

Bad news for HK, and perhaps Taiwan

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) sacking on Thursday of two top Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials in Hubei, as the province and nation struggle to come to grips with the COVID-19 outbreak, overshadowed another crucial personnel move, one that could have repercussions for Taiwan.

Xi replaced the party secretaries for Hubei and its capital, Wuhan, just one day after telling an emergency meeting of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee that "all regions and departments performed their duties actively and conscientiously" in the war against the outbreak.

With much less fanfare, Xi also demoted the director of the Cabinet-level Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office (HKMAO), Zhang Xiaoming (张晓明), by naming Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Vice Chairman Xia Baolong (栗战书) to the post.

While Zhang is to stay on as HKMAO vice director in charge of "routine work," he is the most senior Beijing-appointed official in Hong Kong to lose his job since months of pro-democracy protests began in June last year.

All three men appointed on Thursday have two things in common besides their solid CCP resumes: They are all proteges of Xi and have backgrounds in public security.

Xia's appointment came just six weeks after another Xi protege, Luo Huining (罗海宁), known for carrying out Xi's anti-corruption campaign, was named director of the Hong Kong Liaison Office of the Central People's Government, who since the 1997 handover has been Beijing's top official in the territory.

Some analysts say that Xia's stature as a state-level leader means that the HKMAO has been promoted to a level above the two territories' liaison offices, while others speculate that it could lead to changes in Beijing's management of the territories.

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In any case, Xia's appointment is something of a hierarchical demotion for Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥) and Macau Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng (何潤生), as their jobs used to be ranked on the same level as the heads of the HKMAO and the two liaison offices.

More worrying for democracy advocates is that Xia is a hardliner known for demolishing thousands of crosses and scores of churches during a crackdown on Christian churches in Zhejiang Province in 2014 and 2015, while he was the province's party secretary.

Xi has not only moved to strengthen Beijing's direct supervision over the implementation of its policies in Hong Kong, but indicated that he is determined to crack down hard on any challenge to its control.

As we have seen on the mainland, that can only be bad news for Hong Kong's civil society, which is likely to face more curbs as the CCP ignores its pre-handover promises of 50 years in which the territory could retain its own legal and economic systems and currency, and its people their rights and freedoms.

The CCP's Fourth Plenum in November last year declared that national interest should take priority over the "one country, two systems" policy, and called on Hong Kong to improve its legal system to boost the powers of law enforcement and safeguard national security, as well as increase the "patriotic education" of young people and civil servants.

As Xia proved in Zhejiang and Luo with the anti-graft campaign, Xi now has men in place who are eager and willing to carry out his orders and support his efforts to extend his — and the CCP's — ideological control.

This could be bad news for Taiwan, as Beijing's efforts to take over the reins on Hong Kong could impact everything from the government's efforts to maintain contact with its counterparts in the territory to more visa hassles for travelers and more pushback on Taiwanese support of the territory's democracy movement.

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