



## How to lead billions: observations on leadership and transition in China

**Daniel Harris**

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In autumn 2012, China will see a Party Congress like no other. In the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, 2,270 delegates of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) will gather for the 18th Party Congress. While some key policy directions for the country have already been established in the form of last year's 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, the Congress provides a forum for the Party to announce new ideological positions and confirm its leaders for the years to come. This year's Congress entails a truly generational shift: the world's most populous country will see seven of the nine members of its most powerful group of leaders, the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) step down, including President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao.<sup>i</sup> This transition is, therefore, of tremendous importance in shaping events in China and beyond for the next decade. While the Party Congress itself is still months away, the [process of transition](#) is already underway, and in a far more public way than ever before, thanks to the recent travails of one of China's most recognisable leaders.

Bo Xilai's rise to fame arguably outstripped that of his contemporaries in Chinese politics. His fall from the heights of leadership has been similarly noteworthy.

Until a few months ago, the Chinese political elite were practically lining up to visit Chongqing where Bo was secretary of the CPC Committee. Bo developed a national reputation for his *dahei* or 'Strike Black' campaign against organised crime and corruption; for his 'Red Culture' campaign of nationalist songs, text messages and slogans; and for a package of reforms that included a notable reassertion of the role of state-led investment in the economy, rapid urbanisation, *hukou* reforms, and several large state-led welfare projects, which together became known as the '[Chongqing model](#)'. Western journalists were no less enthralled; releasing numerous articles in 2010-11 citing the way in which Bo's policies and his personalised approach to Chinese politics distinguished him from what they viewed as a somewhat uninspiring set of counterparts.

The last two months have seen this state of affairs change dramatically. In a [now widely-reported story](#), Bo's fall from grace appears to have been sealed by events surrounding a visit by Wang Lijun, the (now former) vice-mayor and (now former) head of the Public Security Bureau in Chongqing, to the American consulate in Chengdu. Speculation is rife about the details, but whatever occurred within the walls of the consulate, Bo now finds himself dismissed from his post in Chongqing with his political career in tatters and his positions in the Politburo and the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party under threat.

There were questions regarding Bo's achievements from both domestic and international audiences, if not from the start, certainly as a clearer picture emerged of the methods being adopted under his leadership. The Strike Black campaign has been plagued by reports of [heavy-handed, authoritarian](#) and even [extralegal](#) methods. Others have [debated](#) the extent to which the Red Culture campaign should be seen as a revival of the Maoist fervour that spilled over in its most brutal form during the Cultural Revolution. The Chongqing model itself has also been critiqued on a number of grounds, including the impact of controversial land policies, inefficient public investment and the accrual of [significant fiscal deficits](#).

One reason why the events surrounding Bo Xilai have received so much attention outside China is that they provide a rare public glimpse of the political machinations that, though rarely visible to outsiders, have long been a key feature of China's political economy. Indeed,

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despite discourses that present China or the Chinese Communist Party as monolithic entities, there are a number of widely recognised factions and groupings within the Party, each with its own identity, views and supporters.

As noted by Cheng Li, an expert on Chinese leadership at the Brookings Institute, Chinese politics has, for a number of years, been defined by a particularly delicate balancing act. The allocation of key leadership positions has been shared between the two broad factions that Li terms the 'populist coalition' and the 'elitist coalition' (Li, 2012). The 'populist coalition', which includes the so-called *tuanpai*, or Chinese Communist Youth League faction led by current president Hu Jintao, tends to comprise leaders with experience in China's poorer inland provinces and is associated with policies and rhetoric that address the needs of 'vulnerable social groups such as farmers, migrant workers and the urban poor' (Li, 2012:137). The 'elitist coalition' includes many of China's 'princelings' – descendants of key figures from China's revolutionary era, including former President Jiang Zemin. It tends to comprise leaders with experience in China's richer coastal provinces and is associated with policy positions that favour China's business class. The fifth generation of leadership is expected to reflect this form of intra-party bipartisanship, with current Vice-President Xi Jinping, a princeling of the elitist coalition, the presumptive favourite to succeed Hu Jintao, and Li Keqiang of the populist coalition, the presumptive favourite to succeed current Premier Wen Jiabao.

Bo Xilai, as the son of Chinese Communist Party elder and revolutionary Bo Yibo can certainly be classified as a princeling, though the populist nature of some of the policy reforms associated with his Chongqing model demonstrate the rough and somewhat flexible nature of the characterisation of the two coalitions. Furthermore, these coalitions and the various elite factions clearly share some priorities, including stability at home, influence abroad and retaining the role of the Party as integral to national leadership in China.

Some commentators see Bo Xilai's dismissal as a result of factional manoeuvring prior to this autumn's leadership transition at the 18th Party Congress (see Ian Johnson at the [New York Review of Books](#)). Before his recent fall Bo was widely seen as a likely candidate for one of the seven anticipated openings on the Politburo Standing Committee and speculation has already begun regarding what his dismissal means for the composition of that core group of officials.

Yet, while previous dismissals of high ranking Politburo officials, like that of former Shanghai party chief Chen Liangyu in 2006, have been seen as the outcome of factional battles in the period immediately prior to leadership transitions, it is difficult to tell whether Bo's fate is merely symptomatic of factional competition, or if it demonstrates another key feature of politics in China: a fundamental change in the way leadership is exercised.

In the days leading up to and following Bo's dismissal, a steady stream of comments from senior figures in the party have suggested that it may not have been Bo's factional affiliation or the policies of his Chongqing Model that got him into such trouble. Rather, it was Bo's approach to leadership and to politics – the very charisma that made him so appealing to Western media<sup>ii</sup> and to some Chinese, which made him so objectionable to the Chinese political elite.

Xi Jinping's speech at the opening ceremony for the spring semester of the Party School of the Central Committee, now [published in Qiu Shi](#), the primary theoretical journal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, has been seen by commentators as a thinly veiled criticism of Bo's political style, rebuking those who damage the purity of the party by pursuing personal fame or wealth.

Writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, 30 years before the founding of the People's Republic of China, Max Weber reflected on the power of charisma in politics where legitimacy can arise from 'the authority of the extraordinary and personal *gift of grace* (charisma), the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership' (Weber, 1919).

In many Western countries there is a tendency to think of charismatic legitimacy, particularly in its most extreme form, the cult of personality, as the exclusive purview of developing

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countries. This would be a mistake. Certainly there is some degree of socio-cultural distaste in the West for charismatic leadership in the post-World War II era on the basis of European experiences with Adolf Hitler and other European demagogues of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, one need look no further than the paradigmatic shift in politics catalysed by the televised Nixon-Kennedy debates prior to the 1960 US Presidential election, which dramatically increased the weight attached to personality, appearance and charisma in political calculations. This dynamic has played out even more recently in the televised leadership debates in the last round of [national elections in the UK](#) and critiques of Ed Miliband as Leader of the Labour Party.

While there is a distinction to be drawn between leaders with charisma and leaders whose charisma forms the basis of their legitimacy, it is clear that charisma is now almost a prerequisite for political success. What we are seeing in China, a country that has achieved some phenomenal developmental progress in the last 30 years, may suggest to some degree a broad rejection of charisma as a legitimating feature of political rule. While Weber specifically mentions the leaders of political parties as paragons of charismatic, individual influence, one remarkable feature of the changes in leadership in China in the last 40 years is the progressive shift away from the highly personalised leadership of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping to the largely technocratic and administrative leadership of Jiang Zemin and, most recently, Hu Jintao. Li writes of the emergence in China of collective leadership in which the 'The top Chinese leader, General Secretary of the Party and President Hu Jintao, is now understood to be no more than the "first among equals"' (Li, 2012:131) in the Politburo Standing Committee. Xi Jinping, his presumed successor, is a man noted for his bland, inoffensive politics whose wife, a folk singer, may be better known by the public.

This trend underscores an important point that has been recognised by the Chinese political elite and by commentators like Hu Shuli. In a [post](#) for Caixin Online, Hu reflects on recent comments by Wen Jiabao regarding the need to learn lessons from history in the context of the Wang Lijun Incident. Hu's observations suggest that for the Chinese leadership, the problem is not so much that Bo adopted Western-style politicking, but rather about the degree to which charisma and personalisation of politics is reminiscent of the dark days of the Cultural Revolution.

Is it possible that under certain circumstances the best leaders may be those that are most forgettable, least personable, or the most dispensable as individuals?

There is a range of interesting research being done in this area, exploring and nuancing ideas of leadership and, in particular, the types of leadership that lead to developmental outcomes. Work like that of Phil Keefer suggests that while the individual disposition of key figures likely does have some importance, developmental leadership is about organisations not just individuals. Keefer argues that solving many developmental problems requires mechanisms to facilitate collective action. Institutionalised political parties (in both democracies *and* non-democracies) can perform such a function where leaders are able to make credible commitments to work in the collective interests of party members because they are, to a significant degree, subject to removal from leadership positions by members. However, where the charisma of leaders contributes to a highly personalised form of leadership, this dynamic is undermined (Keefer, 2011).<sup>iii</sup>

Leadership is increasingly recognised as important for development, but too often there is a tendency to conflate leadership with individual leaders (e.g. identifying champions of reform). We must do better in our approach to politics, demanding more than charisma from our own leaders.

Written by Daniel Harris, ODI Research Officer ([d.harris@odi.org.uk](mailto:d.harris@odi.org.uk)). With thanks to Andrew Norton and Tam O'Neil for their insights.

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<sup>i</sup> In the following year, the National People's Congress is then expected to confirm a new President and Premier *in accordance with the allocation of the Politburo Standing Committee positions*, with the General Secretary of the Party, who is also the highest ranking member of the PSC, confirmed as President and the #3 ranking PSC member confirmed as Premier. The General Secretary is also expected to become the Chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission, although in previous transitions, there has been some delay in this handover. For more information see Patrick Chovanec's useful primer on the transition process at: <http://chovanec.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/primer-on-chinas-leadership-transition/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Examples of the use of the terms 'charisma' and 'charismatic' describe Bo in the media coverage of events of the past few months include [New York Review of Books](#), [The Guardian](#), [New York Times](#).

<sup>iii</sup> ODI's [work on political parties](#) raises similar themes. Additional work on leadership and development includes Adrian Leftwich's [Developmental Leadership Programme](#), which has also produced a wide range of publications demonstrating how developmental leadership emerges in the context of particular combinations of organisations and institutions that shape the way in which elites act and the policies they adopt.