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Henry S. GAO

Singapore Management University, henrygao@smu.edu.sg

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BLOG



HENRY GAO

Henry Gao is Associate Professor of Law at Singapore Management University and Dongfang Scholar Chair Professor at the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade.

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Bo Xilai's True Crime

After more than a year in detention, Bo Xilai, the former Communist Party chief of China's Chongqing city, has been officially charged with accepting an "extremely large amount" of bribes, embezzling public funds, and abusing public office. But, while the charges may sound severe, Bo's situation may not be as serious as it appears.

Indeed, contrary to the indictment's language, the ¥20 million (\$3.2 million) in bribes that Bo allegedly accepted are relatively modest for China, where village chiefs can rake in billions. While accepting a bribe of more than ¥100,000 carries a punishment ranging from ten years to life imprisonment, Bo seems to have escaped the death penalty, given that the indictment mentions no "aggravating circumstances." The same is true for the ¥5 million of public funds that Bo allegedly embezzled.

Moreover, although "aggravating circumstances" (and "heavy losses to national interests") were cited in the indictment for abuse of public office, that crime's maximum punishment is only a seven-year prison sentence. As a result, even combining the punishments for all three crimes, Bo's worst-case scenario is life imprisonment.

Perhaps most revealing, Bo has apparently escaped any charges relating to the widely publicized murder of British businessman Neil Heywood. Last August's judgment against Bo's wife, Gu Kailai, set the stage for this outcome, excluding any mention of Bo – even a reference to the fact that he is her husband.

The Party Disciplinary Committee's report on the subject last September was less forgiving, stating that Bo "made a serious mistake and bore heavy responsibility in the Heywood murder." While the public may never find out exactly what happened over the last ten months, it is not difficult to imagine that Party leaders seeking to keep Bo off death row deliberately eliminated any official mention of a connection between him and Heywood's murder.

Another glaring omission from Bo's indictment is the "singing red, striking black" campaign that he employed while vying for a coveted seat on the Politburo Standing Committee. Despite the popularity of Bo's crusade – in which he promoted neo-Maoist ethics by reviving revolutionary songs and launching a large-scale crackdown on organized crime and corruption – the campaign ignored due process, and the resurgence of Mao-era propaganda raised fears, particularly among reformers and intellectuals, of cultural and political regression.

While there are many potential explanations for excluding the campaign's excesses from the indictment, the most plausible seems to be lack of agreement among Party leaders that such activities should be officially condemned. Indeed, despite the country's shift to state capitalism, Marxist slogans have retained huge appeal, owing to rapid growth in inequality. President Xi Jinping's patrimony – he is the son of revolutionaries – further impedes the elimination of Communist rhetoric (though it rarely influences officials' actions).

Bo's situation reflects the realities of Chinese politics more than it does his own actions. After all, as anyone familiar with China knows, while corruption charges can be ruinous for low-level bureaucrats, they are generally regarded as petty misdemeanors for officials at Bo's level.

So what was Bo's real crime? A recent editorial by the state-run Xinhua news agency may offer some clues. The article details the need for local governments to defend the central government's authority and execute its policies unwaveringly, reinforcing the point with a Tang-era poem ("To repay the honor bestowed upon me by the emperor, I shall fight to death for the emperor"). Only such a unified approach, the editorial explains, can enable the country to realize the "Chinese dream."

This suggests that Bo's most egregious offense was not corruption or murder, but stepping out of line during a critical leadership transition – a time when China's leaders are extremely careful to uphold the appearance of unity across all levels of government. Bo disrupted the system, and now he will pay the price. He will not have to die for the emperor,

but his case shows that China's current political system has much in common with the imperial past.

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