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All about chinese politics.

From: Smith, Dana S (PA)
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Fyi, we aren't the story

From: PA Clips [mailto:paclips@state.gov]
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A Body, a Scandal and China
 By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF
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IT all began with a dead body, in a hotel in the Chinese city of Chongqing. The corpse belonged to a British businessman who was said to have drunk himself to death — odd, considering that he rarely drank.

Then a vice mayor sneaked out of town, by some accounts disguised for a time as an old lady, and entered the American Consulate in Chengdu to whisper a tale of murder. Now China has erupted in its biggest political storm since the Tiananmen democracy movement was violently crushed in 1989.

One of China's most prominent politicians, Bo Xilai, has been kicked out of the Politburo. His wife is detained on suspicion of murdering the British businessman in a dispute over his fee for supposedly smuggling ill-gotten family money abroad.

Their son, Bo Guagua, who once drove up to the United States ambassador's residence in a red Ferrari to pick up Jon Huntsman's daughter for a date, is studying at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government — but seems to have vanished lately. And if you're wondering how Bo Xilai managed on a minuscule state salary to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for Guagua to study in Britain and now the United States (where he downgraded to a Porsche), well, great question!

The scandal is the talk of China, and the government has lost control of the narrative. This scandal may have far-reaching effects on the national leadership, and it should, for it points to a larger truth: China's political model is simply running out of steam.

"Bo's downfall shows the need to restrict government power," Caixin, a daring Chinese magazine, declared in an editorial, adding, "At this stage of its development, China offers too many temptations, and the collusion of money and power is commonplace."

Even good people are on the take in China these days, because everybody else is. Chinese doctors take cash from patients' families before surgery. Journalists take bribes to write articles. Principals take money to admit students.

One Chinese friend of mine was a judge in corruption cases, and made a good living taking bribes from defendants. Another friend, the son of a Politburo member, was paid several hundred thousand dollars a year simply to lend his name to a real estate company.

Officials have a maddening sense of entitlement. When I lived in China, my wife and I once attended a party with many middle-age officials (including one now in the Politburo) and a crowd of trophy female secretaries. One cabinet minister mistook my wife, who is Chinese-American, for a secretary and crassly made moves on her. Let's just say that my wife ruined his evening.

The scale of corruption has become mind-boggling. Zhang Shuguang, a railways official, managed to steal \$2.8 billion and move it overseas, the state news media have reported. A Chinese central bank report suggested that 18,000 corrupt officials had fled China and taken \$120 billion with them. The average take was almost \$7 million per person.

The backdrop is the staggering wealth enjoyed by the elite. More than 300 million Chinese lack access to safe water, but one tycoon's home I visited had an indoor basketball court, a movie theater and a pond with rare fish worth up to tens of thousands of dollars each.

In Chinese, the words for power ("quan") and money ("qian") sound alike, and in China one often translates into another.

The rumors, which I can't confirm, are that Bo Xilai's wife was moving money abroad through the British businessman, Neil Heywood, and that they bickered over his fee. When he threatened to expose her, the theory goes, she arranged to have him poisoned. This is mostly rumor: Bo's defenders think he is being framed by his political rivals.

China's political system has managed daunting challenges, but it is showing serious cracks. For years, reformist leaders from Li Ruihuan to Wen Jiabao have been arguing for political reform, and party officials themselves increasingly see the need for more accountability and oversight.

China's leaders could have paid attention to work years ago by a Chinese journalist, Jiang Weiping, suggesting corruption by Bo Xilai. Instead, they imprisoned the journalist.

There is considerable dissatisfaction, even within Communist Party circles, with the way the political system has been frozen under the outgoing party leader, Hu Jintao. Power is expected to pass this fall to a new Communist Party leader, Xi Jinping, who seems more open to liberalization. Let's hope so, for China's sake.

Ordinary Chinese view the contradictions clearly. You see that in the jokes making the rounds in China, like this one:

Three men meet in Qincheng Prison, where political offenders are often kept. The first one says: I am jailed for opposing Bo Xilai. The second says: I'm here because I supported Bo Xilai. And the third says: Dang it, I am Bo Xilai.

Haider Karzai

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