

China must go beyond one-party system¹

In the early 1970s, the CIA published for its agents, a manual entitled: "The Art of China Watching". At that time, the CIA wrote, "by most standards, China is a peculiar country". Forty years later, China has not changed much; it remains difficult to grasp the moves and motives of a self-proclaimed 'more transparent' leadership.

For the watchers, the latest episode was enthralling to follow; I speak of the 'public' trial of Bo Xilai, a former Politburo member and Chongqing's Communist Party Secretary.

Bo's trial has been the object of immense speculation on the part of the 'watchers'. Will it demonstrate some progress by the new leadership led by President Xi Jinping in the Art of Transparency, or will it be an old style drama à la Mao Zedong, enacted by a State which has understood the importance of using the modern means of communication such as Internet and micro-blogging. Old wine in new cyber bottles!

John Garnaut, the author of *The Rise and Fall of the House of Bo* wrote: "It would be a suitably jaw-dropping postscript to one of the most remarkable political shows on earth if Bo Xilai turns out to be the man who saves the Chinese legal system."

But Bo has not really saved a system which has not witnessed major reforms and taken a step forward towards constitutionalism, the normal rule of law?

Probably not!

Garnaut explains that "as celebrity drama it doesn't get much more riveting than a fallen neo-Maoist, ...brawling with his former right hand man and his

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current wife over infidelity, insanity, defection, a \$3.2 million mansion in France, the murder of an Englishman and a 'princeling' child marooned in the United States."

There is no doubt that the Intermediate People's Court in Jinan in the eastern Shandong province witnessed a historical event. All the ingredients were there: the 'fallen' hero, brilliantly defending himself and denouncing his wife Gu Kailai, who had 'gone mad and always lies'; 'sex', with Bo stating that Gu was angry with him over an affair that the Red Prince had with another woman (Gu herself apparently had an affair with the Police Chief); but more interestingly, the relative transparency of the Court which regularly published transcripts of the proceedings. There was, of course, no way to check the veracity of the released documents as live transmission was not permitted by the Court (read the Party).

There is no doubt that the leadership has scripted the 'show' in detail during the previous week and the 'transparency' was a carefully calculated risk; knowing that it would be watched by hundreds of millions of avid spectators in the Mainland and abroad.

The Party had perhaps not planned such a spirited defence from the side of the fallen leader, but it remained within manageable limits for the new leadership. It has not always been so.

In his youth, President Xi Jinping must have heard (he was too young to remember it) about the fate of his father Xi Zhongxun, a vice-Premier, who during the Lushan Conference in July 1959 sided with Marshall Peng Dehuai, Mao's old companion (more or less his equal). Peng had the courage to present a report on what was happening in the countryside; he spoke on the (today) infamous Great Leap Forward. During his inspection tour, the Old Marshal had seen peasants dying by millions. He told Mao in no uncertain

terms that China was on the brink of the greatest man-made disaster; Mao never forgave Peng for having spoken against the Great Leap Forward and his lieutenant Xi Zhongxun also paid the hard price for having taken Peng's side.

In September 1962, Mao, who had remained in the background after the Lushan Conference, decided to come back on the front stage. During the annual Plenum, he reemphasized class struggle 'to prevent the emergence of revisionism'; denounced 'the members of the bourgeoisie right in the party ranks' and reasserted that the Great Leap Forward was the right thing for China. Peng and Xi Sr. were sent to the 'countryside', an euphemism for a purge at that time, without TV cameras, newspapers, micro-bloggers to report about their fate. Such were the ways of the Party during those days.

Today China has changed, though the manner in which decisions are taken by the inner core of the Party remains shrouded in absolute secrecy.

Although many 'watchers' believe that Bo went beyond the prepared script, Xinhua reiterated the Party's position: "During the trial, both prosecution and defense sides had opportunities to fully express their opinions. Also, the court released trial transcripts through microblog."

It reminded us that on April 10, 2012, Bo was suspended from the CPC Central Committee Political Bureau and the CPC Central Committee, on suspicion of serious discipline violations and the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the CPC filed a case for investigation.

The Party mouthpiece gave what will probably be the final verdict: "Although the country's legal system has a principle of tempering justice with mercy, a heavy sentence in line with the law should be handed to Bo, as he committed very serious crimes and refused to plead guilty. ...he is not subject to any terms of leniency by law." Thus the Party has decided.

But in China everything is linked and Bo's trial should be seen in the largest context of the continuous power struggle at the top of the Party. Soon after the trial ended, the Politburo announced the dates of the Third Plenum of the Central Committee in November, during which the 'deepening of the reforms' will be discussed. Bo Xilai who represented the 'leftist' wing of the Party, is now out of the game.

Observers believe that the Third Plenum should give some clear indications about the leadership's new economic agenda and if deeper 'political' reforms can be envisaged in the near future; they are badly needed to tackle the difficult challenges facing the country, such as corruption, polluted environment, regional economic imbalance or the restive ethnic provinces.

But by most standards, China remains a peculiar country and India is still far ahead in the field of rule of law and transparent governance, even if rampant corruption and other problems cannot be denied.

To become 'normal', China needs to go beyond a one party system.