

Erik Moberg ©:

Xi Jinping consolidates his power

In the book I give several examples of power shifts in party dictatorships. One possible pattern is that, after the disappearance of a former dictator, a group of competitors appear, and, after that, following a continued power struggle, one single person manages to become the one and only in power. That, for instance, was how Nikita Khrushchev became dictator after having ousted Georgy Malenkov and Nikolai Bulganin. Another similar pattern occurred in China after Mao Zedong, although it started already in Mao's last years, that is in his lifetime. At that time the so called Gang of Four appeared and challenged Mao. The members were however imprisoned and severely sentenced by Mao's successor Hua Gofeng. But Hua himself did not last long. After only two years, in 1978, he was forced out by Deng Xiaoping, who then remained in power until his death in 1997.

A new dictator thus often feels compelled to consolidate his power and we are now witnessing an interesting process like that in China. Even if there was no open power struggle between several rivals when Xi Jinping became dictator in 2012 he was nevertheless vulnerable since he was not head of any established faction—factions are of great importance in Chinese politics. He has therefore undertaken quite a lot of consolidating measures, basically by substituting members of party sub-organizations or sub-groups at various levels and of different kinds. The basic principle has been to promote people loyal to himself and to suppress intra-party debate. And he has gone far. It is not only that he is now widely seen as the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao. It also seems as if the “personality cult”—at first condemned by Khrushchev in the Soviet Union in 1956 and then by Deng Xiaoping in China in the late 1970s—now makes its comeback. (The Economist April 8th, 2017, page 48; The Economist May 27th, 2017, page 46; The Economist June 10th, 2017, page 47; The Economist September 9th, 2017, page 49)

Some of the results of these consolidating measures may be seen at the next Congress of the Communist Party which will open on October 18th. Of particular interest is the conflict between the strengthened dictatorship on the one hand and the considerable elements of market economy on the other. Will we see any signs of any handling of this conflict? China, it should be remembered, is still having a five-year plan.