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New Regulations Further Politicise China's Cadre Corps

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On 20 September 2022, the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) published new regulations on the promotion and demotion of leading party cadres. The regulations replace earlier, provisional regulations of 2015, and differ from these especially in one crucial respect: Articles 5 and 6 of the 2015 regulations that stipulated the mandatory retirement ages and term limits for the appointment of leading cadres have been dropped in the new regulations.¹ Xi Jinping had already arranged for lifting the number of terms (originally set at two) for himself as president at the 2018 National People's Congress. The 2022 regulations have now formalised and generalised this practice with potentially major implications for the careers of all leading cadres across China.

Most immediately, at the 20th Party Congress that starts on 16 October the new regulations have paved the way for the reappointment of members of the Central Committee and the Politburo beyond their retirement age of 68, or beyond two terms in office. This might be especially relevant for those who have proven to be personally loyal and useful to Xi even though they were originally beholden to either Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao, Xi's predecessors as general party secretary. Possible examples include propaganda and ideology czar Wang Huning (who turned 68 on 6 October), Premier Li Keqiang (though he has repeatedly said that he will retire and reappointing him would be unconstitutional) and economy point man Liu He.

¹ Zhongban yinfa, "Tuijin lingdao ganbu neng shang neng xia guiding" (The General Office of Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued "Promoting the regulations of the promotion and demotion of leading cadres), 20 September 2022, online at <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0920/c117092-32529723.html>, accessed 28 September 2022; Zhonggong zhongyang bangongting yinfa, "Tuijin lingdao ganbu neng shang neng xia ruigan guiding (shixing) (The General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issued "Several regulations on promoting the promotion and demotion of leading cadres [trial]), 28 July 2015, online at http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2015-07/28/content_2904339.htm, accessed 28 September 2022.

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The regulations on CPC leading cadres have laid down not only strict, but also highly general criteria for promotion and demotion that stress ideological conformity, belief in the socialist system and leadership of the Party, and conformity to the centre's decisions and arrangements. Moreover, the regulations mainly address the demotion of cadres rather than their promotion. Based on these regulations, the party can remove or transfer a cadre who underperforms or lacks diligence and personal integrity.

In part, the regulations on promotion and demotion of leading cadres serve as a more normalised and procedural way to enforce allegiance and compliance among the CPC's leading cadres. This in itself is a welcome adjunct to the blunt force of the anti-corruption campaign that has been Xi's weapon of choice in dealing with his opponents. However, the other side of the coin is that these procedures roll back changes to the cadre management system that were put in motion in the 1990s and 2000s. Recruitment, training and management of leading cadres at that time emphasised formal educational qualifications, a level playing field, professional expertise and formal criteria and transparent procedures for appointment and performance evaluation.

The 2022 regulations seek to strengthen the political and ideological fortitude and discipline of leading cadres across the country, and especially their adherence to Xi Jinping Thought, in order to create "a political environment in which the capable are promoted, the superior are rewarded, the mediocre are demoted and the inferior are eliminated" (Article 2). In Article 5, the regulations list no less than 15 grounds for demotion and dismissal. These grounds emphasise political loyalty, and especially the full implementation of the party centre's decisions. In addition, the Party may remove someone who does not believe in the Party's leadership and ideological concepts, such as socialism with Chinese characteristics or the people-centred development approach. Other grounds for removal from the current post relate to a cadre's working capacity, spirit, work style and moral state, and having family members who have emigrated abroad or run their own businesses. Only one point under Article 5 (no. 13) concerns falling short on either the annual formal, points-based evaluation or the "democratic" assessment put in place under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao to reduce the ideological and personal arbitrariness of the cadre management system.

The regulations stipulate that party committees at all levels together with their organisation department are responsible for the "organisational adjustment" of cadres (Article 6). An organisation department should review and oversee cadre performance in daily work and initiate adjustment procedures when necessary, and submit proposals for cadre adjustment for approval to the party committee. Thereafter, the party committee will hold collective meetings and seek comments from the cadre's organisation before making the adjustment decision. As the last step, either the organisation department or the party committee will talk with the adjusted cadre and announce the decision.

Most of the grounds and procedures for "adjustment" give little detail; the regulations are likely to become an important tool for party leaders to further tighten their political control over leading cadres. For example, at the upcoming party congress, Xi Jinping can drop someone from the Politburo Standing Committee even if he is below 68 years of age. These new regulations may also work at lower levels for a party leader against someone from a rival faction.

The regulations are part of a general politicisation of the Party and its cadre corps; the 2022 version especially goes much farther in emphasising ideological conformity and loyalty than other regulations on cadre management that have been issued under Xi. The power of the central leadership and especially of Xi Jinping himself is felt much more directly and uniformly

across the country, while the room for local improvisation and policy adjustment continues to shrink. The CPC's organisation has been expanded and tightened. Emphasising strict ideological conformity, loyalty and obedience over critical thinking and innovation, party members and cadres are educated, trained, disciplined, and if needed, punished and purged, to ensure full uniformity to the party centre's demands.

The principle of “strictly governing the party” (*cong yan zhi dang*, 从严治党) seeks to strengthen the political function of party branches and develop their role of a “battle fortress” (*zhandou baolei*, 战斗堡垒), a Leninist term that refers less to violent military campaigns than to the constant need for mobilisation, action and discipline. The course content at party schools has shifted back from professional skills and knowledge to political study and ideology. Education and training now first and foremost aspire to mould cadres into faithful servants of the centre's wishes. In a 2015 speech at the National Party School Work Conference, for instance, Xi Jinping sharply criticised the state of affairs at party schools. Loyalty to the centre was lax and inconsistent with the Party's need to counter hostile forces at home and abroad, Xi said. People at party schools spread Western capitalist values and criticise the Party, confusing “exploratory academic issues” with “serious political issues” and giving the impression to “people with ulterior motives” that there are different voices within the CPC.²

The repoliticisation of China's cadre corps is different from the Maoist emphasis on “redness” rather than “expertise” during the Cultural Revolution. We are not witnessing a return to mass mobilisation and revolutionary fervour that saw the Party's organisational bureaucratisation and political revisionism as the problem standing in the way of Mao's personal, millenarian vision. Quite the opposite, Xi has returned to the original Leninist principles of hierarchy, discipline, secrecy, unity and absolute correctness of the central leadership's political line.

In a unified communist party, the Party always trumps the individual, no matter how powerful he or she might be. Leninist systems are fundamentally different from personal dictatorships: the charisma of leadership resides not in the individual leader but in the Party's organisation. The Party's top leader cannot rule without the party organisation and elite united around him.

However, there is a fundamental contradiction here. Leninist secrecy and the concentration of power inevitably lead to personalistic power abuse and deterioration of Leninism's own organisational norms. Under Xi, the Party has been rebuilt and strengthened on the basis of strict Leninist principles. This has brought with it an ever-narrowing concentration of power in the hands of a small elite and ultimately just one man who, as the “core” of the party leadership, rules with an iron fist, turning against anybody who can be suspected of dissent, criticism or worse, but never against the Party itself. With the elimination of term and age limits, Xi's personalistic power has dealt the final blow to the regularised political competition and succession of the reform era. However, since coming to power Xi has also strengthened the organisation and ideology of the Party in such a way that in his “New Era” it will be well-poised to survive the future power struggles that will inevitably ensue when he finally leaves the stage.

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² Xi Jinping, “Zai quanguo dangxiao gongzuo huiyishangde jianghua” (Speech at the national conference of party schools), 11 December 2015, *Qiushi*, 1 May 2016, online at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0501/c64094-28317481.html>, accessed 30 September 2022.

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