

Senior Chinese official detained over spy allegations

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In another sign of political divisions inside the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), an aide to a vice minister of the Ministry of State Security has reportedly been detained as a spy for the CIA.

Details of the detention remain scanty. The man's identity is unknown and he was detained sometime between January and March. The case was only recently exposed in a Chinese-language journal in New York, probably to undermine Zhou Yongkang—the man in charge of state security in the CCP's top body—the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee.

Unnamed Chinese officials told Reuters on June 1 that the aide had provided “political, economic and strategic intelligence” to the CIA in return for hundreds of thousands of dollars. The sources said that the “destruction has been massive” to Chinese interests, as the man had provided information on China's international intelligence networks and secret diplomatic negotiations.

So far the Chinese and US governments have played down the spy case which is the most serious espionage scandal since 1985, when Chinese intelligence official Yu Qiangshen defected to the US and exposed a Chinese double agent inside the CIA.

The detained man was apparently a senior official—a secretary to former vice minister Gao Yichen, who left his post in March. Gao's responsibilities included the deputy directorship of a group responsible for “maintaining stability.” This includes responsibility for the 610 Office, which is notorious for its repression of the banned Falun Gong movement.

Zhou heads the 610 Office, which is closely identified with former President Jiang Zemin's policy of “nipping in the bud” any opposition. Zhou is a key representative of Jiang's so-called Shanghai gang faction within the CCP leadership. Any scandal involving state security, especially the 610 Office, will also tarnish Zhou's standing. He is already under fire for supporting sacked Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai.

The CCP's dominant Communist Youth League faction headed by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao exploited a corruption scandal to oust Bo last March, in order to consolidate its position prior to the party congress later this year. At the congress, seven of the nine Politburo Standing Committee members will retire, with only Wen's likely successor, Vice Premier Li Keqiang, and Vice President Xi Jinping remaining.

Bo had been a likely candidate to fill one of the vacant positions. According to the British-based *Sunday Times*, the spy scandal has now affected the prospects of “another candidate for the committee, the Shanghai party leader, Yu Zhengsheng.” Yu is also connected to Jiang's Shanghai gang.

The leaked details of the alleged spy comes after the strange case of the blind dissident lawyer Chen Guangcheng who fled to the US embassy in Beijing in April. How a blind man was able to escape house arrest, let alone travel the hundreds of kilometres to Beijing undetected, remains unanswered. What is clear, however, is that Chen's high-profile escape was an acute embarrassment to the regime, especially the security forces headed by Zhou.

In another move that weakens Zhou's position, the Guangdong party leadership headed by Wang Yang issued a directive on Monday to 21 municipalities, forcing the secretaries of the local CCP political and legal affairs committee to quit their posts as local police chief. Previously the secretary automatically became the local police chief. If this directive becomes national policy, it would seriously undermine the influence of Zhou, who controlled local police forces through these secretaries. Wang is an ally of Hu and Wen.

The factional struggle inside the CCP is being driven by the deepening global economic crisis and signs of emerging working-class unrest in China since late last year. Zhou was directly responsible for the wave of state repression that followed online appeals last year for a "Jasmine Revolution" in China in line with the political upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt.

Hu and Wen, however, appear to have drawn the conclusion that police-state measures are not enough to deal with potential unrest—new political mechanisms had to be developed to widen the party's base of support. Their faction has very cautiously promoted "democratic reform" as a means of appealing to sections of the middle class.

When announcing Bo's removal in March, Wen declared that "the demand for democracy by the Arab people must be respected and truly responded to." He warned that without "political reform" China would be unable to deal with mounting social tensions, and there could be a "repeat of a historic tragedy" like the upheavals during Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.

Wen's faction has used the Bo scandal and the illegal house arrest of the activist Chen to highlight the lawlessness of the state security apparatus and to promote calls for "the rule of law." This campaign has nothing to do with protecting the basic democratic rights of the working people, but is to justify legal protection for private property and promote a vast expansion of the role of private capital in the Chinese economy.

The new privatisations of remaining state-controlled sectors of the economy to foreign investors is to

appease the US and other Western powers that have criticised China's "state-led" capitalist policy and its protection of state-owned "national champions." Bo represented a rival faction of the CCP that advocated a strengthening of the state-controlled monopolies, on which its power and wealth rested.

All of the CCP factions are deeply hostile to the working class. If a widespread movement of workers erupted in opposition to destruction of jobs and living standards, these factions would not hesitate to come together and deploy the army and security forces to suppress the challenge to the regime.

The latest spy scandal provides another glimpse into the factional power struggle going on behind the scenes in the lead up to the 18th CCP congress. This infighting could well erupt to the surface of political life in the coming months, leading to even greater instability.



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