

China's former security chief sentenced to life in prison

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Zhou Yongkang, China's former security chief and Politburo Standing Committee member, received a life sentence on corruption charges from a Chinese court on Thursday. Now 72 and officially retired since 2012, Zhou stated that he did not plan to appeal.

Zhou was convicted on charges of bribery, abuse of power and disclosure of state secrets. Following the verdict, he was shown on state television saying: "I acknowledge the fact that I have broken the law and committed crimes, and have caused losses to the party's work. I, once again, plead guilty, and I repent."

Zhou was found guilty of taking upward of 2.1 billion yuan (\$338 million) in bribes and other illegal deals, either for himself or arranging them for various business associates, including his wife and son. He was also found guilty of deliberately passing confidential state documents to Cao Yongzheng, a wealthy Chinese businessman who claimed to be able to see the future. Cao cultivated ties with powerful officials like Zhou and used these connections to make his fortune.

Zhou was sentenced to four years' imprisonment for revealing state secrets, seven years for abuse of power, and life behind bars for corruption. Zhou is the highest-ranking Chinese Communist Party (CCP) official to be jailed since the Gang of Four was arrested in 1976 and charged with treason. The Politburo Standing Committee—currently consisting of just seven members—is the CCP's top decision-making body.

Zhou was arrested and purged from the CCP in December before being formally indicted in April. His trial was held in the city of Tianjin near Beijing. Before his arrest, several senior government officials and businessmen, many with ties to Zhou, were also arrested and jailed in what President Xi Jinping claims to be an anti-corruption campaign.

Zhou and others may well have been involved in

corruption, like much of the CCP leadership and state bureaucracy. However, the anti-corruption campaign has the character of a political purge of Xi's rivals. Zhou's trial and imprisonment was preceded by that of Bo Xilai, a one-time Politburo member, the former Chongqing party boss and ally of Zhou.

Zhou's trial was conducted entirely in secret, with the outcome predetermined. Despite the fact that the Chinese Supreme Court said in March that trials of top officials or "tigers" would be open, the Chinese bureaucracy claimed that because the court hearing involved secret documents, the proceedings could not be made public. In reality, the government feared Zhou could reveal politically embarrassing information or other damaging details that would have harmed the credibility of Xi's government.

"Zhou is too important, he was involved in too many things the public shouldn't know about," said Zhang Ming, a professor at the School of International Studies at Beijing's Renmin University of China. Beijing clearly feared that Zhou would follow in the footsteps of Bo, who challenged the charges against him in a trial that was partially open to the public in August 2013.

Zhou, along with Bo, Ling Jihua, and Xu Caihou, had been dubbed the "New Gang of Four" in the Chinese media. Ling was the chief aide to former President Hu Jintao and is currently under investigation. Xu, formerly the vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission, the military's top decision-making body, had been awaiting trial but died of bladder cancer in March.

Since coming to power in 2012, Xi has moved against political opponents who not only represent a threat to his hold on power but resisted plans to further open up China's economy to foreign capitalism. Zhou and Bo were not in any sense opposed to capitalist restoration

but sought to defend China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs), on which their power and wealth was based. They argued for the protection of the largest SOEs so as to transform them into "national champions" that could compete with transnational corporations.

Xi and Premier Li Keqiang, however, have pushed for far-reaching pro-market reforms that would further open up the Chinese economy, including areas currently dominated by large SOEs. Each "tiger" jailed in the anti-corruption drive is a signal to international finance capital that the roadblocks to ongoing privatization are being torn down.

Foreign investors have long pushed for the "rule of law" as a means of safeguarding their investments from interference from the Chinese bureaucracy. Accordingly, the anti-corruption campaign is also designed to ensure foreign capital that the CCP regime will provide an even more business-friendly environment.

As part of this overall privatization push, the government began an inspection of 26 SOEs from late February to early May. As a result, about 20 officials came under investigation or were arrested for graft. The targeted companies were in the auto, oil, telecommunication and energy sectors, where Zhou or his allies held considerable influence. Many of these officials also had close ties to former Chinese leader Jiang Zemin, who protected the top 100 SOEs from privatization while president from 1989 to 2002.

In particular, three officials came under investigation from the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) where Zhou became general manager in 2006. Former CNPC chairman Jiang Jiemin was also expelled from the CCP at the party's October 2014 plenum and has been charged with corruption.

The *Global Times* reported in May that the first round of SOE inspections was laying the groundwork for future sweeps. Xu Yaotong, director of the Scientific Research Department with the Chinese Academy of Governance, stated: "Inspectors improved their efficiency this year, as they published the results while inspections were still under way."

Whether or not Zhou is the last of the "tigers" to fall, the conclusion of his trial opens the door for a new wave of privatizations. By jailing Zhou, the Xi government has made clear that any officials standing in the way of its economic agenda will be removed.



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