

Whose Elections Should We Watch?

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For the past few months, the rest of the world has been watching (often with a mix of fascination and revulsion) the complicated progress of the choice of the Republican candidate for the US Presidential election in November. Media reports across the world have provided the minutiae of the candidates, their performances in various state primaries, their likes and dislikes, their stated policy positions, their private lives. And because of the media, people continue to track what the various candidates say on all sorts of issues and about each other, in excruciating and often repetitive detail.

Of course this is only to be expected - the United States is after all still the most "significant" country in the world, and the outcome of its domestic politics affects all of us in all sorts of ways, whether we like it or not. But the extreme global obsession with it may be somewhat misplaced, for at least two reasons.

First, it has become very clear in the past few years that the forces making for continuity in American economic and geopolitical strategies are so strong that they are barely affected by the individual occupant of the White House. The liberal disappointment with President Obama therefore may well be justified in view of the high expectations that accompanied his ascendancy, but it still reflects an inadequate appreciation of the constraints and the political economy forces shaping the US government's global decision-making. So whether President Obama continues as President into the coming year, or is replaced by Mitt Romney, the front-running Republican, this may not mean fundamental changes in policies that affect the rest of the world.

Second, the concentration on US political processes may be diverting global attention from events and political changes in other countries, that are likely to become even more significant for most of the world's population. The most important of these is the political process currently under way in China. The 18th Congress of the Communist Party of China is due to be held towards the later part of the year in Beijing. The current General Secretary Hu Jintao will have to step down due to term restrictions, and the all-but officially designated successor, Xi Jinping, is likely to take over. True to Chinese style, the personality and views of Xi Jinping are relatively opaque, and certainly not known at all outside his own country, so the implications of this transition are yet to become evident.

But personalities are the least of this process at present. Obviously, China is currently in the throes of a power struggle that may be of far-reaching significance for its future economic and geopolitical trajectory. The surprisingly rapid downfall of Bo Xilai, the dynamic and charismatic General Secretary of the party in Chongqing municipality, should not be seen as an isolated incident, or as simply a reflection of a leader who was over-ambitious and therefore over-extended himself. Instead, it is probably as much, if not more, the result of a struggle between two "lines" or varying approaches about how to take the Chinese polity and economy forward in face of growing challenges to the current model of growth.

Bo Xilai is often highlighted in the western media for his penchant for encouraging the singing of revolutionary Maoist songs and similar cultural signs. But in Chongqing his biggest achievement was the crackdown on organized crime - an achievement that also sowed the seeds of his disgrace, as his methods came to be severely criticized. He was originally associated with the "Shanghai clique" of the Communist Party, which favoured market-friendly export-led growth and development of the coastal regions. But in Chongqing he became known for a mass programme of public housing for workers, for recognising the rights of and providing entitlements to migrant workers from rural areas who did not have urban hukou(residency permits), and emphasising wealth and income redistribution - often through seizing the assets of local elites. In a recent peasant demonstration against eviction from their lands, he allowed the protests to continue and even expressed support for some demands.

Obviously such policies would have generated much mass support and also created bitter enemies. The question now is whether Bo Xilai's current downfall is simply the suppression of a once-powerful individual, or whether it is also an attack on the strategy of aiming for redistribution and economic justice. This can no longer be construed from individual histories: both Xi Jinping and Bo Xilai are "princelings" (sons of revered Communist leaders who led the revolution) and they have both displayed very different approaches to economic and social policies at different times.

The run-up to the Party Congress is crucial in determining the medium term outcome, which matters crucially and not just for China. Deng Xiaoping's famous prescription for China ("taoguangyanghai", or keep a low profile) has been gradually displaced as China becomes ever more confident and assertive about its current strengths and future global potential. At the same time, the internal contradictions of its growth process - in social, distributional and ecological terms - become more pressing daily. For this reason alone, we should all be watching every sign coming out of China with much more interest and attention - certainly more than we need to accord to the speeches of presidential candidates in the US.