China’s constitutional amendments are all about the Party, not the President

It’s official. As of Sunday evening China time, “Xi Jinping Thought” has been voted into the Chinese Constitution, and Xi himself can stay on as president for as long as he likes. Of course, he can also keep his day job as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and his night job as the Chairman of the Central Military Commission, neither of which has a term limit. One man, three jobs, no opposition.

Cue international headlines screaming Dictator for Life, Emperor Xi, and China’s New Mao, as if China had been a vibrant liberal democracy and Xi had suddenly staged a coup. Perhaps the global commentariat had come to believe their own hoopla about Xi standing up for the liberal world order in his 2017 Davos address at the World Economic Forum (WEF). The reality is that China was, is, and will remain for the foreseeable future a one-party state.

That “foreseeable” future will last at least until the 2021 centenary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) — and probably much longer. Xi is apparently aiming for the 2049 centenary of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) itself. Not that Xi will be in charge by that point (though, at 96 years old, he could be). He’ll pass the baton at some point. Xi isn’t so much solidifying One Man Rule as he is solidifying One Party Rule, with himself at the head of the Party.

It may not seem like the Party needs the help, but Xi is taking no chances. The revised Constitution will flatly state that “the leadership of the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The “structure of the state” is also being changed to further embed the CPC into state organs, specifically national and local supervisory commissions charged with fighting corruption and other
personnel matters. It’s not just Xi who’s staying at the helm. It’s the Party itself.

Why bother?

Why bother to bolster the Party’s role now? After seven decades of Communist Party rule, China’s one-party state shows no signs of cracking. But it is at danger of becoming less relevant. Aside from a few activists, ordinary people do not resist Party rule — but they do ridicule it. China’s Internet censorship machine is less focused on crushing resistance than on quashing humor.

That’s an alarming shift for a Communist Party elite that desperately wants to be taken seriously. Young people still join the Party — college students in particular — but they’re often more interested in boosting their resumes than in governing the country. From a practical standpoint, Party membership is little more than an entry ticket to a boring career in public administration.

For the Civil War generation of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, the Party was everything. For their “princeling” children (like Xi), Party leadership was the path to power and riches. But for China’s gen-Xers and millennials, the Party is in danger of being written off as just another corrupt old boys’ club. In their imagination, Xi has succeeded in “making China great again,” but that hasn’t done much to make the Party cool again.

These constitutional changes won’t make the Party any cooler. But they will cement the Party’s lock on the highest levels of government, preventing anyone from using the government as an alternative power base from which to challenge Xi and his associates. Xi was never expected to give up leadership of the Party at the end of his first two terms in 2022. By keeping the presidency as well, Xi precludes the possibility of political challenges for at least another decade.
What “Xi Jinping Thought” really stands for is Party first, no more and no less. That Xi himself intends to continue representing the CPC as president of the country doesn’t change that. What it does do is reduce the possibility that the Party will split into competing factions in the 2020s.

Xi’s road to power was paved over the destruction of the Bo Xilai faction in 2012. Bo, once the charismatic Party Secretary of Chongqing in southwestern China, is now in prison. Many of the tigers in Xi’s “tigers and flies” anti-corruption campaign were formerly allies of Bo and members of his competing faction. Xi seems keen to ensure the CPC becomes a unified organization with no factions at all.

By all accounts, China’s rising middle class has bought into Xi’s Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, but it is not at all clear that they have bought into his Party Dream of reinvigorated Communist Party oversight of all aspects of Chinese life. Initial public reaction to the announcement of the constitutional amendments seems to have been overwhelmingly negative. In response, official coverage was rapidly downgraded from the tone of triumphant announcements to that of technical notices — and of course critical comments were banned.

China is not a dictatorship, but it is a one-party state. While party factions were no substitute for true democratic elections, they do inject some degree of competition (and even choice) into Chinese politics. As Xi pushes to unify the Party behind his own agenda, he risks alienating everyone who doesn’t find a place in that agenda. Without any organized opponents, Xi may ultimately find himself heading a faction of one. That may stabilize Chinese politics through the 2021 centenary of the CPC. What it will mean for the 2049 centenary of the PRC is anyone’s guess.

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