

Arrests follow call for Chinese President Xi's resignation

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On the eve of China's National People's Congress (NPC), an open letter by "loyal Communist Party members" was published on March 4 calling on President Xi Jinping to "resign from all Party and state leadership positions." The letter presented a scathing critique of Xi for "gathering of all power in your own hands" and causing the "unprecedented problems and crises in all political, economic, ideological and culture spheres" facing the country.

The letter was quickly deleted from Wujie News, a state-run website, which was shut down for several days. Its owners are the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committee of the Xinjiang region, the SEEC Media Group that runs the financial magazine *Caijing* and the huge e-commerce corporation, Alibaba.

An English-language translation of the open letter has since resurfaced along with news that as many as 20 people have been detained over its publication. The BBC reported yesterday that the detainees included journalist Jia Jia, who, according to his lawyer, was arrested on March 15 as he attempted to board a flight from Beijing to Hong Kong. He was apparently released yesterday.

An unnamed Wujie staff member told the BBC that 16 others had been "taken away," including six website colleagues and another 10 people working for an associated technology company. A well-known Chinese dissident Wen Yunchao who lives in New York claims that his brother and parents in China's Guangdong Province have also been detained in a bid to make him reveal the letter's author. Wen said he had nothing to do with the letter.

It is not clear who wrote the open letter, which, according to the BBC, was first published on an overseas-based Chinese language website. Nevertheless, the content of the letter does point to deep discontent and factional infighting within the CCP amid China's deepening economic slowdown and Washington's

confrontational "pivot" to Asia and military build-up against China.

Since taking office in 2012, Xi has concentrated the levers of power in his hands. He is not only CCP chairman, the country's president and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but also presides over six so-called "leading small groups" that set policy in key areas, including the economy, domestic security and foreign affairs.

Xi's installation took place amid the arrest and conviction of former Chongqing party boss Bo Xilai on charges of corruption. Xi extended the anti-corruption drive leading to the arrest of former security chief Zhou Yongkang, Bo's supporter in the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, as well as senior officials associated with them. The Politburo Standing Committee is the top CCP leadership body.

The crackdown on Bo and Zhou was aimed at suppressing those within the CCP bureaucracy closely associated with large state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Bo advocated protecting and transforming the SOEs into "national champions" to compete on global markets. He was also connected to layers of the Chinese military that have pushed for a more assertive response to the US military expansion in Asia.

The open letter does not reflect Bo's views but those of sections of the CCP apparatus critical of Xi for holding up pro-market economic restructuring and not doing enough to mollify Washington. It accuses Xi of not following the maxim of former top leader Deng Xiaoping—"hide your strength and bide your time"—and thus allowing "the United States' successful return to Asia, forming a united front with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Southeast Asian countries to jointly contain China."

In a blistering attack on economic policy, the document declared that Xi's leadership of the Leading Group for Financial and Economic Affairs had "created instability in

the stock market and property market, allowing the wealth of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people to vanish. Supply side reforms and production capacity policies have resulted in large layoffs at state-owned firms; and the closing of private firms have also led to many layoffs.”

The letter also attacked Xi’s signature “One Road, One Belt” initiative, which is aimed at the construction of a vast network of land and maritime links connecting China with Europe. It claimed the project put “a huge amount of foreign exchange reserves into chaotic countries and regions with no return.” The letter continued: “The excessive consumption of foreign exchange reserves, and renminbi devaluation cycles, has made everyone’s confidence decline, had brought the national economy to the very of collapse. People want change.”

The reference to last year’s stock market plunge is significant. Premier Li Keqiang was closely associated with the panicky response including a ban on short selling and new stock offerings and share sales by large investors. As premier, Li is in charge of economic policy and was centrally involved in drawing up the China 2030 report, co-authored with the World Bank, which set out sweeping pro-market reforms to further open up the country to foreign investors.

Li was not solely responsible for encouraging the speculative frenzy on China’s share markets, but he has been marginalised. An article in Thursday’s *Australian Financial Review*, entitled “The cult of Xi Jinping,” declared that Xi had effectively relegated the other six members of the Politburo Standing Committee to minor roles. “Within this, the biggest casualty has been the technocratic premier, Li Keqiang, who is a much diminished figure after Xi took control of the economy.”

As well as continuing the purge of those associated with Bo, Xi appears to have launched an attack on the party’s Communist Youth League faction associated with Li. Last month, the *Beijing Daily* branded officials connected to the league as “ambitious aristocrats whose self-serving attitude did no good to the party and led to scandals.” The *Australian* reported the comments in an article headed “Xi push to remove his rivals and rule for life as ‘another Mao’ and pointed to a study by the CCP’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection had criticised the “mentality” league members.

The connection of the open letter to the CCP’s inner turmoil is uncertain, but it is not alone in criticising Xi’s rapid accumulation of power—the theme that is now being picked up in the international media.

Last month, Ren Zhigiang, an outspoken property

tycoon, had his twitter accounts suddenly shut down after criticising Xi’s high-profile visit to three top state-owned media groups—the Xinhua news agency, the *People’s Daily* and China Central Television (CCTV)—to insist that they toe the party line. He was greeted at CCTV with a fawning banner declaring “CCTV’s surname is ‘the party’.”

Ren, who has some 37 million twitter followers, shot off a post asking “When did the people’s government turn into the party’s government?” In another he declared: “Don’t use taxpayers’ money to do stuff that doesn’t provide services to the taxpayers.” Ren, who is a longstanding CCP member whose father was a vice minister of commerce, has been attacked by the state-owned media but has not been detained.

The CCP leadership is clearly attempting to keep a lid on the affair. An essay by Cai Xia, a professor at the prestigious Central Party School, declared that Ren’s treatment “smacks of a political trial” and was erased from Chinese websites and condemned by a party newspaper.

Significantly, the newspaper of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection published an editorial in late February hinting obliquely at concern over the response to Ren. “Those who succeed in mighty undertakings are always open-minded and willing from the bottom of their hearts to hear different views.” The commission chief Wang Qishan, who heads Xi’s anti-corruption drive and is a Politburo Standing Committee member, has a longstanding personal relationship with Ren.

In the Byzantine world of CCP politics, the open letter is one more indication of the acute tensions being generated in ruling circles by rising geo-political rivalry, China’s economic slump and the growing signs of working-class unrest.



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