China: ‘Some retired leading cadres interfere in organizational work through their cronies’ - Is Jiang Zemin being targeted?

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People's Daily (Chinese language edition), the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), carried a signed commentary on August 10, 2015, which alleged that “some retired leading cadres”, while they were in office, put their “cronies” in key positions, so that they can interfere in the work of their original organizations and wield influence in the future.

This is making new leaders feel that unnecessary concerns affect their work as their “hands and feet” are being fettered. Contributed by Gu Bochong, a Deputy chief in the General Political Department of China's People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and a member of the CCP-managed China Writers Association, the write up is fast catching the attention of China watchers in the world who are trying to find out whether there is any political meaning in what has been said in it. Quite a few analysts have traced in the article a veiled attack against the former party strongman Jiang Zemin, now 89 years old, but still said to be influential.

To help in getting a correct picture, it would be desirable to read

(i) The free translation into English of the original text (done by D.S.Rajan, the writer of this article), which is at Appendix.

(ii) The original Chinese language text of the Commentary which is at http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0810/c1001-27436119.html [1] and
The commentary is unmistakably an authoritative one, judging from the fact that the author is a senior serving PLA cadre in the Centre. Also, surely, it constitutes a sharp criticism of some retired leading cadres for their interference in matters relating to their former units and thereby weakening cohesion in the party and putting their successors in embarrassing positions. The commentary at the same time falls short of giving a warning to these cadres; it gives only a call to them for adapting themselves to the situation after retirement. Significantly, it does not name any leader and as such, there is no clarity that any particular personality has been targeted. Several media outlets monitoring the correspondence within China on the commentary have done what can be called intelligent guess work. They have found that responding to the comparison done by it of retired cadres with 'cold tea', one online reader has observed, "What happens if the jasmine tea always wants to stay hot? It must be thrown away". The word "jasmine" in Chinese is pronounced "jiang", which could be a euphemism for former CCP supremo Jiang Zemin. The fact however that is is still no direct evidence to Jiang Zemin coming under attack.

It is a fact that quite a few top Jiang Zemin allies like Zhou Yongkang, Guo Boxiung and Xu Caihou, have been targeted under the CCP chief Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign. Also, Jiang Zemin and his successor Hu Jintao had reportedly demanded Xi to rein in his campaign and that is not being acceded to by the latter. Such instances do signal an atmosphere of political friction in China, but they look insufficient to indicate emergence of an anti-Jiang Zemin political climate in the country. It should be noted that the retired top leader still continues to be highly regarded nationally. The state controlled media constantly report on his activities, the latest such occasion being his visit to a Beijing hospital on February 17, 2015, to express condolences on the demise of late CCP leader Deng Liqun.

The publication of People’s Daily item has coincided with the usual annual slot for the Beidaihe conference of senior leaders, about which no official confirmation has so far come. If being held, party problems mentioned in the commentary might be addressed on the occasion. But confusion prevails as the CCP-affiliated Global Times has reported that this year’s gathering at Beidaihe may not take place as a ‘signal to progress in transparency of China’s decision-making process’ (http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/935728.shtml [3], dated August 6, 2015).

In a nutshell, the commentary in question brings to fore a sensitive topic, which may suggest that a complicated phase in domestic politics of China under Xi Jinping, centering round his anti-corruption campaign has begun. An important question will be whether the leader will be successful in identifying and eliminating the alleged ‘cronies’ in the party and government of the still influential retired cadres. In overall sense, it would be paramount for Xi to settle any problem in power equations by the time the fifth plenum of the 18th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee meets in October 2015 to discuss personnel changes and the agenda for the next national five-year plan. Future developments would be interesting to watch.

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Appendix


Dialectically treating the concept of “people in positions have to leave, just like hot tea has to become cold” (“Ren Zou, Cha Liang”)

"Ren Zou Cha Liang" is a concept which denotes a situation in which people often lament the changes in life happened after they leave jobs. But when the concept is approached dialectically, a clear norm emerges – people after retiring from their places and government positions, become like "cold tea".

For a long time, many of our cadres who are old, broad minded and have noble sentiments, after stepping down from their jobs, are correctly treating the change of status and consciously not intervening in the work of new teams; this is winning everyone’s respect. However, some leading cadres, while they were in office, with intentions to play a “more than the right” role and wield influence in the future as well as to intervene in the major issues of the organizations they formerly worked for, even many years after they retired, planted their "cronies" in key positions. Through their cronies, they are trying to intervene in crucial decisions that should otherwise be left to the executive. By doing so, they are weakening cohesion within the Party and put their successors in the embarrassing positions. They are making new leaders unnecessarily concerned under a feeling that their “hands and feet” are being fettered. If decisions are made against their wishes, they accuse serving officials of being superior and aloof. Such a phenomenon is creating a dilemma for the new leadership, causing inconvenience and denying free hand to it, in carrying out bold tasks. In some units, it is resulting in rampant vulgarity in their work, formation of cliques and individualist tradition; these units are losing their morale and willingness to do hard work.

One might think that the concept of "Ren Zou Cha Liang" is human. Some leading cadres think on this line. They think that they have managed to gain a firm footing in their units which gives them a prestige; they are not willing to accept the post-retirement "Ren Zou Cha Liang", so they do everything possible to extend their powers and try to keep their cups of tea always hot.
"Ren Zou Cha Liang" is a social concept also. When leading cadres leave original units and positions, naturally they can no longer enjoy the original share of the power and benefits. Thus, this concept stipulating that “people in positions have to leave, just like hot tea has to become cold” is perfectly normal.

From an emotional point of view, "Ren Zou Cha Liang" is understandable. When people are in work, they have their own circles and living areas. When individuals leave their units, contact with the past colleagues, subordinates and acquaintances tend to gradually reduce; such fading of relationship over time, is normal.

"Ren Zou Cha Liang" is the norm; it should not affect old party cadres politically and ideologically. There should be no impact on their sense of security and feeling of happiness. Retired officials and their families should adapt themselves to retirement, which means making fewer public appearances than previously. The serving officials on their part, should strike a balance between being respectful to retired cadres and establishing stricter rules to prevent the latter from maintaining their past influence.

Tags:
People's Liberation Army[5]
Chinese Communist Party[6]
Jiang Zemin[7]
Category:
Papers[8]
Countries:
China[9]
Topics:
Political[10]