



TOPIC OF THE WEEK

MAR'18. (15 to 21)

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Topic: Rationale behind Xi Jinping's Power Consolidation

The Republic of China established in 1912 was governed by a series of constitutional documents. The first formal Constitution was enacted in 1946, when the Kuomintang-controlled government hastily declared an end to the "political tutelage" stage of Sun Yat-sen's three-stage theory of constitutional government amidst internal and external pressures. The Republic of China government progressively lost control of mainland China in the late 1940s to early 1950s, but the Constitution of the Republic of China, with amendments, is still the organic law of the government in Taiwan.

It may be said that from 1949-54, the People Republic of China did have a formal Constitution. The first draft of the constitution was completed in March 1945. It was discussed in the public and certain amendments were offered and a revised draft was published in June 1954. It was thrown open to public discussion on a much wider scale. As a result of these discussions, the draft was

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once again revised and was finally approved by the Central People's Government Council on September 9, 1954. In September 1954 the All China People's National Congress was elected. It declared China a socialist State under the 'dictatorship of the working class.

China's National People's Congress on 11th March approved a plan to abolish presidential term limits, making it possible for President Xi Jinping to stay in power indefinitely and cementing a dramatic shift in Chinese politics.

At Beijing's Great Hall of the People, on the western edge of Tiananmen Square, 2,964 delegates cast their votes, with 2,958 in favor of the constitutional amendment, two against, and three abstentions and one invalid vote.

The ballot, which was largely symbolic, came two weeks after Communist Party-controlled media announced the proposal. It included other changes designed to put Xi and the party at the very heart of Chinese life.

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It is the clearest evidence yet that Xi plans to rule beyond the end of this second term, in 2023, taking China back to the era of one-man rule just as it steps up its role in global politics. “It means that Xi is now unquestionably a Leninist strongman,” Steve Tsang, director of the China Institute at SOAS University of London. Xi, unlike his predecessor, is not first among equals but “lord and master of them all,” he said.

Though state-controlled media insisted that the constitutional changes had “won the hearts of the people,” the news spurred a wave of public worry about a return to the despotic politics of the past.

“Throughout history, only Chinese emperors and Mao Zedong had lifelong tenure until their deaths,” Li said. “And what came out of that was a disaster for the society and many painful lessons.”

Since his ascendance in 2012, Xi has moved quickly to consolidate power at home and trumpet an ever-grander vision of China’s place in the world. At a Communist

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Party congress last year, his signature theory – “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” – was enshrined in China’s constitution. He started his second five-year term with no clear successor.

Party media have since amped up the hagiography, casting Xi as the father of the nation and the man uniquely equipped to lead. What remains to be seen is how Xi’s new strongman status shapes governance on the ground. Xi has built his presidency on a bold promise to “rejuvenate” China and put the country back at the center of the world. Now he must deliver, experts said. “Everyone expects that this will make Xi Jinping a stronger, more decisive leader, but it’s also possible that he will need to justify this change by maintaining his popularity,” said Mary Gallagher, director of the Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan.

This year’s constitutional revisions received the highest approval rating for such a move since 1999, with the whole voting process also completed in record time. The

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last time China amended its constitution, in 2004, it took almost two hours. Now, thanks to technology, the lawmakers took less than an hour to pass what was considered the most ambitious revision to the country's modern constitution since its first draft in 1982.

“What are the risks of these shifts?” Professor Minzner said. “In the short term, all the traditional dangers that arise from the excessive centralization of power in the hands of one person. But in the long term, the real question is how far the breakdown in political norms could go.”

On the Chinese internet, some people eluded the party's censors and mocked Mr. Xi's ambitions by sharing images like that of Winnie the Pooh – portly like Mr. Xi, and used by critics to represent him – hugging a huge jar of honey.

But many people in China have applauded his campaign against official corruption. And harsh security measures make mass protests against a central leader nearly

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impossible. So any major public backlash against Mr. Xi's move appears unlikely.

The proposed constitutional changes were released in the name of the Central Committee, a council of hundreds of senior party officials, who will meet starting on Monday for three days. Mr. Xi had already built expectations that he would stay in office past two terms, and some analysts said he must have decided to move while at peak political strength. Usually, authority begins to ebb from Chinese leaders as retirement nears.

The proposed amendments would also authorize a new anticorruption commission that Mr. Xi has pushed. The commission would expand the reach of corruption investigations, which up to now have mostly been conducted by a Communist Party agency acting largely beyond the law. The amendments are almost certain to be passed into law by the party-controlled legislature, the National People's Congress, which holds its annual full session starting on March 5. The congress has never voted down a proposal from party leaders.

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“Xi Jinping is susceptible to making big mistakes because there are now almost no checks or balances,” said Willy Lam, an adjunct professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong who is the author of a 2015 biography of Mr. Xi. “Essentially, he has become emperor for life.”

There was no debate, no discussion and not even canvassing. The whole event was meticulously managed to the last detail. All the deputies gathered at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing at 3pm sharp. Each received a pink ballot paper the size of an A4 sheet. They were given a short briefing on how to use a specially designed pen to tick the box of their choice before putting the completed ballot papers in 28 red, electronic ballot boxes designed to immediately scan and record the results.

It was a smooth and error-free process – something many deputies say is how things in China should be run. Against the backdrop of cheerful traditional Chinese music, Xi walked on to the stage to cast his vote amid

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thunderous applause. His trusted ally Wang Qishan – despite being only an ordinary party member after retiring from the party leadership in October – was also clapped loudly.

The all-encompassing anti-graft commission will have huge investigation power and is being set up under a national supervision law that is expected to be passed by the legislature at March's full meeting.

It will be the fifth time the Chinese constitution has been amended since it came into force in 1982. Previous revisions include the replacement of “planned economy” with “socialist market economy” to describe the country's economic system in 1993.

China is not a dictatorship, but it is a one-party state. While party factions were no substitute for true democratic elections, they do inject some degree of competition (and even choice) into Chinese politics. As Xi pushes to unify the Party behind his own agenda, he risks alienating everyone who doesn't find a place in that

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agenda. Without any organized opponents, Xi may ultimately find himself heading a faction of one. That may stabilize Chinese politics through the 2021 centenary of the CPC. What it will mean for the 2049 centenary of the PRC is anyone's guess.

Suggested Reading:

- ✓ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/11/world/asia/china-xi-constitution-term-limits.html>
- ✓ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/salvatorebabones/2018/03/11/chinas-constitutional-amendments-are-all-about-the-party-not-the-president/#85e58061615a>
- ✓ <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2136788/chinas-state-media-defend-changes-constitution-removing>