

Leader for life: Xi Jinping strengthens hold on power as China Communist Party ends term limits

On Sunday, the China's Communist Party Central Committee proposed to amend China's Constitution to remove the two-term limit for Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the People's Republic. The amendment is sure to be approved when the National People's Congress convenes for its annual session on March 5. The Constitution can be amended by a two-thirds vote of the nearly 3,000 members of the Congress.

The National People's Congress is dominated by the Communist Party and is widely viewed as a rubber-stamp body. The success of the proposed amendment is all but assured. If passed, it will allow Chinese President Xi Jinping to stay in office indefinitely.

In the absence of a Constitutional amendment, Xi would have to step down from the Presidency in 2023. He was first elected in 2013 by a vote of 2,952-1, and is certain to be reelected this year to a second five year term. Speculation is that the one vote against Xi Jinping in 2013's secret ballot was... Xi Jinping himself. He may have cast the vote as a form of democratic window-dressing.

In addition to the office of President, Xi also holds the posts of General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, neither of which carries any term limit. That puts him in charge of the state, the Party, and the army, potentially in perpetuity. In December, the national armed police were put under the Central Military Commission as well. Formally as well as informally, Xi is set to hold all the major reins of power in China for as long as he chooses.

The China difference?

In recent years, China has often been held up as a successful model of authoritarian government, non-democratic but nonetheless meritocratic and effective. The major foundations of China's authoritarian meritocracy were supposedly its traditions of collective leadership and rotation in power. These helped China avoid the pitfalls of strongman rule that are so common in other communist and post-communist societies.

There have always been doubts about whether or not that consensus-driven model would outlive China's first post-Mao leader, Deng Xiaoping. After the death of Communist China's founding father Mao Zedong in 1976, there was a tussle for power with massive implications for the future direction of China. On one side were the so-called Gang of Four (led by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing), who planned to continue Mao's legacy. Opposing them were a group of reformers organized around Mao's junior contemporary, sometimes partner, and frequent competitor Deng Xiaoping.

Deng ultimately won out and rose to the top, but he did not monopolize power in the way Mao had. Instead Deng laid the foundations for the ensuing three decades of Communist Party rule by elite consensus. China's next two leaders were both recruited and mentored directly by Deng: Jiang Zemin (President 1993-2003) and Hu Jintao (2003-2013). Though Deng died in 1997, the people he put in place ruled China, largely according to his plan, until the elevation of Xi Jinping in 2013.

Xi is China's first true post-Deng leader. He has consolidated more power under his direct personal command than any previous leader since Mao, and he has used his popular anti-corruption campaign to jail an unprecedented number of potential opponents and rivals. Where China's authoritarian politics once looked very different from those of other strongman dictatorships, it now seems to be reverting to form.

Just 64 years old and with a legal route to remaining President for life, it now seems certain that Xi will retain not just an informal grip on power, but a monopoly of China's leadership for a generation or more. That may ensure several decades of relative stability and competent government. But personal rule ultimately weakens a political system, no matter how effective the personal ruler. Xi may realize his Chinese Dream of a

prosperous and powerful country, but at the cost of hollowing out its political system.

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