



## The Bo Trial and Political Conflict in Chinese Society

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Six months have passed since the Xi Jinping regime swung into action in China in the spring of 2013. The biggest challenge for the regime during its first six months was to strengthen its power base. Considering the developments up to this point, it could be said that the Xi regime regarded the following as ways to reinforce its power base: (1) strengthening its centripetal force through stricter discipline inside the Communist Party of China (CPC) and



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cracking down on corruption; (2) stabilizing the economy through sound economic management and the presentation of reform plans; and (3) developing diplomatic ties with Sino-U.S. relations as the centerpiece.

The trial of Bo Xilai, a former member of China's Politburo who lost his position in the spring of 2012, symbolized the tightening of political control. Bribe-taking, embezzlement, and the abuse of power were the crimes Bo was alleged to have committed over the past twelve years or so. Bo's alleged interference with a criminal investigation into a murder case involving his wife and her British business partner was considered to be an abuse of power.

In this exceptional case, the written proceedings of the court session, which went

on for five days from August 22–26, 2013, were broadcast on Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, almost on a real-time basis. The Chinese authorities probably wanted to show the transparency and fairness of this trial.

Degrading Bo's image by exposing his corrupt lifestyle appeared to be another aim of broadcasting the trial on Weibo. Most likely the Chinese authorities chose the bailiffs—two big men around 2 meters tall who stood on both sides of the defendant—to prevent people from getting the impression that Bo, who is more than 180 centimeters tall himself, was flanked by his followers.

Why is Chinese President Xi Jinping so much on guard against Bo? The reason is nothing less than the fact that Bo continues to be very popular among ordinary citizens and left-wing scholars. People in China who criticize the social contradictions caused by the reform and opening policies remain strong supporters of policies Bo advanced as the former leader of Chongqing, such as building housing for low-income earners and the “Singing Red and Striking Black” campaign, that is the campaign for singing revolutionary songs and smashing organized crime groups.

Bo denied all criminal charges that were brought against him, and took full advantage of the courtroom as his battleground. He seemed to have learned from the case of his late father, former vice premier Bo Yibo, who stood firm against persecution in the Mao Zedong–led Cultural Revolution era and had his name cleared in the subsequent period. As a result, although Bo was sentenced to life imprisonment, his image as the symbol of leftists became even stronger, and the serious division within the Communist Party was exposed.

Needless to say, the Xi Jinping regime is not promoting all-out reform. It maintains a tight grip on ideas. The Propaganda Department of the CPC, in charge of party theories, education, and media, has instructed the party cadres to beware of concepts such as “constitutional government” and “civil society”, which originate in the west. Chinese authorities continue to detain campaigners for democracy who are asking the government to take such steps as disclosing the assets owned by CPC executives.

Nonetheless, as far as the Chinese economy is concerned, the Xi Jinping regime has taken a clear position of promoting reforms and openness. The regime set up the experimental Shanghai Free

Trade Zone, and relaxed foreign capital regulations in the Zone for the service, finance, and other industries at the end of September 2013. In an effort to address concerns about shadow banking, or financial transactions other than ordinary bank loans, and the expansion of local government debt, the regime is also studying the idea of substantially reducing the authority given to local governments in a reform plan it will be submitting to the Third Plenary Session of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CPC in November 2013.

Some consider these “politically hard” and “economically soft” practices of the Xi Jinping regime as being similar to what the late Deng Xiaoping did. However, Deng fought tooth and nail against criticism of his reform and opening policies, saying that “leftists are more dangerous,” though he suppressed political liberalization at the same time. The situation is different now. Leftist criticism against reform is increasing due to the growing contradictions in society.

The trial of Bo Xilai demonstrated the fact that the present Chinese government cannot solve this fundamental problem. At the end of the day, Xi Jinping can't prevent leftists from increasing their forces unless he carries out political reforms that will set the unfair and unequal Chinese society straight.

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