

Leader looks to Mao and Stalin to expand his power, dictate China's destiny.

Xi Steamrolls Dissent With Old Playbook

BY CHUN HAN WONG

Chinese leader Xi Jinping is employing the sort of autocratic tactics once wielded by Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong to stamp out opposition and stack the leadership with acolytes as he prepares to extend his reign.

In a throwback to the most powerful Communist leaders of the 20th century, Xi has purged dozens of senior officials—even his own protégés—overseen the growth of a cult of personality and demanded absolute loyalty.

His goal: Dictate China's destiny for years to come to expand the country's power and match the U.S. in military might and economic clout. Now in his 14th year as party leader, the 73-year-old Xi has eliminated conventions put in place after Mao to prevent a return to one-man rule.

But such strongman tactics come with risks. In squelching debate and stoking a climate of fear, Xi has made policymaking more arbitrary and mistakes harder to correct. Without clear succession planning, Xi also risks the fate that befell Stalin and Mao, whose deaths in office unleashed struggles for power that ended up unraveling their political visions.

Stalin and Mao eliminated rivals and quashed dissent as they consolidated absolute power. In launching the disastrous Cultural Revolution, Mao mobilized zealous youths to attack alleged counterrevolutionaries, unleashing mob violence and social turmoil.

While Xi shunned such fanaticism, he has purged senior officials at a speed and scale unseen since the Mao era. Unending allegations of corruption and political dissent aim to compel officials to demonstrate loyalty to Xi and ensure that no one can undermine him.

Xi has stepped up the culling since starting his third term as party leader in 2022. He took down three sitting members of the elite Politburo in six months, the biggest purge at this level since 1976. China's ministers for defense, foreign affairs and agriculture have been removed, along with other military commanders, regional leaders, financial regulators and stateenterprise executives.

For Communist leaders, "The more successful you are, the more enemies are afraid of you and mobilize to destroy you, and therefore the more you need to purge," said Joseph Torigian, a historian at American University in Washington.

Xi has pushed aside guardrails to prevent a return to Mao-style autocracy.

During his first decade in power, Xi discarded age-based retirement norms for senior officials and repealed a twoterm limit on China's presidency, clearing his path to remain party chief and head of state indefinitely.

Xi, whose stint as Communist Party leader is the longest since Mao, appears poised to claim a fourth five-year term as party chief in 2027 and as state president in 2028.

Xi concentrated key policymaking powers into his own hands during his first two terms as party leader, asserting personal control over everything from economic planning to national security.

In his third term, Xi has delegated some responsibilities to a small group of loyalists who are in their late 60s and early 70s—considered too old to be viable successors. He hasn't promoted into the party's seven-man leadership body anyone young and experienced enough to be a suitable heir, say party insiders.

This approach is risky. Succession struggles after Stalin and Mao fueled political turmoil. Stalin's death in 1953 sparked a succession fight and a process of "de-Stalinization" that dismantled his personality cult and program of mass terror. After Mao died in 1976, his chosen successor purged a group of rivals known as the "Gang of Four" before being pushed aside by Deng Xiaoping, who became paramount leader and reversed many of Mao's policies.

Xi has set up an extensive system of rules and enforcement that closely dictates the behavior of party members and -- government workers. To enforce these rules, Xi empowered the party's top internal watchdog, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, to scrutinize the party's 100 million members and police their loyalty.

Communist Party authorities disciplined nearly a million people last year, the highest annual tally on record.

Xi has also retained an element of Stalin and Mao's approaches to social control: encouraging people to monitor and report on each other. Even so, Xi has avoided the mass terror and mob violence these two leaders unleashed.

Like Stalin and Mao, Xi portrays himself as the greatest Communist theorist of his generation. He claims credit for major policies and links them to his own political philosophy, known as "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."

New rules require all prospective party members to study "Xi Jinping Thought" during the admission process. Members must take part in regular study sessions on Xi's policies.

Tapping in to Mao's legacy, analysts said, helps Xi justify his autocratic style.

"Whether it's Stalin or Mao or Xi, they all act with clearheaded rationality" in enforcing their policies and entrenching their power, said Guoguang Wu, a senior fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute. "They are certainly ruthless—there are no emotional factors in their calculations."

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