

New leaders unlikely to be bold reformers

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The Australian
16 November 2012
P. 12

We finally know the names of the seven men who will lead China for the next five to 10 years. As a group they stand out as a balance of political interests, as was to be expected, but markedly older and more conservative than anyone anticipating bold reform was hoping for.

Besides the two top leaders, 59-year-old Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, 57, the rest of the seven-member, all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee are men born in the 1940s. Xi, in his first speech as Communist Party General Secretary, came across as outright boyish in comparison to his PSC colleagues who were lined up beside him.

Not only will Xi and Li have to build consensus among men who are their elders, the remaining five do not stand out as bold reformers. Three of them, like Xi, are called "princelings" in Chinese political jargon because they are the sons of former revolutionary Communist leaders. Princeling families have amassed fortunes during the past three decades using their privileged position in society.

Three PSC members are men who owe their allegiance directly to 86-year-old Jiang Zemin, the former leader who stepped down 10 years ago. They represent continuity, which is paramount for Communist Party elders such as Jiang. But political analysts and informed Chinese citizens today question, whether Xi will muster the political will within this group to push through far-reaching reform policies, the kind that would genuinely address China's formidable domestic challenges, corruption and social injustice among them.

Xi spoke yesterday of the need to combat corruption, but this is not new for a Chinese leader. More than a decade ago Jiang warned that corruption threatened the future of the party.

Ordinary Chinese have grown so cynical about the government's anti-corruption campaigns, which often end with a few high officials being fired and imprisoned, that they shrug them off with a Chinese proverb: "Kill the chicken to scare the monkeys."

The man who has been put in charge of fighting corruption is Wang Qishan, a no-nonsense economist known as an effective crisis manager.

He was appointed acting mayor of Beijing in 2003 when severe acute respiratory syndrome struck the capital. Though Wang is probably the best suited of the seven for the job of fighting corruption, at least two influential Chinese economists already privately lamented yesterday that Wang was not made responsible for the economy. (The job of overseeing the economy fell to Premier Li, who holds a doctorate in economics.)

Those who want to see China move swiftly ahead with curtailing the dominance of the state enterprises, allowing more space for private enterprise and fixing the fiscal system regard Wang as the most competent senior economic leader.

As for what kind of specific policies these seven men are likely to implement, unfortunately, we are relatively clueless. For all the dramatic changes in China across the past three decades -- changes that have led to stunning economic growth and a more open, multifaceted society -- the views of the leaders at the pinnacle of power remain obscure.

These men do share a vision, one of China remaining stable and continuing to grow stronger, economically as well as politically and militarily. But which of the many available paths China could take for its rise to continue will be the focus of intense discussions within the PSC.

Another factor that does not bode well for reform is the fact Xi and Li, as PSC members for the past five years, already have been part of the consensus-driven decision-making processes. In other words, they have endorsed present policies and are in a sense wedded to those policies. Even if Xi wanted to make bold decisions, he presumably would be constrained by his fellow committee members.

Finally, in the past, new leaders have waited until the so-called "Third Plenum" meeting of the Central Committee, which is held about one year after the party congress at which they were appointed, to announce a new agenda. So it would be premature to expect dramatic turnarounds.

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