

It took many people by surprise when Xinhua news agency on Sunday announced that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was planning to scrap the term limits for the nation's president as part of personnel changes to be passed during the National People's Congress' annual two-week session, which begins on Monday.

It should not have been such a bombshell, although several China experts have said they thought Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) would have been more oblique in his efforts to hold on to the presidency for more than the two terms that have been the rule since 1982.

After all, Xi has spent the past five years ruthlessly eliminating any potential challenger under the guise of his campaign against corruption, crushing China's human rights activists and the lawyers who have helped them, and demanding that the nation's media pledge absolute loyalty to the CCP and its core leadership, which basically means Xi.

The announcement forced the CCP's propaganda machine and China's massive censor network into overdrive this week, proclaiming that the proposal had the overwhelming support of the public and that it did not mean that Xi was planning on staying in power forever, while trying to stamp out any criticism.

The rationale behind the move is that Xi might need more than the prescribed two terms to ensure that his goal of establishing China as a prosperous, modern nation by 2050 is achieved.

The safeguard, according to an article in the state-owned People's Daily is that the CCP's constitution stipulates that the party's leaders cannot stay in office indefinitely and that they should retire if their health fails.

However, Xi's efforts to retain control, to establish himself as the main arbiter of what is best for the party and the nation, actually undermine the institutionalism that has made the CCP's brand of authoritarian rule more resilient where other Marxist-Leninist parties have crumbled.

Succession always becomes an issue with authoritarian regimes, communist or otherwise, unless family lineage becomes the rule, hence the reliance on coups to bring in new leadership. The problem only becomes more acute the longer a head of state stays in office, as several African nations and others can attest to.

The longer a leader is in office, the less likely they are to receive accurate information in times of economic or political crisis because no one wants to be the bearer of bad news, and the less likely people are to question their policies.

For Taiwan, Xi's move is cause for concern because of the xenophobia that he has helped foment over the past five years as part of his mission to restore China to greatness, encapsulated in the "Xi Jinping Thought for the New Era of Socialism With Chinese Special Characteristics" that was written into the CCP's constitution during the party's National Congress in October last year.

This nationalism can be seen in the rabid response in the Chinese media, amid its netizens and among its students studying overseas, to any mention or recognition of Taiwan as a separate nation — just as they react to recognition of the Dalai Lama as either a religious or world leader.

It can also be seen in the more aggressive efforts to limit Taiwan's interactions with other nations on the international stage, from blocking it even from observer status in organizations such as the WHO and the International Civil Aviation Organization, to luring its diplomatic allies to switch recognition to Beijing.

This nationalism, coupled with an ever-increasing military budget to expand the People's Liberation Army's hardware and technology, and the widespread ignorance in China about how democracies or other societies work, could make it harder for Xi to resist calls for forcible unification with Taiwan, especially if he is looking to ensure his legacy.

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