seen in recent years. Due to these high-ranking cadres' disillusionment about the possibility of extending their own tenures and the fact that the above-mentioned institutional inconsistencies have become increasingly clear, elite resistance to Xi, as partially evidenced by elite praise of Deng's programs, seems to have gathered some new momentum.

Is it possible that such elite resistance will have a negative effect on the party chief's plans to assume a third term in office at the 20th Party Congress? Probably not. Among the many political advantages that Xi can mobilize to crack down on such elite resistance, anti-corruption purges seem to be the most effective weapon. As Table 1 summarizes, purges already seem to have become a new norm in political life in the Xi Jinping era. There is no reason to expect that in the critical months leading up to the 20th Party Congress that Xi will be any less determined or less aggressive in resorting to more purges than he has been in the past. In fact, through the anti-corruption campaign of the last ten years and the redistribution of elites up to the provincial leadership reshuffling of 2021–22, Xi has already brought new blood into the high echelons of CCP elites, as those with careers associated with former leaders have exited the political stage (with many of them already ineligible to attend the forthcoming Party Congress). In other words, the reorganization of the provincial leaderships has helped Xi vis-à-vis the institutional dilemma presented by the party elites, and it is expected that this logic will extend to the national-level leadership changes at the 20th Party Congress.

After all, the CCP system features by politics manipulating norms rather than norms governing politics, with the Party Congress representing institutional manipulation to meet the expectations of the incumbent leadership both in terms of platform and redistribution of power.²¹ The real challenge facing Xi seems to be to reach a consensus among the existing top leaders regarding the redistribution of power, that is, to overcome the institutional inconsistency between the party chief's quasi-life tenure and the future retirements of other Politburo members. At the time of this writing, a dividing up of the spoils within Zhongnanhai has not yet reached a decisive stage, but the situation will be highly dynamic in the months that follow until the eve of the 20th Party Congress. Only after all the deals have been made will the 20th Party Congress legitimize the political triumph of the winners.

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