

China's NPC formally approves Xi's indefinite rule

Peter Symonds
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The National People's Congress (NPC) voted on Sunday to formally approve constitutional changes to remove the two-term limit on the China's president and vice-president. The change, which was foreshadowed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), cements President Xi Jinping as a Bonapartist figure presiding over a regime confronting mounting internal and external crises.

The 3,000 or so heavily-vetted delegates rubberstamped the constitutional amendments, with a token two votes against and three abstentions. Xi, who was installed in 2013, has already served one five-year term. He now will be able to stay as president past 2023. He also will hold the powerful posts of CCP chairman and head of the Central Military Commission, which have no term limits.

Over the past five years, Xi has steadily accumulated power in his hands, exploiting a so-called anti-corruption campaign to purge potential rivals and factional opponents. He has effectively sidelined Premier Li Keqiang by establishing small leading groups under his control, including on economic matters that have been the preserve of the premier. Xi's changes to the military have concentrated more power in the hands of the Central Military Commission at the expense of regional military commands.

Xi's dominant position was evident at last October's CCP Congress, where "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," along with his key policies, were enshrined in the constitution. In a break with the convention of the past three decades, no potential successor to Xi was appointed to the top party body—the Politburo Standing Committee—which is now dominated by Xi loyalists.

The NPC also voted to include so-called Xi Jinping Thought in the constitution. Other constitutional

amendments sought to strengthen the CCP's power over the state apparatus—a move that was further consolidated on Tuesday with the announcement of major changes to the ministries. State television described the measures, which axe 15 ministries and vice-ministries, as a "drastic reform."

A new anti-corruption body—the National Supervision Commission—will expand the powers and scope of the party's present Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. Whereas the old agency could detain and investigate CCP members, the new commission will have the power to investigate others who hold public posts, including administrators and managers, who are not party members. Xi will ensure that the head of the new commission is one of his supporters.

A new financial regulatory body will include the existing banking and insurance regulators. The decision reflects growing fears of financial instability in China as a result of a massive build-up of debt and the activities of the shadow banking system that operates outside the major state-owned banks.

A third regulatory body will establish an expanded environmental ministry to reduce overlap and deal with issues of pollution and climate change that Xi has given a high priority—at least cosmetically.

In justifying the changes, particularly the concentration of power in Xi's hands, the emphasis has been on stability. Shen Chunyao, director of the Legal Affairs Commission of the NPC Standing Committee, told the media: "If you look at the past two decades, having the three posts served by one person is not only effective, but also crucial, for the country's long-term stability, and an orderly power transition."

Externally, China faces the prospect of trade war and war as the Trump administration seeks to block any challenge to US global hegemony from Beijing. The

latest Chinese budget outlined by Li at the NPC increases military spending, especially in the area of hi-tech arms, in a bid to counter US imperialism's overwhelming military outlays.

Speaking on Monday, Xi stressed the need for greater cooperation between military and civilian sectors, particularly in scientific and technological areas. "Implementing the strategy of military-civilian integration is a prerequisite for building integrated national strategies and strategic capabilities and for realising the Party's goal of building a strong military in the new era," he said.

At the same time, the CCP regime confronts growing social tensions at home. Three decades of capitalist restoration have led to a widening gulf between rich and poor. Far from being socialist in any sense, the CCP represents a tiny layer of ultra-rich billionaires—some of whom were NPC delegates.

Under Xi, Beijing has continued to expand its police-state apparatus, cracking down on any form of dissent or opposition. According to a report to the NPC last week, nationwide security spending reached 1.24 trillion yuan (\$US196 billion) last year, up by 11.4 percent from 2016. The internal security budget first surpassed military spending in 2010. It is now almost 20 percent higher than the military budget.

The fact that China is spending more on its police apparatus than the military reflects deep fears in the Chinese bureaucracy of social unrest—especially by the huge Chinese working class, estimated to number 400 million. With the economic growth rate slowing to 6.5 percent and further mass layoffs in the steel and coal industries planned, the regime is desperate to prevent protests or strikes becoming the focus of a broad oppositional movement.

The CCP still brands the upheavals of the working class associated with the Tiananmen Square movement in 1989, which was begun by students, as "counter-revolutionary," in order to justify the brutal military suppression that followed. Unlike the students, who primarily called for democratic reforms, the workers were driven into action by the sharp deterioration of their living conditions that followed the regime's pro-market restructuring. Nearly three decades later, capitalist restoration has made many more inroads into the social position of the working class, which has expanded massively.

Amid acute class tensions, the CCP and the NPC have ensured that Xi can stay in power as a political strongman. His task is to suppress internal factional disputes and strengthen the state apparatus to confront the danger of war with the US, and a new upsurge of the class struggle at home.



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