

## The Sacking of Bo Xilai – The Sequel

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The sacking of Communist Party Chief of Chongqing and Politbureau member, Bo Xilai has turned murky with allegations of murder, money laundering, political intrigue, a power struggle for positions on the Standing Committee and eventual succession to the top position of party General Secretary. It is reported that of the nine positions on the Politbureau Standing Committee, seven are up for grabs. It is these nine standing committee members that actually run the world's second largest economy and military.

The rumour mills in China are extremely active. China has the world's largest on-line population with about half a billion users. Conscious of the damage that unverified, but startlingly frank blogs can cause; the Chinese leadership has resorted to mass censorship. Already forty two web-sites have been shut down and nearly two hundred thousand blogs deleted. Nevertheless, Chinese bloggers have found a way out by the extensive use of pseudonyms and historical allegories. Interestingly, some of the bloggers have proved to be unnervingly accurate, leading to the speculation that the 'leakers' are well connected party officials themselves.

Wang Lijun, the police chief of Chongqing, and a close subordinate of Bo Xilai was summoned to Beijing by party officials, who unnerved at the prospect of Bo Xilai's elevation as a member of the party standing committee, questioned him closely about the 'business' dealings of the Bo family. Fearing that Wang had spilled too much, Bo Xilai summarily replaced him as police chief. Wang fearing the wrath of Bo Xilai and possibly for his life fled to Chengdu and sought asylum in the US Consulate there. Wang is reported to have told the Americans about the 'business' dealings of the Bo family, their foreign investments and the fact that most of these were conducted through a British businessman named Neil Heywood. It is also report that he handed over a police file that concluded that Heywood had not died due to over consumption of alcohol, but was ostensibly poisoned to death. The main suspects were Bo Xilai's wife Gu Kailai and their house staff, Zhang Xiaojun. The Americans duly informed the British. Wang also handed over details of the alleged conversations that Bo Xilai and his ally Zhou Yongkang, a Politbureau Standing Committee member and in charge of public security, were having on how to gain ascendancy in the standing committee in the forthcoming 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. It smacked too much of intrigue and the beginnings of a political 'plot'.

Different newspapers have reported close links between Heywood and the Bo family. The British businessman Neil Heywood had studied at Harrow and Oxford and was reportedly working for a private intelligence firm, Hakluyt that was founded by former Mi 6 officers. While working in China he had met and married a Chinese woman Wang Lulu. Some have even speculated that Heywood was actually a British Mi 6 officer. It is reported that Heywood also financed the schooling of Bo's son Bo Guagua's education at Harrow and Oxford University.

It would be a travesty to suggest that a person of Bo Xilai's standing would be alone in feathering his nest. It is commonly believed that such tendencies are fairly prevalent within the ruling circles of China. Nepotism is also widely rampant.

Although both Gu Kailai and Zhang Xiaojun are under detention as 'murder suspects', Bo Xilai himself has only been faulted for 'failing to over see underlings, mismanagement of family and for flouting party procedure.' He has been ousted essentially for not maintaining party discipline. The Chinese authorities conscious of the high stakes involved have initiated a wave of propaganda articles trying to justify the ousting of a popular leader. The main theme has been the need for maintaining party discipline and that in China the rule of law must prevail.

Most analysts see the sacking of Bo Xilai as the beginning of a power struggle for succession that is slated to take place later this year. Even if the Chinese officials do not admit it, the sacking is deeply embarrassing for a party that likes to project an image of probity, discipline and unity. What 'discipline' Bo violated has not been spelt out. If he is accused of too much, it would reflect badly on the leadership as a whole. If too little, then there is no case against him. That is the central dilemma of the Chinese leadership. Having got rid of him perhaps the front runners for the two top positions, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang would feel a little less apprehensive, but ideological and factional disputes still remain to be sorted out and there could be further public fallouts. There is speculation that the next target could be Zhang Yongkang, a politbureau standing committee member and an ally of Bo Xilai. An important aspect that still remains hidden behind the bamboo curtain is who actually conspired to eliminate Bo Xilai and who drove the final nail into his political coffin. However one thing is certain that the top echelons of the Chinese Communist Party are certainly not united and that this is probably not the end of the drama.

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