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Real meaning of the rot at the top of China

By Daniel Bell

The [Communist party of China](#) faces a colossal legitimacy crisis. The scandal surrounding Bo Xilai, once a party leadership contender, poses a threat to the regime. The CPC's leaders are [throwing the book at Mr Bo and his family](#) in an effort to save their own jobs. But this can barely conceal the [panic in the top ranks](#).

Or so we are told. The collapse of the CPC has been repeatedly forecast ever since the suppression of the pro-democracy uprisings in 1989. But the system did not collapse then and it will not collapse now.

The reason such dire predictions are taken seriously is that non-democratic regimes are seen by the west to lack legitimacy. The theory is simple: a political regime that is morally justified in the eyes of the people must be chosen by the people. Rule by a [self-selected elite](#) is fragile, as the Arab spring has shown.

But this view assumes the people are dissatisfied with the regime. In fact, surveys suggest the Chinese political system's legitimacy is high. To the extent there is dissatisfaction, it is largely directed at lower levels of government. It may sound paradoxical to western ears but the CPC has succeeded by drawing upon sources of non-democratic legitimacy.

The first source is "performance legitimacy". This idea is rooted in Confucian and socialist values, and the CPC derives legitimacy from its ability to provide for the welfare of the people. The reform era has seen perhaps the most impressive poverty reduction in history.

The second source is political meritocracy: the view that leaders should have above-average ability to make morally informed judgments. It too has deep historical roots. In imperial China, scholar-officials proved their ability in a fair and open examination system, which granted them respect and legitimacy.

Surveys indicate that the Chinese care more about having high-quality politicians than about having procedural arrangements to choose their

leaders. Over the past 30 years, the CPC has transformed itself into a more meritocratic organisation, with a renewed emphasis on examinations and education as leadership criteria.

Ideological legitimacy is the third source. The CPC was founded on Marxist principles but few Chinese believe in communism any more. Instead, the CPC has turned to nationalism, which in China has more recent roots. Traditional elites viewed China as the centre of the world. But this vision faded when it was subject to the incursions of foreign powers in the mid-19th century, leading to a “century of humiliation”. The CPC put a symbolic end to bullying by foreign powers with the establishment of a relatively secure state in 1949.

In short, there is no reason to expect the imminent collapse of the regime. But the key word is “imminent”. In the absence of substantial political reform, China’s non-democratic sources of political legitimacy will not be sustainable.

“Performance legitimacy” varies according to economic conditions. China’s rulers are still seen as the best stewards of the economy and their legitimacy could actually increase in times of crisis. The real trouble may occur once China has eliminated poverty. The CPC would then have to turn to the ethical and intellectual development of the people, as Confucius suggested. This equates to more opportunities for the Chinese to participate in politics, which also means more freedom of political speech.

Furthermore, the emphasis on meritocracy for CPC officials refers to virtue as well as ability. In the past, moral legitimacy stemmed from perceived commitment to Confucian values. Today, however, leaders are widely seen to be morally corrupt and lacking any serious commitment to an ethical system. Most of the popular anger is directed at lower-level corrupt officials, but the Bo case points to rot at the top.

China’s leaders are also seen to be responsible for the moral state of the whole nation, which is perceived to be in poor shape. If nothing is done to improve perceptions of moral collapse, they may not be able to resist calls for wholesale change of leadership.

Nationalism also has inherent problems for the regime’s legitimacy. The point of building up state power was to secure political stability so that people could lead decent lives. It may have made sense to build up this power when China was routinely bullied by foreigners but it is harder to justify now that the country has the ability to bully others. Hence Confucian reformists argue for a

more humane form of nationalism that is grounded in values such as benevolence and harmony.

The world has been gripped by the saga of Mr Bo. This is forgivable. It is a remarkable story. But amid the scandal, it is vital to understand how the Chinese regime achieves legitimacy through – not despite – non-democratic methods. Only then can western observers identify the signs of China's future fragility.

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