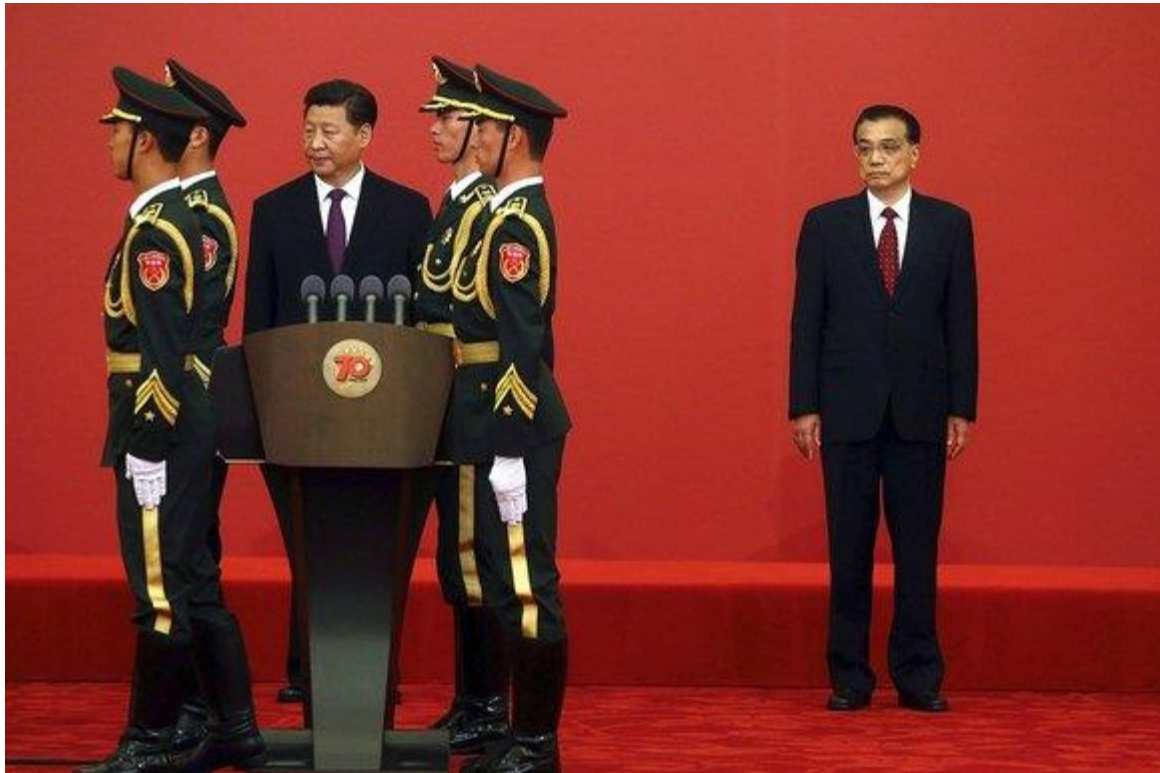


London Sunday Times  
25-10-15

## Coup whispers sour Xi's return

Michael Sheridan



Xi: dissent in the ranks of the PLA has been acknowledged (EPA)

WREATHED in the glow of royal pomp and ceremony, the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, has returned home from Britain to face bitter infighting at the top of the Communist party and resistance to his authority over the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The British government placed a huge bet on Xi, 62, by honouring him last week with a state visit while talking of a "golden era" of trade and friendship. Chinese newspaper readers and television viewers were shown images of their leader riding with the Queen in her gilded carriage.

But evidence is accumulating that Xi — who heads the state, the party and the army — may be in political trouble. There has even been talk of an abortive conspiracy last March to stage a coup d'état against him, leading to the postponement of a visit to Pakistan.

The information comes from insiders connected to the party elite, amplified by leaks to the Chinese-language media in Hong Kong.

Threats to Xi's prestige multiplied after China's stock market crashed in the summer, its economy slowed and thousands of officials and army officers fell to his campaign against corruption.

Earlier this month the official PLA Daily newspaper acknowledged dissent in the ranks by denouncing "resistance blocking the reforms of military command appointments". The coup talk came after Xi purged two top generals, Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, for corruption. Xu died of cancer before he could face trial.

A retired general, in an interview with the Hong Kong political magazine Qianshao, said Xi could not sleep soundly at night in the leadership compound at Zhongnanhai, in the old centre of Beijing. "What does he worry about? First, about the military power on which his life depends," the unidentified general was quoted as saying.

A group of 14 generals, including the chiefs of all of China's seven military regions, earlier made an unprecedented public vow of loyalty to Xi.

"This demonstration that the PLA had his back was a sign of weakness as much as strength," said Roderick MacFarquhar of Harvard, an expert on Chinese politics.

Xi's problem is that 134 of China's generals were promoted by his two predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Both men are still Xi's rivals and lead factions opposed to his group of "princelings", the privileged sons and daughters of the leaders of the 1949 revolution. The anti-corruption campaign, led by a dour enforcer named Wang Qishan, met fierce resistance.

"The risk for Xi is that he is confronting dozens and dozens of families who feel they contributed to the building of China and who face losing their wealth, their positions and their place in history," said MacFarquhar.

Government business has slowed or come to a stop as mid-ranking officials start to worry about making decisions and resent the fact they cannot take bribes. Some analysts believe that if the campaign goes on as it is, the party's morale could crumble, along with its organisational strength. Mingjing, a Hong Kong magazine, said in its latest report on the issue: "The biggest risk is that Xi Jinping and Wang Qishan will be killed."

Xi, who arrived back yesterday, faces a difficult party meeting tomorrow at which a barely concealed split over the economy with his prime minister, Li Keqiang, will be on the table. The fifth plenum of the 18th party congress is meant to set out the next five-year plan. In reality, a venomous dispute has broken out among the leadership about the stockmarket crash and its aftermath. The meeting was delayed because of the tensions.

During the crisis Xi is said to have banged the table and shouted at the premier to fix the market or come back with his head on a plate. He then ordered state intervention to prop up stock prices to protect millions of small investors from losing money. Officials threatened financial firms with punishment. Chinese journalists say the premier's faction retaliated with leaks to the Hong Kong media that "economic reform has reached a dead end".

The Chinese public has read none of this in the state-controlled press, which has been full of Xi's triumphant progress through Britain. There was no mention of the fact that the Queen, in her speech at a state banquet, avoided using the words "golden era".

MacFarquhar, who is close to the White House, says the US government reacted to Britain's embrace of the Chinese leader with disbelief. "They will be rethinking their whole vision of Britain," he said