

Chinese court rejects Bo Xilai's appeal

Peter Symonds
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A Chinese court last Friday dismissed an appeal by former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo member Bo Xilai, upholding the life sentence handed down last month over charges of corruption and abuse of power.

After a five-day trial in August, Bo was found guilty of taking more than 20 million yuan (\$3.3 million) in bribes and hindering the investigation into the murder of a British business associate, Neil Heywood. Bo's wife, Gu Kailai, was convicted of Heywood's murder last year and received a suspended death sentence. Bo has maintained his innocence.

Unlike the original trial, during which details of proceedings were published, the appeal in the Shandong Higher People's Court was held behind closed doors, amid tight security. The court issued a brief statement rejecting the appeal. Bo could lodge a complaint in China's Supreme Court, but it is highly unlikely that the top court would alter the ruling.

The high-profile trial was bound up with sharp political divisions within the CCP bureaucracy. Bo was not only a member of the 25-member Politburo, but up until last year was considered a likely candidate for appointment to the CCP's top decision making body—the Politburo Standing Committee—during the leadership change last November.

Bo disappeared from public view in March last year after he was publicly criticised by former Premier Wen Jiabao, who warned that Bo's populist rhetoric could produce a repetition of the upheavals of Mao Zedong's so-called Cultural Revolution. The World Bank had just released a report, *China 2030*, produced in conjunction with China's State Council headed by Wen and the current premier Li Keqiang, which outlined a far reaching restructuring program to open up new areas of the economy to foreign investment. The proposed changes included the dismantling of "state monopolies" in key strategic and base industries.

Bo was closely associated with layers of the CCP bureaucracy whose wealth and privileges were bound up with large state-owned enterprises. He was not in any sense an opponent of pro-market restructuring, but advocated a different economic strategy, aimed at enabling Chinese corporations to compete with their global rivals in international markets.

Bo became the focus of various "New Left" and neo-Maoist political tendencies that falsely promoted his fostering of state-owned enterprises, along with his limited social reforms that were dressed up with the singing of Mao-era "revolutionary" songs, as socialism.

As economic growth slowed, the differences within the CCP bureaucracy sharpened. Bo and his supporters became a political obstacle to the further opening of China to foreign investors. He was removed as party secretary in the south-western city of Chongqing, stripped of his positions within the CCP, then expelled from the party just prior to last year's CCP congress that installed the new leadership of President Xi Jinping and Premier Li.

The charges against Bo and the outcome of his trial were orchestrated at the top levels of the party. The focus of the charges was kept narrow so as to ensure that broader issues of corruption, which is rampant inside every level of the state apparatus, were not opened up. The glaring gulf between the economic hardships facing the working class and the extraordinary wealth and privileges of country's political and corporate elites is a potentially explosive issue.

Not accidentally, the court's rejection of Bo's appeal comes ahead of next month's plenum of the CCP Central Committee, at which the new leadership's agenda of so-called economic reforms will be discussed. On Saturday, the state-owned media highlighted the comments of Yu Zhengsheng, the fourth ranking member of the Politburo Standing

Committee, who declared: “The reforms this time will be broad, with major strength, and will be unprecedented. Inevitably they will strongly push forward profound transformations in the economy, society and other spheres.”

The plenum is being closely watched by economic analysts and foreign investors both as an indication of growth prospects for the world’s second largest economy, and in anticipation of lucrative new business opportunities. Economic growth has slowed markedly, from an average of 10.5 percent over the past decade to a projected 7.5 percent this year.

Writing in the *Financial Times*, Cornell University professor Eswar Prasad warned: “China does not have the luxury to postpone all reforms until the conditions are ripe. Its leadership may have to take greater risks to advance much-needed steps.” He also called on critics to appreciate that in implementing pro-market restructuring, Beijing could confront opposition and resistance.

Prasad praised the new leadership’s efforts to disguise its socially regressive plans. “This year, Beijing announced a plan to reduce inequality,” he explained. “This would be a dubious policy goal if it emphasised redistributive policies. In fact, the policies are exactly the reforms needed—financial market liberalisation, reform of state-owned enterprises and freer labour mobility.” In other words, in the guise of narrowing the gulf between rich and poor, the CCP plans a restructuring that will lead to massive job losses in the state sector and a further undermining of job security across the economy.

The government has already taken the first tentative steps towards loosening restrictions on financial markets. Earlier this month, the China (Shanghai) Pilot Free Trade Zone was opened as a testing ground for the convertibility of the yuan, foreign investment in services, and freer capital markets. Over the weekend, Beijing announced a “loan prime rate” that will be used as a new benchmark for the easing of restrictions on interest rates.

Promises that “unprecedented” reforms will be developed at next month’s CCP central committee plenum, the third held under the leadership of President Xi, has drawn comparisons with the “free market” measures unleashed in the aftermath of the third plenum of the party’s eleventh central committee in

1978, which saw Deng Xiaoping unveil his plans for capitalist restoration. “Thirty-five years after the Communist Party of China lifted the country out of 10 years of chaos and started economic reform and opening up, analysts say the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC has the potential to be a landmark event,” Xinhua, the Chinese news agency, declared on October 9.

The new leadership was determined to politically bury Bo prior to embarking on its new round of pro-market restructuring. Heavy security around the Shandong Higher People’s Court ensured that there would be no protests by his supporters. Media coverage was limited. A *Time* article commented: “As the hours to the decision on the Friday appeal ticked down, Bo’s fate was relegated to non-news status on Chinese state-linked media websites, which ran with homepage stories on strengthening ties between China and the EU and the impending departure of a giant inflatable duck from a Beijing lake, among other articles.”



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