

Xi Jinping's power grab: Bonapartism with Chinese characteristics

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime has made a sharp break from the norms of the past three decades by moving to end the two-term limit for the post of president. As a result, Xi Jinping, who has consolidated his control over the military and state apparatus and purged key political rivals over the past five years, will be able remain in office indefinitely.

Xi's emergence as China's political strongman is not a function of his personal characteristics, but rather is a reflection above all of the extreme social tensions wracking the country. Confronting a deteriorating economy and the prospect of social upheaval, the Chinese bureaucracy is desperately seeking to consolidate its forces around the figure of Xi—a form of rule that Marxists have classically designated as Bonapartist.

Writing on the acute political crisis in Germany in 1932, Leon Trotsky explained the essential characteristics of Bonapartism: “As soon as the struggle of two social strata—the haves and the have-nots, the exploiters and the exploited—reaches its highest tension, the conditions are established for the domination of bureaucracy, police, soldiery. The government becomes ‘independent’ of society. Let us once more recall: if two forks are stuck symmetrically into a cork, the latter can stand even on the head of a pin. That is precisely the schema of Bonapartism.” [Germany: The Only Road]

After three decades of capitalist restoration, the CCP has transformed China into one of the most unequal countries in the world. At one pole of society, over 300 dollar billionaires—more than any country other than the United States—rake in enormous profits and live extravagant lifestyles. At the other, hundreds of millions of workers and peasants struggle to make ends meet, many still living in abject poverty.

In the past, the CCP regime relied on very high levels of growth to curb joblessness and ward off social unrest. But since the global financial crisis of 2008/09, the Chinese economy has continued to slow to levels well below 8 percent growth, which was long regarded as a crucial benchmark to maintain social stability. Moreover, the mechanisms that were used to boost growth—massive stimulus packages—have generated huge levels of debt that threaten to trigger a financial meltdown.

At the same time, China confronts extreme geopolitical tensions and the rising threat of conflict, above all with the United States, which under Obama and Trump has aggressively sought to undermine China economically and diplomatically particularly in the Asia Pacific, all the while building up its military forces in Asia in preparation for war. Trump's bellicose threats of war against North Korea and military confrontation in the South China Sea are aimed against China, which US imperialism regards as the chief obstacle to its global hegemony.

Confronted with dangers at home and abroad, the CCP apparatus has strengthened the hand of Xi hoping he will be able to counter Washington, and suppress any movement of the massive Chinese working class, now numbering 400 million. However, as Leon Trotsky explained, Bonapartism rests on an inherently unstable and temporary balance of class forces—the bourgeoisie can find no other way out of its crisis, while the working class is unable, at present, to find the road to power.

The announcement that the CCP will abandon its two-term restriction on the Chinese presidency has provoked shock, condemnation, concern and calls for action in the Western media. The US and its allies had expected, as the *New York Times* put it in its editorial,

that the opening up of China in the late 1970s would lead to its integration into the post-World War II framework and that “economic progress would lead eventually to political liberalisation”.

In reality, the US was hoping that “political liberalisation” for an expanded Chinese middle class—not the working class—could be manipulated to fashion a regime more closely aligned with Washington. That prospect has now been dashed by the installation, for the indefinite future, of a Chinese leader who has proven unwilling to immediately buckle to US demands and has sought to counter Washington’s belligerence.

With staggering hypocrisy, the *New York Times* editorial declares that China is “challenging the liberal order based on the rule of law, human rights, open debate, free-market economics and a preference for elected leaders who leave office peacefully after a fixed period.” It warns: “Despite increasing concerns about China’s evolution, the West has yet to come to grips with this threat.”

The *New York Times* touts the virtues of Western democracies right at the point where fundamental democratic rights and legal norms are under attack in the US, Europe and around the world, corporate giants such as Facebook and Google censor the Internet on behalf of Washington, and police state measures are being directed against workers and youth.

It is not only in China and Russia that the ruling classes have concluded that a political strongman is the only means of protecting their interests. The same basic social and economic processes—above all, acute social tensions generated by the enormous and widening gulf between rich and poor—are driving the bourgeoisie in so-called liberal democracies to autocratic forms of rule.

In the United States, the fascistic President Trump presides over an administration dominated by generals and billionaires as he prepares for trade war, and war against China, and the build-up of the police - military apparatus against the working class. In Germany, an acute political crisis that left the country without a government for months has only been resolved through what is effectively a parliamentary dictatorship in the form of a grand coalition of establishment parties. In France, Macron, who was propelled into the presidency by the collapse of the traditional parties, is using draconian labour decrees to crush opposition by

workers to privatisation and the destruction of jobs and conditions.

The deep frustration felt in ruling circles around the world with democratic processes and the failure of governments to overcome opposition to austerity was summed up by Australian retail billionaire Gerry Harvey following another inconclusive result in the 2016 federal election. “The only cure we’ve got is to have a dictator like in China or something like that. Our democracy at the moment is not working,” Harvey declared.

Workers and youth should take the sharpest warning from this accelerating trend toward Bonapartism and other autocratic forms of rule. Democratic rights can only be defended on the basis of the struggle by the working class to overthrow capitalism, which is producing the impulses towards dictatorship, and refashion society on socialist lines.



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