

INKSTICK

China's Authoritarian House of Cards Won't Fall to Rumors

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If you have spent any amount of time on Twitter in the last few days you have probably seen some posts about a rumored coup against China's President Xi Jinping. These rumors are false but understanding why they exist and how they spread is a valuable analytical exercise. The China coup story is the latest in a series of recent, similar stories about authoritarian figureheads which reveal misplaced optimism about the fragility of these regimes.

The China coup rumors connect several pieces of unrelated information during a period of heightened political sensitivity to create a narrative of Xi's removal from power. Earlier this week, Zeyi Yang wrote an excellent play-by-play for MIT Technology Review of how the rumors started and spread. To sum up Yang's report, Chinese-language Twitter accounts weaved military personnel changes, flight cancelations, footage of military units driving on highways, and a lack of public appearance by Xi after a foreign trip into a coup narrative.

The rumors jumped into English-language Twitter when Jennifer Zeng, a Chinese human rights activist who created YouTube videos arguing that the 2020 US presidential election was illegitimate, started posting about them. This created a snowball effect, with more and more Twitter accounts weighing in, hashtags going viral, and prominent commentators including Indian politician Subramanian Swamy and US pundit Gordon G. Chang amplifying the rumors. Serious and humorous efforts to set the record straight present convincing arguments for the absence of a coup and have hopefully put the issue to rest.

THE MISINFORMATION WILDFIRE

China coup misinformation spread so quickly for two reasons: an upcoming major political meeting and misplaced optimism about authoritarian regime fragility.

On Oct. 16, 2022, the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party will begin. A party congress is a major political event that establishes the ruling communist party's top leadership for the next five years. Xi is widely expected to emerge from the party congress in a strong position and secure a third consecutive term as the party's general secretary.

The leadup to the party congress creates an environment where rumors and political intrigue thrive, especially because the important decisions and political horse-trading preceding the meeting occur behind closed doors. While the party congress will most likely result in Xi's third consecutive term as general secretary, there is a chance that he could face resistance from other

senior members of the party. As Cai Xia, a former professor at China's Central Party School who was expelled from the party in 2020 and now resides in the United States, wrote in Foreign Affairs, "In the months leading up to the congress, the CCP's stealth infighting will probably intensify...Contrary to the conventional wisdom among Western analysts, [Xi] may not have locked up a third term." However, even if Xia's assessment is correct, it is difficult for outside observers to know for sure given the level of secrecy around internal party dynamics.

Looking beyond China's domestic political moment, the recent coup rumors are indicative of a larger trend of misplaced optimism about authoritarian regime fragility that extends beyond China. Leaders like Xi, Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jong-un are widely reviled and are imbued with important symbolic status as figureheads of their regimes. The general opacity surrounding other power structures in authoritarian states further encourages observers to look to the figureheads as the chief contributor to the threat that the country poses to the United States. This creates a general perception that the figurehead is both incredibly powerful but also fragile because they are one person.

By extension, an authoritarian figurehead being removed from power or dying unexpectedly would be a shock to the system that could spell its demise. In the spring of 2020, Kim Jong Un's lack of public appearances in North Korea combined with some rumors spread by social media about his sudden death by illness spawned weeks of speculation about what would happen next, including the potential of regime collapse. In the summer of 2022, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency quashed rumors that Putin was in bad health. While the Putin health issue did not have the same level of amplification as Kim's death rumors, the idea of Putin's regime being a house of cards on the verge of collapse was appealing especially given its invasion of Ukraine.

Sadly for the Twitterverse "if only [insert authoritarian leader here] was gone then everything would be better" is not a quick solution to complex foreign policy problems. Banking on the sudden, unexpected collapse of authoritarian regimes as a quick fix to difficult foreign policy challenges is tempting but it does not make for good foreign policy.

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