Top China Leader Faces Trial

Once-Powerful Bo Xilai Faces Broad Criminal Accusations; Expelled From Party

By JEREMY PAGE

The Chinese Communist Party expelled former high-flying official Bo Xilai, according to state-run media on Friday. Jeremy Page has details on The News Hub. Photo: Bloomberg.

BEIJING—China's leadership expelled former highflying official Bo Xilai from the Communist Party and launched criminal proceedings against him, citing a litany of
wrongdoing over 30 years, including taking huge bribes, abusing his power during a murder investigation against his wife and engaging in improper sexual relations with several women.

The moves suggest China's leadership is trying to send a strong message to the public that it will tackle the issues at the heart of the Bo scandal—corruption, abuse of power, and the decadent lives led by some members of the party elite. That represents an acknowledgment that growing public anger over those issues constitutes a grave threat to the party's future grip on power.

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The decision by the party's Politburo, announced by the state-run Xinhua news agency, came as the world's second largest economy wrestles with a host of knotty problems—an economic slowdown, a sovereignty fight with Japan over some islands, and a pending once-a-decade leadership shuffle that the Bo scandal had thrown into turmoil.

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There is also the issue of lingering support among the public for Mr. Bo and the populist style of government he pursued as party leader in Chongqing. There, he presided over a Maoist revival movement and heavy state spending on infrastructure and social programs. By accusing Mr. Bo of extensive wrongdoing, over his entire career, the party appears to be determined to crush that support.

Another announcement Friday indicated that current and retired party chieftains have likely reached broad agreement in negotiations over the new leadership lineup. After weeks of feuding and horse-trading, the Politburo—the party's top 24 leaders—set Nov. 8 as the opening for a Congress at which President Hu Jintao and other senior figures are to retire from their party posts.

The risk the leaders run with a broad judicial case against Mr. Bo is attracting criticism from members of the public who already have been wondering how he was able to rise almost to the pinnacle of power—and whether he would have gone further were it not for his former police chief.

That chief, after a falling out with Mr. Bo, triggered the scandal in early February by going to a U.S. consulate and reporting evidence that Mr. Bo's wife had murdered a British
businessman. Before then, Mr. Bo was a front-runner for a spot on the Politburo's powerful Standing Committee.

"What we should be thinking about is how, at every step along the road, he was violating discipline. How did he climb so high? We should consider problems with the system," wrote Lei Yi, a historian, in a posting on Sina Weibo, a microblog service akin to Twitter.

Differences over how to handle Mr. Bo, the son of a fabled revolutionary, are believed to have delayed an announcement on when the leadership succession would begin, according to party insiders, political analysts and diplomats.

Those people say that powerful figures, thought to include former President Jiang Zemin, argued until recently that Mr. Bo should be disciplined within the party for limited wrongdoing in Chongqing rather than face criminal charges, which in China almost always bring conviction.

Bo Xilai: A WSJ Documentary

The fall of Bo Xilai, once a rising star in Chinese politics, has plunged the country into its biggest crisis since Tiananmen Square. In this documentary, The Wall Street Journal examines how his downfall has altered the debate about China's future.

Next in Line

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Bo Xilai—The former party chief in Chongqing was suspended from Party posts and placed under investigation for unspecified "serious disciplinary violations" on April 10. Expelled from the party on Sept. 28 and accused of wrongdoing involving bribes, Friday's announcement suggests that Mr. Bo's opponents, believed to include President Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao, convinced other leaders that he should face trial for serious crimes that lawyers say can carry the death penalty. Party insiders say Mr. Bo is more likely to draw a long prison sentence.

Mr. Bo was dismissed from his Communist Party posts in April and put under investigation for unspecified "serious disciplinary violations" by the party's internal watchdog, which typically makes a recommendation to the party leadership on whether to file criminal charges. Xinhua said Friday that Mr. Bo's case had been transferred to "judicial organs." It gave no indication of when formal charges would be filed or when a trial might be held.

"Bo's behaviors have yielded serious consequences, badly undermined the reputation of the party and the country, created very negative impacts at home and abroad and significantly damaged the cause of the party and the people," Xinhua said.

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power abuse and improper sexual relations with multiple women.

It added that Mr. Bo had repeatedly "violated party discipline" over a lengthy career, dating back to his days as mayor of the northeast port city of Dalian from 1993 to 2001 and continuing through his time as governor of Liaoning province, as China's commerce minister and as party chief in Chongqing.

Senior party figures have been convicted of serious crimes before, but it is extremely rare for one to be accused of serial violations over an entire career. Chen Youxi, a prominent lawyer, wrote on his microblog that "among Politburo members, Mr. Bo's crimes and punishment could set a new record."

Xinhua said Mr. Bo had "abused his power, made severe mistakes and bore major responsibility" in his wife's murder case and in the case of Wang Lijun, the former police chief who fled to a U.S. consulate.

Mr. Bo's wife, Gu Kailai, was convicted in August of murdering British businessman Neil Heywood. Mr. Wang this week was convicted of defection, bribery, abuse of power and "bending the law for selfish ends" by initially trying to cover up Ms. Gu's crime.

During their trials, prosecutors made hardly any direct references to Mr. Bo, and no mentions of corruption, suggesting to some he would escape charges relating to economic crimes. But Friday's announcement made clear that corruption in his family had been a big part of the investigation.

"He took advantage of his office to seek profits for others and received huge bribes personally and through his family," Xinhua stated. Ms. Gu also abused her position "to
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China Drama Now a Murder Mystery (4/11/2012)
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Mystery Deepens Over Briton in China (3/27/2012)
U.K. Seeks Probe Into China Death (3/27/2012)

The Chongqing Drama
See key dates in the death of Neil Heywood in Chongqing and the drama surrounding Bo Xilai.

seek profits for others, and the Bo family accepted a huge amount of money and property from others," it said.

It didn't mention any other members of the family. During Ms. Gu's trial, prosecutors said she believed Mr. Heywood had threatened her son, Bo Guagua, after they became embroiled in a business dispute over a failed property deal.

Bo Guagua, who graduated from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government this year, and who friends say is still living in the U.S., didn't respond to an emailed request for comment.

Zhang Ming, a political scientist at Renmin University in Beijing, said Friday's announcement was as politically significant as that of a failed 1971 coup attempt against Chairman Mao Zedong by his military chief and designated successor, Lin Biao.

Mr. Zhang said he believed China's leaders were worried by recent anti-Japanese demonstrations, during which many protesters appeared to show support for Mr. Bo by carrying portraits of Chairman Mao, whose patriotic songs Mr. Bo had revived.

"If they didn't take Bo Xilai's actions and announce them to the people, he would just turn into a populist leader," Mr. Zhang said.

Xinhua went on to say that Bo Xilai "had or maintained improper sexual relationships with a number of women," without providing details. The investigation also found he had made "erroneous decisions in the promotion of personnel," the news agency said, and uncovered evidence that suggested his involvement in other crimes.

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Mr. Zhang said that citing Mr. Bo's relationships with women appeared to be an attempt to sully his reputation. "This is just to discredit him," he said, to tell Mr. Bo's fans: "Look at the person who you support."

Mr. Bo has been unreachable for comment. He is believed to be under a form of house detention.

A longtime friend of the Bo family said he didn't believe Mr. Bo would be executed, but most likely would face a life sentence. "If you want to be a politician, you have to think about one day it might happen," the friend said.

While some observers said Mr. Bo's trial could be rushed through before the party Congress, He Weifang, a law professor at Peking University, said he thought it might not happen for several months.

"I still don't think we'll find out the real facts of this case, and there is still the question of whether we would know any of this if Wang Lijun had not gone to the U.S. consulate," said Mr. He.

—Brian Spegele and Josh Chin contributed to this article.

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Corrections & Amplifications
A former Chongqing, China, police chief accused the wife of Bo Xilai of murdering a British businessman. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said he accused Mr. Bo. Also, in an earlier version, historian Lei Yi's name was misspelled Lei Yu.

A version of this article appeared September 29, 2012, on page A1 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal with the headline: Top China Leader Faces Trial.