



## China's Sixth Plenum: Analysing the Outcomes

*Dr. Sanjeev Kumar and Dr. Avinash Godbole \**

The Sixth Plenary Session of the 18th Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee was held in Beijing from October 24 to 27, 2016. The meeting was significant as China's top leadership discussed the political issues pertaining to governance and discipline of the Party. According to an early press release, this plenum was expected to discuss and amend Party management, including "the review of key issues concerning the comprehensive and strict management of the Party, writing the norms of intra-Party political life under the new situation; and a revision to an intra-Party supervision regulation".<sup>1</sup> Thus, a stricter observation of the conduct of individuals as well as the party institutions was high on the agenda of this plenum. In addition, according to reports by Xinhua, the preparatory meeting had decided, "the party needed to enhance its ability in self-cleansing, self-consummating, self-innovating and self-enhancing" in new situations, and to "resist corruption" and "withstand risks".<sup>2</sup>

Since Xi Jinping's coming to power an anti-corruption campaign is underway in which numerous big and small leaders of the Party have either been convicted or have been investigated relating to the matters of corruption, misuse of power for personal gains, undue gains within the family members or personal networks. There has been a perception that this campaign was politically motivated and the Sixth Plenum was expected to enhance the Party's rulebook of conduct to bring in a defined code of conduct relating to the use and misuse of political power. Further, there is another perception that the fall of the top Party and military leaders like Bo Xilai, Zhou Yongkang, Xu Caihou and Ling Jihua during the anti-corruption campaign was hurting the image of the Party and the country.

The media hype, particularly in the West mostly concerns the "core" status of Xi Jinping and the issues related to succession. However, the Communiqué issued by the CPC at the conclusion of the Sixth Plenary Session is quite comprehensive and provides significant details about the challenges facing the Party and the direction of China's political reform processes.<sup>3</sup> The

communiqué has noted that China has made significant progress in promoting: comprehensive deepening of reform, supply-side structural reforms, and defence and military reforms.

### **Outcomes of the Sixth Plenum**

The initial part of the Communiqué argues for a need to develop the guidelines for the Party under the new situation. It talks about advancing the great project of “party building” and promoting the great cause of “socialism with Chinese characteristics in order to withstand “Four tests” (四大考验) and overcome “Four kinds of dangers” (四种危险). The four tests refer to the following: (a) test of the CPC as the ruling party (b) test of reform and opening up (c) market economy test and (d) test in external environment.<sup>4</sup> The “four dangers” are lost vitality, insufficient capacity, alienation from the people and rampant corruption. It is noteworthy that Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the CPC had highlighted the ‘tests’ and ‘dangers’ in 2011.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, the Plenum approved two documents relating to the norms of political life within the Party under the new situation and a regulation on intra-party supervision<sup>6</sup>.

There is continuity with previous Party documents as far as China’s political discourse is concerned. It calls to adhere to Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong thought, Deng Xiaoping theory, Three Represents (by Jiang Zemin) as well as the Scientific Concept of Development (by Hu Jintao).

The Plenum went further and endorsed Xi Jinping’s new ideas on governance to unite and lead the whole party and people of all ethnic groups together. It aimed to promote “Five in one” (五位一体) and “Four Comprehensives” (四个全面) put forward by Xi Jinping.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the Communiqué did not use the term “China Dream” – that President Xi Jinping often repeated in his speeches during his first year as the President of the PRC.

### **Xi as the Core**

The Sixth Plenary Session called on all party members to “closely unite around the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core”. One of the significant points of the Communiqué issued at the end of the Plenum was that Xi Jinping was elevated to the level of “core” leader. Significantly, he is the first serving President of China to himself adopt such status. Deng Xiaoping had coined this term and called Mao Zedong and himself as the core leaders of their generation, and Jiang Zemin of the third-generation of the CPC leadership. When Deng had devised this term, China was passing through a political crisis in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Thus, the idea behind identifying Jiang Zemin as a core leader was also to reduce the status of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. Presently, the idea that China does need a core leader stems from the perception that the country is facing immense economic and political challenges at home and abroad and that the country needs a strong party and the party needs a strong leadership to tide over these challenges. Further, the Chinese media argue that the new status is also meant to help Mr. Xi’s fight against corruption.

It can be argued that the elevation of Xi Jinping's status gives him more power to select the next set of members of the Politburo and the Standing Committee. Increased focus on discipline and the stricter implementation of rules and regulations may also mean an even more enhanced role for the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) under Wang Qishan, who is considered to be close to Xi Jinping.

### **Serving the People**

The Communiqué underlines that the future destiny of China is tied with the fundamental interests of people of all ethnicities. It emphasizes that the Party must adhere to the fundamental purpose of serving the people and the Party must implement its “mass line” for the people. It stresses the need to do everything possible to solve the problems of the people. It even notes that the ties between the Party and the people are like “flesh and blood”.

### **Democratic Centralism**

Democratic centralism is the fundamental organizational principle of the Party. The Plenum called for a combination of collective leadership and individual responsibility. The collective leadership system must always be followed and “should not be violated by any organizations or individual under any circumstances for any reason.”<sup>8</sup> The collective leadership was introduced in 1981 to ensure that no individual dominates the party.

### **Inner-Party Democracy**

By and large when Chinese leaders talk about strengthening democracy in China they refer to inner-party democracy. The 16th Party Congress (2002) declared inner-party democracy as the “lifeblood of the Party”. Hu Jintao's report at the 17th Party Congress (2007) noted the need to “expand inner-party democracy to bring along people's democracy” The process of “inner-party democracy,” by which the views of the members of the Central Committee are solicited, began to play an important role during the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (2012)<sup>9</sup>. The Sixth Plenary Session of the 18th Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee reiterated that “inner-Party democracy is the life of the party”.<sup>10</sup>

The Plenum placed importance on ability and integrity while selecting and appointing cadres for the Party and its resolute determination to put an end to the practice of buying and selling of official positions, election malpractices and acts of bribery during elections. It also highlighted the conduct of senior cadres in setting examples for others to follow and strict supervision of political power and the observance of the Party discipline. The emphasis on strict supervision and resolute efforts to fight corruption certainly represents the resolve of the new leadership.

### **Anti-Corruption Drive**

The ongoing anti-corruption campaign of the leadership was reflected in the Plenum's Communiqué. It noted “together we must build a clean and righteous political environment, and

ensure that the Party unites and leads the people to continuously open up new prospects for socialism with Chinese characteristics”.<sup>11</sup>

The Plenum endorsed prior decisions to expel four former senior officials from the Party namely - Wang Min, former Party Chief of Liaoning Province, Lyu Xiwen, former Beijing Deputy Party Chief, and Fan Changmi and Niu Zhizhong, former senior military officials. The previous decisions of their expulsions were made by the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee.

### **Defence and Military Reforms**

The Communiqué has noted that China has made remarkable progress in defence and military reforms. It is noteworthy that under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, the CPC Central Committee has attached great importance to defense and military reforms. After the third plenary session of the 18th CPC Central Committee, the CMC established the leading group for the work, and later drafted a reform plan. China's military area commands and military departments are reorganized.<sup>12</sup> The reforms are described by Chinese leadership as historic change in the organization and structure of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>13</sup>

Further, the Central Military Commission (CMC) has issued a circular urging the PLA and the armed police force to study and implement the spirit of the Sixth Plenary session of the 18th CPC Central Committee.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress**

A resolution on convening the 19th National Congress of the CPC was deliberated and passed at the Sixth Plenary session. The Plenum noted that the 19th National Congress of the CPC is a major event in the political life of the Party and the state, and will be held in the second half of 2017. It noted that the entire Party shall comprehensively implement the spirit of the 18th National Congress of the CPC, as well as the third, fourth, fifth and sixth plenary sessions of the 18th CPC Central Committee.

*In the lead-up to the 19th National Congress of the CPC, the Communiqué calls for starting preparatory work for thought, theories and organization, economic and social development, as well as ideological work. Presumably, these preparatory works will be done through formation of various committees.*

### **Conclusion**

The era of high growth rate in China seems to be over now and the country is adapting to a “new normal”. It is undergoing transitions in the industrial structure, labour, urbanization, income distribution and other key areas amid its slower economic growth. It is also evident that important issues like reform of State-owned Enterprises (SOEs) in urban China and land reform in rural China have not made much headway, which was highlighted in the Third Plenum and was expected to play an instrumental role in deepening the reforms.

Though the concept of a leader as “core” is not new in Chinese political discourse, President Xi Jinping is leading an important political experiment in China. The Communist Party of China faces a big challenge in regulating its members effectively, especially Party officials at various levels who exert power. The rise of “middle class” in China has also been considered as a threat to the CPC by some experts. Significantly, the Plenum adopted two important documents on guiding principles and regulations for the Party. The full texts of these documents have not been released by the CPC so far. While the Plenum has used strong language to check indiscipline and corruption in the Party, it would be interesting to see the extent to which the Party would implement the new strict rules of governance and intra-party conduct.

\*\*\*

\* Dr. Sanjeev Kumar and Dr. Avinash Godbole are Research Fellow with the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of authors and do not reflect the views of the Council.

### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Xinhua, “CPC to hold key plenum in October”, 26 July 2016, at [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-07/26/c\\_135542196.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-07/26/c_135542196.htm) (accessed 25 October 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Li Jing, “Key Communist Party plenum set for late October”, *South China Morning Post*, 27 September 2016, at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2022979/politburo-announces-chinese-communist-party-plenum-will> (accessed 25 October 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Xinhua News Agency, 中国共产党十八届六中全会公报发布(全文) (The Sixth Plenary Session of the 18<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of China Central Committee Communique) issued on 27 October 2016 available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-10-27/doc-ifxxfuff6960217.shtml> accessed on 27 October 2016

<sup>4</sup> For more details kindly see “四大考验”：党的建设面临的重大挑战(Four tests": the major challenges facing the Party building) available at <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/15105893.html>

<sup>5</sup> For more details kindly see “四种危险”：党长期执政的安全警示 (four Kind of Denger) available at <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/15230219.html>

<sup>6</sup> Xinhua News Agency, 中国共产党十八届六中全会公报发布(全文) (The Sixth Plenary Session of the 18<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of China Central Committee Communique) issued on 27 October 2016 available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-10-27/doc-ifxxfuff6960217.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> Five in One” is all about comprehensively promoting economic construction, political construction, cultural construction, social construction, and ecological civilization”. Four comprehensive refers to following: Comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society, Comprehensively deepen reform, Comprehensively govern the nation according to law, Comprehensively strictly govern the Party.

<sup>8</sup> Xinhua News Agency, 中国共产党十八届六中全会公报发布(全文) (The Sixth Plenary Session of the 18<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of China Central Committee Communique) issued on 27 October 2016 available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-10-27/doc-ifxxfuff6960217.shtml> accessed on 27 October 2016

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Fewsmith, “The 18th Party Congress: Testing the Limits of Institutionalization” available at [media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM40JF.pdf](http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM40JF.pdf) accessed on 8 October 2015

<sup>10</sup> Xinhua News Agency, 中国共产党十八届六中全会公报发布(全文) (The Sixth Plenary Session of the 18<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of China Central Committee Communique) issued on 27 October 2016 available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-10-27/doc-ifxxfuff6960217.shtml> accessed on 27 October 2016

---

<sup>11</sup> Xinhua News Agency, 中国共产党十八届六中全会公报发布(全文) (The Sixth Plenary Session of the 18<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of China Central Committee Communique) issued on 27 October 2016 available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-10-27/doc-ifxxfuff6960217.shtml> accessed on 27 October 2016

<sup>12</sup> The general command of the PLA, the PLA Rocket Force, and the PLA Strategic Support Force were established on the basis of reform plan. The previous seven military area commands were regrouped into five theater commands, and the four military departments namely- staff, politics, logistics and armaments -- were reorganized into 15 agencies.

<sup>13</sup> "Xi calls for further armed forces reform" available

[http://english.qstheory.cn/2016-07/29/c\\_1119302078.htm](http://english.qstheory.cn/2016-07/29/c_1119302078.htm)

Reference: Lu Wei "Adhering to a Distinctively Chinese Approach to Reform" Qiushi Journal Vol.6 No.2 April, 2014 available at [http://english.qstheory.cn/magazine/201401\\_10013/201405/t20140509\\_347710.htm](http://english.qstheory.cn/magazine/201401_10013/201405/t20140509_347710.htm)