

Top leadership contender in China abruptly ousted

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Sun Zhengcai, a contender for a role in the top Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, was suddenly removed from his post last weekend. He is reportedly under investigation by the party's anti-corruption agency. His ousting is a sign of sharp inner-party tensions ahead of the CCP congress later this year, at which President Xi Jinping is expected to consolidate his grip on power.

Sun was removed as party boss of the inland industrial mega-city of Chongqing on Saturday and replaced by Chen Miner, who is viewed as a trusted protégé of Xi. Few details have been released officially. A source in Chongqing told the *South China Morning Post* that Sun was suspected of a "serious violation of party discipline." Such allegations are likely to spell an abrupt end to his political career.

Sun, 53, the youngest member of the CCP's 25-member Politburo, was seen as a leading candidate for a position on the party's highest decision-making body, the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee. He was promoted to the Politburo in 2012 along with Hu Chunhua, party chief of Guangdong province. The two were regarded as possible replacements for Xi and Premier Li Keqiang when their two terms in office expire at the 2022 congress.

Xi and Li were installed as the top leadership at the 2012 congress following the removal of Bo Xilai as Chongqing party boss. Bo, along with his wife, was eventually arrested, tried and convicted of corruption charges. Sun was his replacement.

Bo was not ousted over corruption, which is rife at every level of the bureaucratic apparatus, but as a result of differences over economic and foreign policy. He was the most public representative of sections of the CCP bureaucracy who rest on the large state enterprise sector, which global finance capital demands be

reduced or eliminated. While fully supportive of capitalist restoration, Bo advocated the transformation of the biggest state-owned enterprises into Chinese "champions" or challengers to existing global corporations.

Bo's support for state-owned enterprises and revival of Maoist-era songs made him the rallying point of "new left" and neo-Maoist groups. Like Bo, this amorphous grouping did not represent socialism in any sense. It advocated concessions to the working class to avert a social explosion and protect the CCP regime. Bo was also supported by sections of the military that pushed for a tougher stance against the menacing military build-up by the US and its allies in Asia against China.

By contrast, Xi and Li were associated with the strategy of the dominant sections of the CCP leadership: a further opening up of the economy to foreign investors that would inevitably undermine the monopoly position of state-owned enterprises, and, as far as possible, avoid a direct confrontation with the US. The 2013 central committee plenum set out sweeping pro-market restructuring in line with the *China 2030* report jointly produced by the World Bank and China's State Council.

Xi also launched a far-reaching anti-corruption drive that he exploited to remove many of Bo's closest supporters, including former security chief and Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang. The "new left" and neo-Maoist groups, along with their websites and publications, were also suppressed.

Over the past four years, Xi has considerably strengthened his grip on power. He exploited the stock market plunge in 2015 and the panicky response, with which Li was closely associated, to marginalise the

premier. Xi has established small leadership groups under his control, including the Leading Group for Financial and Economic Affairs. This body, rather than the premier, now sets overall economic policy.

As a result Xi, who is the head of the party and the military as well as the president, has concentrated power in his hands. At this year's annual National People's Congress in March, leading officials referred to the "core leader of the party"—reflecting his dominant position. Li slavishly declared that Xi, as core leader, was of "crucial and far-reaching significance for ensuring the flourishing and long-term stability of the party and country."

Xi's prominence led to much commentary in the American and international media on his emergence as the uncontested leader, and the possibility he might extend his rule beyond two terms. A comment published by the US government-funded *Voice of America* in March was headlined "Is Xi Jinping Putinizing China?"

Sun Zhengcai's ousting comes ahead of the key CCP congress in October or November at which both the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) will be restructured. A large number of members of both bodies, including a majority of the PSC, are expected to stand down as they reach retirement age. The appointment of new members is regarded as a guide to those who will assume the top jobs in 2022 when the next generation is due to take over.

Xi may be planning to stack the leadership bodies with his supporters and lay the basis for a break from recent tradition in order to stay on for a third term. However, Sun's removal could also reflect ongoing divisions and infighting within the CCP and state apparatus amid a slowing economy, sharpening social tensions and the rising danger of trade war and war with the United States.

Significantly one of the chief accusations against Sun appears to be that he did not do enough to eradicate Bo's influence in Chongqing. In February, after a two-month investigation, the party's disciplinary officials criticised Sun and other city leaders for not having completely rooted out the "pernicious ideological legacy" left by Bo and his chief supporter Wang Lijun.

On Monday, Sun's replacement Chen Miner was reported as pledging to "resolutely eliminate the evil legacy of Bo and Wang thought from thinking, politics

and work style."

No one appears to be accusing Sun of being another Bo. The *South China Morning Post* wrote: "Sun did not pose a challenge to Xi's power in the way that Bo potentially could, and his low-key personality was in stark contrast to Bo's unabashed ambition and desire for attention, which had always raised eyebrows [in the top leadership]."

However, Sun's replacement does suggest that the divisions over economic and foreign policy reflected in the purge of Bo and his supporters have not disappeared. Moreover, other sections of the CCP apparatus have criticised Xi from the opposite standpoint—not proceeding fast enough with pro-market restructuring and not doing enough to placate Washington.

On the eve of last year's National People's Congress, an open letter by "loyal Communist Party members" was rapidly suppressed. It called on Xi to resign on these grounds and accused him of causing the "unprecedented problems and crises in all political, economic, ideological and culture spheres" facing the country.

While the internal life of the CCP is always subject to heavy censorship, the ousting of Sun could be a sign of new political turmoil in the lead-up to this year's party congress.



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