

The perfect dictatorship, amending the constitution to rule for life, China, Russia, Turkey as examples

By: Nadum Jwad*

Introduction

“The perfect dictatorship” was a famous statement by Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa that he used to describe the continuous governments of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which dominated politics in Mexico for much of the 20th century (1.)

The PRI was founded by former president Plutarco Elías Calles and his followers in a period of conflict with the Roman Catholic Church, rebellion in the military, and disputes with the United States. In effect, the party represented the institutionalization of the new power structure that had emerged as a result of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), a coalition of regional and local political-military bosses and labor and peasant leaders. This governing coalition sought a more conservative evolution (though often under “revolutionary” guises) and more stability in government. In the new party-state system that emerged, party control came to be concentrated in the Central Executive Committee, whose chief was selected by the president of Mexico and entrusted with the task of approving party nominees for all important elective positions in Mexico except for the presidency. The incumbent president, who under the Mexican constitution could serve only one term, selected his own successor. The Central Executive Committee became responsible for enforcing a common understanding among state and national officials and among the various groups within the party (2.)

The above arrangement of mandating that the incumbent president can only serve for one term, but select his own successor (who is a PRI member of course) what prompted Mario Vargas Llosa to brand it as a “perfect dictatorship”, which is meant to change faces on the top but the country remains under the PRI’s iron grip.

Xi Jinping of China

Until literally the past week, this arrangement of one party but different presidents dominating political life entrenched in the constitution was strikingly identical to that of China in which the China Communist Party (CCP) has a total monopoly on power in the country. However, the president is elected into two five-years terms. It is said that this arrangement was instituted by the late Chinese leader Ding XiaoPing to quell any competition between the higher echelon of leaders in the CCP and, hence, jeopardize its iron hold on power. (3) This arrangement, as seen

in the list of presidents below, worked well as the first two presidents delivered the reins of power to their respective successor (4). It is also important that each of those presidents groomed the next president ;

Jian Zemin, 1993-2003

Hu Jintao, 2003-2013

Xi Jinping, 2013-

This arrangement of one party but a different president every ten years, and as it was mentioned above, was changed last week to allow Mr. Jinping to run for a third term, and possibly for life as the constitution was amended to delete any reference for a term limit.

The BBC reported the way things folded at the CPP conference as follows: “Chinese President Xi Jinping consolidated his control of the Communist Party after being re-elected as general secretary for a third term.

Xi appeared in Beijing's "Great Hall of the People" along with implementing members of the Standing Committee of the Party's Politburo - the highest decision-making body.

Xi Jinping said that China will continue itself in the global economy in his third term, stressing that China's development cannot take place in isolation from the world and that the world needs China. On the internal level, Jinping said that the Communist Party will remain the strong backbone of Chinese society, statements that jurists saw as suggesting an increase in repressive practices against anyone who opposes the Chinese president.

Days before the congress, senior CPC leaders issued a statement, endorsing Xi as the "core" of the party and leadership. They also called on the party to unite more closely behind him.

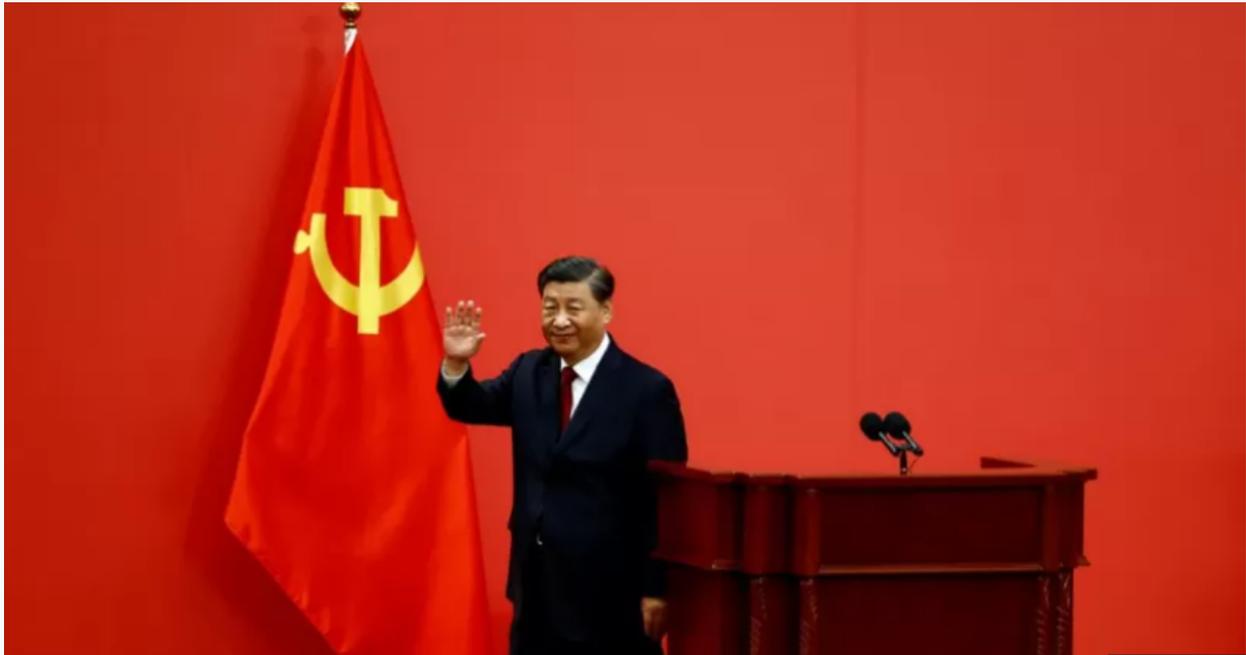
Xi currently holds the three most powerful positions in China - general secretary of the Communist Party of China, head of the country's armed forces, and president.

There is no maximum number of terms of leadership of the party. But no leader except Mao Zedong, the founder of communist China, has led for a third term.

There was a two-term limit in the country's constitution, which was instituted by reformer Deng Xiaoping to prevent the emergence of a Mao-like figure.

But Xi succeeded in removing this restriction. In 2018, China's parliament repealed the law, effectively allowing Xi to remain in office for as long as he wanted. (5)

It is becoming quite clear that Mr. Jinping is the most powerful man in China now, and most probably since the late Mao Zedong in which he exercised absolute power. This is a remarkable achievement for a man who was virtual unknown a decade ago (other than being the son of one of the revolutionary leaders who established the People's Republic of China (PRC) (6.)



Chinese president Xi Jinping at the CPP conference today, October 23, 2022. Rueters

Mr. Jinping, and like any other leader with dictatorial powers, ensured that his opponents were neutralized one way or another. This went as far back as 2017 during the last conference in which the events were reported as follows “There was only one thing missing from the newly anointed leadership lineup announced at the close of China's Communist Party Congress on Wednesday: an obvious successor for President Xi Jinping. Xi, as expected, received another five-year term. But normally at this stage in a Chinese president's tenure, a clear successor has taken the stage in the red-carpet ceremony at Beijing's Great Hall of the People. Instead, the six men standing with Xi are all in their 60s and considered too old to assume the top slot after their terms expire. This move has fueled speculation that Xi might break with recent convention, and try to stay in power beyond 2022. The [BBC](#) added that there had been speculation that Mr. Xi would elevate his protégé Chen Miner and Guangdong party secretary Hu Chunhua, both of

whom are in their 50s — young enough to be credible successors. But that didn't happen. Reuters further explained that the make-up of the committee, which has ultimate control over the world's second-largest economy, appeared to be a compromise to include a broad range of voices from party elites.

The committee includes one person known to be very close to Xi — Li Zhanshu. Li, who often accompanies Xi on overseas trips, was named the third-ranked member, meaning he will most likely assume the role of head of the largely rubber-stamp parliament. That will not be confirmed until parliament meets in March." (7)

And the bizarre event of what happened last Saturday to former president Hu Jintao is part of that process. On that day, suddenly, Hu Jintao was escorted abroad during the closing session of the ruling Communist Party Congress. The 79-year-old, who looked frail, was sitting next to President Xi Jinping when officials approached him and took him away.



Hu Jintao is being led outside the conference. BBC October 22, 2022

Hu Jintao, who served as Chinese president from 2003 to 2013, was sitting when two officials approached him. He said something to Xi Jinping, who shook his head, after which Hu Jintao was led out of the hall. There are many questions, and no answers yet from the Chinese

government. The former leader initially seemed unwilling to leave. If this is the case, what is the reason? What did he say to the man who replaced him, Xi Jinping, who made the latter shake his head? The two most likely reasons for his exit: either the spectacle is part of a manifestation of the game of power and influence in Chinese politics and the removal of a symbol representing the past, or Hu Jintao has major health problems. And if he was taken outside the hall for health reasons, why did this happen so suddenly? And why did it happen in front of the cameras? Was he suffering from a sudden health symptom? Communist Party meetings are usually so carefully planned, which leads to the suspicion that the timing of Hu Jintao's exit may not have been a coincidence. He attended the previous meeting behind closed doors yesterday, then let the cameras in for the latter part of the day. Officials headed towards him after turning on the cameras.

Hu Jintao represents a different form of China than Xi Jinping. He was leading more collectively than his successor, and had to find a balance between more than one orientation in the Politburo. He views years as a time of openness to the outside and greater tolerance for new ideas.

Xi, the Party's general secretary, has taken the country in a different direction, putting himself at the center, in a challenging position.

The new Central Committee does not include Li Keqiang or Wang Yang among its members, both of whom represent a liberal orientation in economics and leanings of the previous administration. This indicates the different positions of the Politburo, which is dominated by Xi's supporters" (8.)

This writer believes that the whole episode of leading Mr. Jintao in such a humiliating fashion is a well-orchestrated episode by Xi Jinping and his inner circles. In a tightly censored system where every move is well-calculated, it is hard to believe that the cameras which broadcast the event would not turn off or move to somewhere else when there was a sign of unusual activity going on. And if Mr. Jintao was initially suffering from some sort of ailment, why was let into the conference. Finally, some other figures were also other figures of prominence such as Deng Pufang, the son of former leaders Ding XiaoPing, and retired Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli (Xi loyalist) who was accused of of pressuring tennis star Peng Shuai into having sex (9.) This accusation was walked back by Ms. Shuai later on in what is widely believed under pressure from the Chinese government (10).



Zhang Goali and Peng Shuai, NPR February 6, 2022

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey

The first round of the next presidential election in Turkey is scheduled for June 18, 2023 (the second round is a month later), and Mr. Erdogan has declared his intention to run (11.) And if he wins, as widely expected, Mr. Ardogan will begin his 19th year in power (with different positions.) The constitution of the Republic of Turkey now mandates that a person may be elected as the President of the Republic for two terms at most. This means that Mr. Erdogan can remain in power until the year 2028, if the constitution is not amended to eliminate any reference to term limits. And this remains to be seen.

Mr. Erdogan served as mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998. He founded the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2001, leading it to election victories in 2002, 2007, and 2011 general elections before being required to stand down upon his election as president in 2014. He later returned to the AKP leadership in 2017 following the constitutional referendum that year. Coming from an Islamist political background and self-describing as a conservative democrat, he has promoted socially conservative and populist policies during his administration (12).



Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Dreamstime

Before commenting on his style of governing, it is important to the following refernda were held in Turkey during Erdogan's rein;

2007

A constitutional referendum on electoral reform was held in Turkey on 21 October 2007 (13) After the aborted attempt to elect the next president in May 2007, the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan introduced substantial electoral reforms in parliament which were then passed with the votes of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party and the opposition Motherland Party.

2010

A constitutional referendum on a number of changes to the constitution was held in Turkey on 12 September 2010. The results showed the majority supported the constitutional amendments, with 58% in favor and 42% against. The changes were aimed at bringing the constitution into compliance with European Union standards. Supporters of Turkish EU membership hope constitutional reform will facilitate the membership process (14)

2017

A constitutional referendum was held throughout Turkey on 16 April 2017 on whether to approve 18 proposed amendments to the Turkish constitution that were brought forward by the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). As a result of its approval, the office of the Prime Minister was abolished and the existing parliamentary system of government was replaced with an executive presidency and a presidential system (15.) The number of seats in Parliament was raised from 550 to 600, while, among a series of other proposals, the president was given more control over appointments to the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) (16.) The referendum was held under a state of emergency that was declared following a failed military coup attempt in July 2016 (17) which was followed by a series of purges by the Government of Turkey. The purges began with the arrest of Turkish Armed Forces personnel reportedly linked to the coup attempt but arrests were expanded to include other elements of the Turkish military, as well as civil servants and private citizens. These later actions reflected a power struggle between secularist and Islamist political elites in Turkey (18) affected people who were not active in nor aware of the coup, but who the government claimed were connected with the Gülen movement, an opposition group which the government blamed for the coup. Possession of books authored by Gülen was considered valid evidence of such a connection and cause for arrest (19.)

Tens of thousands of public servants and soldiers were purged in the first week following the coup (20.) For example, on 16 July 2016, just one day after the coup was foiled, 2,745 judges were dismissed and detained (21.) This was followed by the dismissal, detention or suspension of over 100,000 officials (22) a figure that had increased to over 110,000 by early November 2016 (23) over 125,000 after the 22 November decree (24) reaching at least 135,000 with the January decrees, about 160,000 after the suspensions and arrests decree of April 29 (25) and 180,000 after a massive dismissal decree in July 2018. Collectively about 10% of Turkey's 2 million public employees were removed as a result of the purges. Purged citizens are prevented from working again for the government, therefore pushed into precarity and economic death (26.)

Whereas amending the constitution is a virtual impossibility in countries like the USA, Canada, France, the UK, etc., in Turkey there was three referenda since 2007, and in each instance, the powers of Mr. Erdogan increased drastically. It is also noticed that the powers of those positions he leaves behind either diminished or the position disappeared altogether. And as it was seen after the 2016 coup which almost succeeded in unseating him, Mr. Erdogan came out swinging and ruthlessly purged the opposition. It is safe to assume, therefore, based upon this record, that Mr. Erdogan will try something to remain in power and this might include another referendum to amend the constitution this time term limit is eliminated.

Vladimir Putin of Russia

Arranging referenda for whatever he would like to achieve, is pretty frequent for Mr. Putin who has overseen several during his reign in power which began on the 16th of August 1999. His latest arranged referendum was held on September 27, 2022 in which the Kremlin-installed governments of the four Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine have all declared victories in the so-called annexation referendums. Authorities published claims that an unprecedented majority of residents said yes to joining Russia. The results, decalied by the Kremlin were astounding, In Kherson, the head of the voting committee put the "yes" vote at above 87%. Luhansk authorities said 98.4% of people there had voted to join Russia. In Zaporizhzhia, a Russian-appointed official put the figure at 93.1%. Denis Pushilin, head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, said 99.2% of participants in the region had voted to join Russia (27.)



Boris Yaltsin and Vladimere Putin, (ITAR-TASS) April 24, 2007

On 9 August 1999, Vladimir Putin was appointed one of three First Deputy Prime Ministers, which enabled him later on that day, as the previous government led by Sergei Stepashin had been sacked, to be appointed acting Prime Minister of the Government of the Russian Federation by President Boris Yeltsin (28.) Yeltsin also announced that he wanted to see Putin as his successor. Later, that same day, Putin agreed to run for the presidency (29.) On 16 August, the State Duma approved his appointment as Prime Minister with 233 votes in favor (vs. 84 against, 17 abstained), (30) while a simple majority of 226 was required, making him Russia's fifth PM in

fewer than eighteen months. On his appointment, few expected Putin, virtually unknown to the general public, to last any longer than his predecessors. He was initially regarded as a Yeltsin loyalist; like other prime ministers of Boris Yeltsin, Putin did not choose ministers himself, his cabinet being determined by the presidential administration (31.)

Vladimir Putin was inaugurated president on 7 May 2000. He appointed Minister of Finance Mikhail Kasyanov as his Prime minister. Having announced his intention to consolidate power in the country into a strict vertical, in May 2000 he issued a decree dividing 89 federal subjects of Russia between 7 federal districts overseen by representatives of his in order to facilitate federal administration. In 2003, a referendum was held in Chechnya on the adoption of a new constitution which declares the Republic as a part of Russia. Chechnya has been gradually stabilized with the establishment of parliamentary elections and a regional government (32.) On 14 March 2004, Putin was elected to the presidency for a second term, receiving 71% of the vote (33.) Putin was not constitutionally permitted to run for reelection in 2008, so he endorsed First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who went on to become the next president and Medvedev was elected his successor. On 8 May 2008, only a day after handing the presidency to Medvedev, Putin was appointed Prime Minister of Russia, maintaining his political dominance (34.) The Constitution was amended in 2008, expanding the presidential term from four to six years following the 2012 election. Having been removed from the office of the presidency for a term, Putin was constitutionally eligible to run again and was elected president in 2012 and then reelected in 2018. The Constitution was amended in 2020 to reset the number of terms Putin has served, allowing him to circumvent term limits in the 2024 and 2030 elections, enabling him to legally stay in office until 2036 (35.)

As was seen in China and Turkey, the constitution was amended several times to enable Mr. Putin to remain in power as a prime minister or as a president. It also noticed, like before, that each position he assumed, the constitution was amended to increase its powers. And as a final act, the term limit is eliminated altogether to ensure practically presidency for life (he will be 84 years in 2036.)

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