

## No global place for an Emperor Xi

Written by Parris Chang 陈昌  
Friday, 23 March 2018 07:04

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There was near unanimous approval among the more than 3,000 delegates at the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 19th National People's Congress earlier this month to abolish constitutional limits on presidential terms, with only two voting against and three abstaining.

In doing so, they also approved Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) as general secretary of the CCP, chairman of the Central Military Commission and president — the three main offices of the state — in effect making him a Chinese emperor for the 21st century.

Under the leadership of Mao Zedong (毛泽东), the CCP defeated the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and successfully founded the People's Republic of China (PRC). All of the party's revolutionary elder statesmen wholeheartedly supported Mao's elevation to emperor.

However, since Xi was born after the founding of the PRC, he made no direct contribution toward its establishment. Will the party's many cadres accept his status as emperor for life?

Party elder Chen Yun (陈云) criticized Mao for staying in power too long and called the Cultural Revolution a crime that tore apart the party's structure and persecuted millions of party cadres.

Following Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), who spearheaded economic reform through the "four modernizations," was surely the most qualified to be given a regal title.

To prevent another dictator from emerging, Deng in 1982 established the rule that presidents should be able to hold office for a maximum of 10 years, or two terms. His successors, former presidents Jiang Zemin (江泽民) and Hu Jintao (胡锦涛), respected this rule.

During his handling of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, Deng ordered the People's Liberation Army to suppress the protest, killing thousands of unarmed students and members of the public protesting against corruption within the party and its autocratic rule. Deng was forced to assume responsibility for the calamity and step down.

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In 2012, Xi took over as the party's general secretary at the CCP's 18th National Congress. The following year, he became president and began to amass enormous power by establishing and leading a plethora of "leading groups." In the past, the party practiced a system of collective leadership with key roles shared among members of the party's Politburo Standing Committee.

Under Hu and former Chinese premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝), Wen was in charge of handling the economy. However, since becoming president, Xi has sought to micro-manage every area of government and abolished the president-premier power-sharing arrangement to seize control of the economic brief from Premier Li Keqiang (李克强). While Li still holds the title of premier, control of the economy has passed to Xi's most trusted political ally, Vice Premier Liu He (刘鹤).

Over the past five years, Xi has used an anti-corruption campaign as a cover to orchestrate a purge of rival factions within the military and the party. Having cracked down on cadres at all levels, Xi's anti-corruption campaign has snared hundreds of high-level cadres and nurtured an army of loyal supporters, but has also created countless political enemies.

This vast hostile force has become a thorn in Xi's side and is a source of nervousness and paranoia in the president, who believes there is an enemy lurking behind every tree or bush.

Will the abolition of presidential limits be sufficient to guarantee Xi's permanent hold on power?

There are multiple dangers looming on the horizon that could yet derail his presidency. For instance, China's economic growth could continue to slow and the trade war with the US could intensify to the extent that the US launches a full-scale economic assault on China.

In addition, Xi's Belt and Road Initiative could be resisted and killed at birth by other nations or China might become entangled in a regional political conflict that triggers a military confrontation with the US.

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During a lunch with US Republican Party supporters on March 10, US President Donald Trump joked about Xi's lifelong presidency, saying: "I think it's great. Maybe we'll have to give that a shot some day."

However, the sarcasm was lost on academics in Hong Kong and China, who believed it to be a compliment and a show of support for his counterpart.

Beijing has strictly controlled discussion within domestic media on the topic of Xi's lifelong presidency. The audio to a CNN report, broadcast in China, of Trump discussing Xi was abruptly silenced before the video feed was also severed.

The first US president, George Washington, served two terms between 1789 to 1797. Although the US constitution did not limit Washington from continuing to serve and his supporters urged him to continue, Washington refused. His decision set a precedent, creating an unwritten rule that US presidents may not serve more than two terms in office.

This rule was observed until 1940, when former US president Franklin D. Roosevelt won third and fourth terms. Eleven weeks into his fourth term in April 1945, Roosevelt died and was succeeded by his vice president, Harry Truman.

During Truman's presidency, the US Congress quickly approved a constitutional amendment stipulating that a president may renew his term only once and may hold office for a maximum of 10 years. In so doing, Congress restored the principle that political power must always be limited through a system of checks and balances.

This period of history should remind us that the US reveres democracy, and checks and balances on power. It has no time for the likes of Emperor Xi, who has just carried out a colossal power grab in a bid to subvert the global trend toward democratic rule.

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