

Corruption equals communism in China¹

Xi Jinping will soon be President of the Peoples' Republic of China. It is not an easy job. Xi, who was elected Party boss at the end of the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress in November 2012, will have to tackle myriad problems, the first being the corruption within the Communist Party.

As the 'advisory parliament', the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) started its deliberation in the Great Hall of the People, Xi appealed to the Communist delegates to fight this pervasive plague in the Middle Kingdom.

Since he assumed the top job in the Party (as well as the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission), it has been Xi's leitmotif.

On the occasion of the CPPCC's opening, Xi told the delegates, "The Communist Party would be able to mark its 100th birthday in eight years time, only if officials can learn from the selfless sages of the past."

Though the Communist Party is scheduled to celebrate its centenary a year before the end of the second of Xi's two five-year terms, will the Party still exist?

Today, it is the question that many China-watchers ask.

In a speech marking the 80th anniversary of the Central Party School, Xi asserted a few days earlier, "Only if the capabilities of all Party members unceasingly continue to strengthen, can the goal of 'two 100 years' and 'the dream' of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people be realised."

That is the theory. The reality is different.

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Take Ling Jihua, a former close collaborator of President Hu Jintao. He did not get a seat in the coveted Politburo in November because he tried to cover up his son's death in a Ferrari accident which occurred on March 18, 2012. Ling's son is said to have died in his car while having sex with two women.

The New York Times, quoting party insiders, reported: "Before dawn on March 18, a black Ferrari Spider speeding along Fourth Ring Road in Beijing ricocheted off a wall, struck a railing and cracked in two. Mr Ling was killed instantly and the two young Tibetan women with him were hospitalised with severe injuries. One died months later, and the other is recovering."

Ling made the mistake of trying to hide his son's accident. Though the families of the two women are said to have received hefty sums of money from China's largest State oil company "to make sure they shut up," unfortunately for Ling, microbloggers are extremely active in China these days. As a result the entire story went around the Net.

As The South China Morning Post put it, the accident was "an embarrassment for the ruling Communist Party, sensitive to perceptions that children of top party officials live rich, privileged lifestyles completely out of touch with the masses."

At the same time, there were rumors that Gu Liping, Ling's wife had benefited from Youth Business China, a well-endorsed charity that she was running.

As a result Ling Jihua was 'demoted' and appointed head of the United Front Work Department, a less influential position, though overlooking the 'minorities' and Taiwan affairs.

Ling did not remain in the purgatory for long; he has now been promoted as one of 10 Executive Chairmen of CPPCC; in a few days he will automatically become a Vice-Chairman of the august body.

Nobody will believe that Xi Jinping is serious about fighting corruption when officials like Ling are promoted, even if only to a honorific position.

It is not just the question of covering up his son's misdeeds, but the Party should also explain how the son of a close collaborator of the country's president acquired a Ferrari.

Ling has perhaps been a good 'fixer' for Hu Jintao, but the fact remains that a tainted official has now been relegated to a 'smaller' job, looking after the 'minorities', in particular, the Tibetans and the Uyghurs. It is worrying for the future of China, which could implode under the weight of its own contradictions.

Chen Ziming, an independent analyst, told The South China Morning Post: "Considering that Ling was an important member of Hu Jintao's camp, Hu may have pushed to retain his protégé's influence."

In fact, Ling's promotion in the CPPCC is probably part of a deal — Hu Jintao wanting to keep an eye on Tibet. He may give a free hand to Xi Jinping on other issues.

Another Tibet 'expert', Du Qinglin, Ling's predecessor at the United Front Department's has now become a member of the Secretariat of the CCP's Central Committee and Secretary General of the CPPCC's session.

In China, it seems rewarding to look after 'minorities'. Let us remember that the Dalai Lama's envoys had to resign after 10 years of unfruitful talks with the United Front.

Though some will argue that the post of CPPCC Vice-chairman is mostly honorific, it still carries the rank of Minister, with all perks and respect attached.

Xi Jinping may want to fight corruption, but can he resist the pressure of the apparatchiks who are all keen to reward their respective friends? In these circumstances, it is extremely doubtful if the Party can survive till its centenary.