



Beijing's Schadenfreude Over the Capitol Riots Conceals Deep Anxiety

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Nearly three months on, the echoes of Jan. 6 continue to reverberate globally. The pro-Trump insurrection at the U.S. Capitol was unquestionably a political crisis for the United States. But it was also a boon for China's propagandists, who, with righteous indignation, decried the country's "election chaos" and chortled gleefully at the sight of the carnage on full display. In a house editorial, the *Global Times* did not mince words, saying: "The chaos [was] caused by the election. The unprecedented mob in the Capitol, a symbol of the U.S. system, is the result of the U.S. society's severe division and the country's failure to control such division." All of China's major party outlets, including the *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, and the Xinhua News Agency, echoed the same message: Democracy produces chaos.

At first glance, these commentaries appear to merely be opportunistic U.S.-bashing by Beijing. Beyond this facade, however, China's rhetoric reflects a deep-seated—if unspoken—anxiety that its own country will be thrust into an even more violent and protracted political power transition at some point in the future. In this context, China's harsh critiques of the Jan. 6 riots offer a rare glimpse into China's fears at this important moment—the fraught interim period before Chinese President Xi Jinping officially takes up his third—and unprecedented in the post-Mao era—presidential term at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022.

To understand the power and pervasiveness of contemporary Chinese fears of messy political power transitions, a brief history is essential. Former Chairman Mao Zedong's first two chosen successors—Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao—both died under mysterious circumstances after they had crossed him. When Mao himself died in 1976, the weakness of his chosen successor, Hua Guofeng, precipitated a series of intraparty factional power struggles that concluded when party stalwart Deng Xiaoping emerged victorious nearly three years later.

Immediately upon taking power, Deng and his supporters buried Mao's cult of personality and gradually instituted a system of one-party rule intended to create and institutionalize methods of policymaking and leadership succession. Term limits on the presidency, age limits for senior leaders, and the selection of a pre-appointed successor were among the policies instituted to avoid the wasteful and debilitating intra-party factionalism that had marred the post-Mao years. But these reforms to China's leadership succession process came to a halt in the spring of 1989, when tanks rolled into Beijing at the behest of a coalition of political and military hard-liners who used extralegal means to remove General Secretary Zhao Ziyang.

By the 2000s, having watched political power transfer from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, China confidently declared it had solved the succession problem. In his Sept. 1, 2004 resignation letter to the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Jiang wrote that for the good of the party's long-term development and the people, he "had always looked forward to the complete retirement from leading positions." In truth, despite his titular retirement, Jiang and his loyalists (known as the Shanghai group) retained considerable influence throughout Hu's term as party secretary, which they used to amass vast riches.

In the years that followed, some party leaders sought to institutionalize (as opposed to personalize) governance in China. They worked to create a more representative one-party political system that they dubbed "intraparty democracy" or "deliberative democracy." One prominent advocate was the former vice chairman of the Central Party School, Li Junru. In his 2015 book, *Deliberative Democracy: Interpreting China's Democratic System*, Li explained that "deliberative democracy" means party leaders should seek to "achieve solidarity in democratic consultation by way of dialogue on equal footing, seeking common grounds while reserving differences, and advocating unity while not giving up struggle."

"Deliberative democracy," Li argued, would ensure that "China is not a country of despotism."

This political trajectory, however, has been fundamentally reversed by China's current president, Xi. Upon assuming power in 2012, Xi set out to remove the residual influence of the Shanghai group, as well as that of his predecessor Hu and his loyalists (known as the Youth League group). Xi has purged dozens of Jiang loyalists, including Gen. Xu Yongkang, and in 2016, Xi announced sweeping changes to the Youth League that neutered its potential to create future leaders.

In the run-up to Xi's abolition of presidential term limits in 2018, many within the party expressed private (and sometimes even public) concerns about the decision. In Beijing, there was a palpable sense of shock among many Chinese elites who feared a return to one-man rule. In February 2018, just before Xi successfully repealed presidential term limits and changed the country's constitution, Li Datong, the former editor of party mouthpiece China Youth Daily, warned that amending the constitution to let Xi rule indefinitely would "sow the seeds of chaos." Li lamented: "If there are no term limits on a country's highest leader, then we are returning to an imperial regime. My generation has lived through Mao. That era is over. How can we possibly go back to it?"

Li subsequently sought refuge in London, but others like him who have spoken out against Xi have disappeared, been fined, and were sentenced to years in prison. Those who have been able to do so have left China, as Xi has tightened control and abolished any semblance of opposition.

The official press critiques of the United States' failed insurrection provide a peep into Chinese fears of what is likely to happen after Xi exits the political scene. Such anxieties are well warranted because, like Mao before him, Xi has consolidated power and kept his would-be successors weak—or worse.

Soon after the 2018 constitutional change, the Chinese press was quick to remind the world that today's China is very different than it was during the Cultural Revolution. In fact, at the highest levels of government, Xi's China has gone far beyond the Cultural Revolution in terms of the number of those arrested or stripped of their party membership. In his first term as president, between 2012 to 2018, Xi disciplined 35 members of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, as many as between 1949 and 2012. Today's advanced technology mean even Politburo members are under constant surveillance. But while Xi's "coup proofing" will probably ensure he remains unchallenged in life, after he is gone, the current mirage of stability and harmony is likely to devolve into an intraparty battle royale for control of the country.

Many Chinese understand this problem all too well but hold their tongues for safety's sake. For them, the events of Jan. 6 not only provide some welcome schadenfreude at the United States' expense, but they also give them political cover to express their fears about the long-term implications of Xi's power grab. In this way, China's response to the Capitol Hill insurrection, which at first blush appeared to be merely a show of national strength and confidence, actually belies heartfelt concerns among tens of millions of Chinese elites that, someday, their country too will face its own messy and prolonged power transition.

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