

Xi's offer of stability in a time of chaos



Chinese President Xi Jinping, after being elected for another term, at the National People's Congress last Saturday. Analysts say the uncertainty of the Trump administration is a big opportunity for China. PHOTO: REUTERS

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For The Straits Times

The consolidation of power in Chinese President Xi Jinping's hands this past week offers the world a measure of stability and certainty.

This is all the more striking at a time when United States President Donald Trump is creating chaos at home and abroad.

"Extending Mr Xi's tenure will ensure some measure of predictability in one way at least: by allowing for resolute policymaking," wrote Professor Mary Gallagher, a China analyst at the University of Michigan, in an article published a few days after the scrapping of term limits on the Chinese presidency was announced.

Some scholars of authoritarianism divide dictatorships into two categories – institutional and personal.

The first operates through committees, bureaucracies and something like consensus. The second runs through a single charismatic leader.

Maoist China, Stalin's Soviet Union and, now, Mr Vladimir Putin's Russia are some of the obvious examples of the second.

Deng Xiaoping's political reforms were moving China, albeit slowly, into the first category. Will the granting of additional working life to Mr Xi take China back to the first category?

The answer is not necessarily so. Even those Chinese scholars not working in government institutions believe that the new economic reality and the enormous changes in the global system require China to make massive political and economic adjustments. These may not be possible in a relatively slow-moving decision-making system based on consensus building.

DOWNSIDERS OF PERSONAL DICTATORSHIP

The Chinese system may move to the institutional category once China has developed a new economic model and redefined its role in the still-forming international system that calls for new power-sharing arrangements among the world's major powers.

Mr Xi has said that he would like to work with the US, still the world's largest economy, but in the context of an internationally-agreed legal framework.

However, authoritarianism of the personal variety is harder to maintain. According to Dr Erica Frantz, a scholar at the Michigan State University, personalisation is

not a good development. There are subtle downsides that lead to long-term instability. Domestic politics then become more volatile, governing more erratic and foreign policies more aggressive.

If her research is correct, the Xi manoeuvre aimed at obtaining stability over the short-term might, in the end, yield long-term instability. This may result from the people's aspirations for greater participation.

In 2005, political scientist Bruce Gilley struggled with one of the most important questions for any government – is it viewed by its citizens as legitimate?

He came up with a numerical score, determined by sophisticated measurements of how the governed behave. He found then that China enjoyed higher legitimacy than many democracies and every other non-democracy.

This work was done when China was concluding the first phase of its remarkable economic progress. In the preceding quarter century, its national income increased 32-fold and income per head of the population 25-fold.

However, with the Great Recession of 2007-09, China's economic fortunes changed, along with the rest of the world. Dr Gilley revisited his model in 2012 while the global economy was still in the recovery mode and found that

China's score had plummeted.

Government legitimacy, in other words, depended on the well-being of the citizenry.

PRESSURES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Economic slowdown was not the only problem China faced.

When Mr Xi took control of the party in 2013 and became the country's president, he was aware that he had to deal with another problem. "Elite capture" is the term used in economics and political science for the situations in which those who have access to power use it to satisfy themselves rather than the general populace.

There was considerable elite capture going on in China when Mr Xi was handed the reins of power. There was obvious discontent in the country. This could pose serious challenge to those in positions of power.

Recognising this, Mr Xi and his associates decided to tighten their grip on the political system while moving decisively against corruption.

A programme was launched, aimed at the people who occupied senior positions in the party, the government and the military. Thousands of people fell from power and some landed in prison.

By the spring of this year, Mr Xi felt strong enough to change the Constitution and prolong his stay in power, arguing for continuity in the process of governance.

This retreat into authoritarian politics in China is occurring at a time when other parts of the world are also moving in the direction away from open, liberal political systems that allow for the full participation of all people.

However, it is in global economics that Mr Xi's influence will be greatly felt. For allies who have long looked to the US to provide security and stability, Mr Trump's moves were "a dizzying jolt of drama that injected fresh uncertainty into strategic calculations in the world, where China is seeking to supplant the US as the major power", wrote Ms Motoko Rich of The New York Times, in an appraisal of how the world sees the Trump administration operating in the world.

"This is, without question, a big opportunity for China, said Mr Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group, a New York-based research firm that forecasts global risks. "The US has become a less certain partner in for a while."

In this situation, it made a great deal of sense for China to opt for certainty and stability by extending the life span of the Xi administration.

This move involves a trade-off between continued and cautious political development and continuity. Mr Xi, by now, is an experienced hand both in domestic and external affairs. By placing China in his hands, the Chinese have not abandoned political progress. They have only postponed it.

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