

BO XILAI

**POWER,
DEATH
& POLITICS**

Inside the scandal that is shaking China. By *Jamil Anderlini*



The alleged murder of Neil Heywood has brought down one of China's most powerful politicians – and exposed an elite power struggle that has rocked the Communist party to its core

A

s the cyanide took effect, Neil Percival Heywood must have looked around at the tacky photos of trees and waterfalls on the mustard-coloured wallpaper and wondered how he ever got involved in the vicious world of Chinese politics.

The dingy room at the Lucky Holiday Hotel – a three-star hilltop resort in the Chinese metropolis of Chongqing where Heywood was found dead on November 15 last year – was a long way from his childhood in a middle-class London suburb and his education at Harrow, the elite private school attended by Winston Churchill and Lord Byron. Although he had become increasingly worried about his involvement with one of China's most powerful political families, and had seen enough to know how they dealt with those who crossed them, he thought it very unlikely they would kill a foreigner.

Heywood could not have imagined that his murder would spark the biggest Chinese political scandal in at least two decades and expose an elite power struggle that has shaken the ruling Communist party to its core. After spending nearly half his 41 years living in China, mostly working as a small-time business consultant and fixer, his death in the secluded, run-down guest house was blamed on “excessive alcohol consumption” by the Chongqing police.

His remains were quickly cremated, without an autopsy, on the authorisation of his family. According to people familiar with the matter, Heywood's Chinese wife Wang Lulu was pressured by the Chongqing authorities to agree to the quick cremation and was so distraught when she arrived in the city that she sent her brother with a British consular official to identify the body. Almost every single staff member at the Lucky Holiday Hotel was replaced over the following month and all current employees have been warned not to discuss the incident with anyone.

Back in the UK, Heywood's sister, elderly mother and friends were told he died of a heart attack, as his father Peter had in 2004 at the age of 63. At a memorial on December 19, in St Mary's Church in Battersea, London, the Heywood family was joined by many of Neil's old Harrovian schoolmates. “At least some of us were puzzled and concerned by the circumstances of Neil's death and the story that he'd died of a heart attack,” says one person who attended. “Those of us that knew who he was connected to in China felt something more sinister had happened.”

The Lucky Holiday Hotel was a favourite spot for Gu Kailai, wife of Bo Xilai, a member of the elite 25-member politburo of the Communist party and the man who ruled like a king over Chongqing, a city-province with a population of 33 million and



Chongqing, a south-west city-province, sits on the banks of the Yangtze



Neil Heywood

a land area the size of Austria. For Heywood, virtually all of his modest success as a business consultant for British companies in China stemmed from his 15-year relationship with the Bo-Gu family and it was Gu Kailai who arranged for him to come to Chongqing and stay at the forlorn, mist-shrouded compound last November. It is here that she is alleged to have murdered him using potassium cyanide, reportedly administered in a drink with the help of a household orderly and bodyguard named Zhang Xiaojun. The government announcement on April 10 of her detention on suspicion of “intentional homicide”, and her husband Bo Xilai's suspension from all his posts because of “serious discipline violations”, sent shockwaves through Chinese politics.

The death of an obscure British consultant had brought down one of China's most powerful politicians, a man who had been favoured to ascend to the ruling nine-member Communist party politburo standing committee at a once-in-a-decade power transition later this autumn. While Gu and Bo remain in detention awaiting an official verdict, their downfall has also revealed a deep rift among the top echelons of the Communist party and debunked the idea that authoritarian China has managed to institutionalise an orderly succession process in the absence of democracy. But Heywood's suspicious death would have almost definitely remained a mystery and Bo would still be a rising political star if it wasn't for the actions of one man – Bo's once-loyal and fanatical chief of police in Chongqing, Wang Lijun. ►



Gu Kailai
Wife of Bo Xilai

She is alleged to have murdered British businessman Neil Heywood using potassium cyanide administered in a drink with the help of a bodyguard



‘He is someone who “*liu qin bu ren*” – “doesn’t recognise the six relations” – which means he has no loyalty to anyone, not even his own father’

A friend of Bo Xilai during the Cultural Revolution

◀ Wang’s flight from house arrest in Chongqing to a US consulate 300km away on February 6 made him the most senior asylum-seeking official in the history of communist China and will probably go down as an event that changed the course of Chinese history. While machine-gun-toting security agents sent by Bo Xilai surrounded the consulate on February 7, Wang provided US officials with detailed evidence of Heywood’s murder and Gu’s culpability, as well as lurid tales of corruption and political intrigue involving his former boss. He insisted Bo was trying to have him killed and requested political asylum, but when that was refused, he negotiated an exit with Beijing, left the consulate in the middle of the night and was taken to the capital by a vice-minister of state security. He has since disappeared from public view, but people familiar with the case say he has provided detailed and extensive proof of Bo and Gu’s alleged crimes to Chinese investigators and is himself awaiting trial, possibly on charges of treason, a capital crime.

Most Chinese political insiders believe he will receive a relatively light sentence because of his role in helping Bo’s many political enemies to bring down a man they believe could have tried to seize ultimate power and rule as a modern dictator.

“If Wang Lijun hadn’t run to the US consulate and revealed Heywood’s death, then Bo would almost certainly have been elevated into the standing committee and then he would have been untouchable,” a senior party member in the Chongqing government told the FT. “That was a very frightening prospect for his rivals, who thought of him as a Hitler-like figure.”

Even many of his supporters believe Bo would not have been satisfied as a junior member of the collective leadership and would have tried to manoeuvre himself into a more central role, possibly even by replacing Xi Jinping, the man anointed to take over as Chinese president this autumn.

THE RED ARISTOCRAT

If any family in post-revolutionary China can be considered aristocratic, it is that of Bo Xilai. His father was the revolutionary Red Army commander Bo Yibo, one of the all-powerful party elders, known as the “eight immortals”, who controlled Chinese politics from behind the scenes throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Born on July 3 1949, the year the Communists won the civil war, Bo Xilai had an early life of ultimate privilege. Surrounded by the children of other top officials, he attended the elite Number 4 High School in Beijing, along with his older and younger brothers. “He was much more quiet and civilised than his two brothers, who were really very arrogant and aggressive rascals,” one former classmate says. “On the surface he seemed kinder and gentler than them.” Others described him as a shy boy who would blush when he spoke.

But when Mao unleashed the madness of the Cultural Revolution and students organised themselves into “Red Guard” groups to brutalise their teachers and elders, Bo Xilai and his brothers all joined a radical faction called Liandong, or “United Action”. This group of teenage children of high-ranking cadres believed in the “bloodline theory” that said their destiny was to rule over China as the sons of “red nobility”. They were regarded as particularly vicious as they attacked government officials and

other Red Guard groups, even as many of their parents, including Bo’s father, were purged and sent to jail or labour camps. In a possibly apocryphal story that is today used as shorthand in Chinese political circles to sum up his character, Bo Xilai actively participated in a public “struggle session” directed against his father, whom he beat until he broke two of his ribs. “He is someone who ‘*liu qin bu ren*’ – ‘doesn’t recognise the six relations’ – which means he has no loyalty to anyone, not even his own father,” said one person who knew him well at that time and later at university.

Bo Yibo was sent to prison, where he endured torture at the hands of his fanatical captors, while Bo Xilai’s mother, Hu Ming, killed herself or was murdered while a captive of Red Guards, according to differing accounts. The chaotic tide soon turned against their children and Bo Xilai was thrown into prison at the age of 17. He spent nearly five years in jail and in Camp 789, a labour camp for children of disgraced senior officials. On his release in 1972, he went to work in a machine repair factory.

People who know Bo Xilai say his experiences left him bitter, but his belief that he was special and destined to rule never wavered and was probably only strengthened by his awful experiences. With Mao’s death in 1976, the Cultural Revolution ended and Bo Xilai was married and then admitted to the elite Peking University in late 1977 to study history. It was while still in his first year at university that friends and acquaintances say an adulterous romance blossomed between Bo and Gu Kailai, nine years his junior and the youngest of five daughters of Gu Jinsheng, a prominent revolutionary general. After two years of studying history, Bo decided to change to journalism, laying the foundation for his future expert manipulation of the news media.

MAKING OF A POLITICIAN

After graduating, Bo moved to Liaoning province, in the distant north-east of the country, to work as a low-level cadre. He officially left his first wife and married Gu Kailai. The couple had a son, Bo Guagua, in 1987, and in 1993 Bo Xilai was named mayor of Dalian, thanks in part to lobbying by his father, who by this stage had taken a keen interest in promoting his son’s political career. It was here in this seaside city of 6 million, in the country’s rustbelt, that Bo began to formulate his trademark political style. His charming public persona and telegenic good looks set him apart from the majority of grey, faceless party bureaucrats and he earned a reputation for getting things done and improving lives. Even today, most ordinary people remember him fondly as someone who made them proud to be from Dalian. “Perhaps us ordinary folk didn’t understand the full picture of what he was up to, but we all thought he was great and he really did a lot for this city,” one resident says.

While the overwhelming public impression of him was positive, some complained he focused too much on grand monuments and cosmetic changes, especially his obsession with planting expensive imported grass. And in contrast to his mass public appeal, Bo was widely hated and feared among his subordinates. “He had a very mean character and would punish officials for the tiniest things,” said one person who worked for him in Dalian. “To foreigners and in front of the cameras he was always smiling, but he would turn to us and his face would change to that of a tyrant.”

Bo’s enormous power as the top Communist official in Dalian manifested in other more sinister incidents. After Dalian-based journalist Jiang Weiping wrote three anonymous articles in a Hong Kong publication that criticised Bo for his role in a corruption scandal, he was sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of subversion and stealing state secrets. He served nearly six years before he was freed and fled to Canada.

Meanwhile, Gu Kailai, whose given name means “embrace the future”, was also burnishing her public image as a high-flying lawyer with the 1998 publication of a book entitled *Uphold Justice in America* that later became a TV serial. The story followed Gu as she helped several Dalian companies win a case in a US court in 1997. Calling herself Horus Kai in English (after the ancient Egyptian god of war) she was much sought after by Chinese and



Bo Yibo Father

Red Army commander and one of the all-powerful party elders, known as the “eight immortals”, who controlled Chinese politics throughout the 1980s and early 1990s



Bo Guagua Son

He studied at Oxford, and was known as a spoilt “flower prince”. Photographs spread over the internet of him at parties living a champagne lifestyle

foreign businesses for legal advice related to investment in Bo's fiefdom of Dalian.

It was in Dalian in the mid-1990s that Neil Heywood first met the rising political star and his glamorous wife. While still in his twenties and hoping to establish himself as a business consultant, Heywood sent introductory letters to government officials in an attempt to connect with the Chinese elite. Bo, the city's mayor, responded, and Heywood, with his upper-class British charm, became a friend of the family, eventually joining a group of foreigners who advised Gu on her overseas business ventures. This small coterie included a French architect called Patrick Henri Devillers who friends of Heywood and acquaintances of Gu say was her main business agent in Europe, and probably her lover. Devillers, 52, was arrested last month in Cambodia, where he has lived for at least five years, at the request of the Chinese authorities. He was freed last week and flew to China to help with the investigation into Bo and Gu after he was promised legal immunity.

Around 1999, Gu moved to Bournemouth in the UK with her son, Guagua, so he could attend a language school there before moving to Papplewick, an exclusive private boys prep school, and then Harrow. Neil Heywood told friends he helped Guagua gain admittance to the exclusive schools, and in the succeeding years, he acted as a mentor and friend to the young man, often meeting up with him and his mother in the UK.

As his wife and son settled into their new lives in Britain, back in China, Bo Xilai found his career accelerating and he was promoted to governor of Liaoning province in early 2001. Political analysts say his promotion was partly thanks to a concerted campaign of flattery directed towards China's then-President Jiang Zemin, as well as continued heavy lobbying by Bo's father. In 2004, Bo's media savvy and ambition were launched on to the global stage with his appointment as China's minister of commerce. Although his salary was no more than Rmb120,000 (£12,000) a year, Bo lived in a palatial mansion in central Beijing and drove a late-model Jaguar, in addition to his chauffeured government car. His wife had ostensibly given up her legal career, but his son was attending private schools in the UK that charge fees of about £30,000 a year.

Since Bo was removed from all his positions in April, investigations into publicly disclosed company reports have exposed hundreds of millions of dollars worth of property and assets owned by members of Bo's extended family. These documents reveal that between them, Bo's brothers and sisters and Gu's sisters control assets worth at least \$120m. People close to the family say their actual holdings are far greater, but there is no evidence of any wrongdoing on the part of these siblings.

BANISHED TO THE WEST

By most accounts, Bo was one of the people considered at the 17th Communist party congress in 2007 for advancement to the nine-member politburo standing committee, which in effect rules China, and he had his sights set on being named at least a vice-premier at that time. But his father's death in January that year reduced his political clout, and staunch opposition from many serving and retired officials, including Premier Wen Jiabao, ultimately ruined his chances. Bo was sent out to the provinces – to the steamy south-western metropolis of Chongqing on the banks of the Yangtze River. “There are three main things that stopped him being promoted – his notoriety from being a member of the Liandong [the violent Red Guard group] in the Cultural Revolution, his father's bad reputation and overly aggressive campaigning on his behalf and thirdly, the fact he treated colleagues and junior officials so badly,” says Cheng Li, an expert in elite Chinese politics at Brookings Institution. There was also a fear among party leaders and elders that Bo's overwhelming ambition would lead him to try to seize power as, in stark contrast to other senior cadres, he didn't try very hard to conceal his desire to one day take the top job of premier or president.

Although he was angry and frustrated at being shoved off to the edge of the empire, Bo would soon find a way to use his new position to raise his profile further. When he arrived to take over as Communist party secretary in November 2007, Chongqing



Wang Lijun Chief of police in Chongqing

An ethnic Mongolian and a decorated police officer with a reputation for battling violent mafia gangs in China's famously lawless north-east. He was obsessed with learning and culture

was seething with problems – terrible pollution, unemployment, unco-ordinated growth, organised crime, corruption and a nascent real-estate bubble. He quickly began a figurative and literal clean-up of the city with a series of policies that would come to be known collectively as the “Chongqing Model” and were seen by some as presenting an alternative to the policies espoused in Beijing. Just as he had in Dalian, Bo launched a massive planting campaign to “green” and tidy up the city. His agenda included tearing down and rebuilding large swathes of urban areas, an enormous new subsidised housing programme for low-income families, construction of a giant new highway, bridge and tunnel network and a new airport.

Foreign investors were besotted with Bo, with his English banter and all the charm of a western politician that set him apart from all the other dour Communist officials they encountered in China. But just as in Dalian and at the commerce ministry, Bo's underlings soon learned to fear him.

'SMASHING BLACK' AND 'SINGING RED'

In order to solidify his control over Chongqing's police and security services, Bo plucked a man he had known well in north-east China and promoted him several ranks to the head of public security in the city. This man was Wang Lijun, an ethnic Mongolian and decorated police officer with a reputation for battling mafia gangs in China's lawless north-east. With his smart glasses and penchant for finely tailored suits, most people's first impression was that Wang looked like a professor. Although he did not have much education beyond his time at police college, Wang was obsessed with learning and culture and accepted numerous “visiting professorships” from universities at home and abroad.

In the late 1990s, Wang had drawn the attention of party propagandists who created a television drama based on his exploits called *Iron-blooded Police Spirits* and, later, he personally commissioned a number of books and films that glorified his actions. A braggart and fantasist who claimed to have spent two years being trained by the FBI and to have once talked kidnappers from the Italian mafia into letting him go, Wang often wore leather jackets he said were the same brand as those worn by former US president Bill Clinton. He also conducted autopsies and, as police chief of the north-eastern city of Jinzhou, he established an “on-site psychological research centre” to analyse the psychology of prisoners as they were executed and had their organs harvested for transplant, according to documents posted on Chinese government websites. Wang's notoriety and loyalty to Bo made him just the man to help with what would become the centrepiece of Bo's bid for higher office – a well-publicised war on organised crime known as the “dahei” or “smash black” campaign.

Wang arrived in Chongqing in June 2008, and a year later, the pair launched their televised typhoon against the mafia. In a series of hasty trials, more than a dozen accused gang bosses ▶

Foreign investors were besotted with Bo, with his English banter and all the charm of a western politician that set him apart from the other dour Communist officials

◀ were convicted and executed, while thousands of others were given lengthy prison terms and assets worth billions of renminbi were confiscated. The public applauded, but disturbing accounts soon emerged of persecution, disregard for legal procedures and confessions extracted through torture.

The other main plank of Bo's bid for higher office was a nostalgic campaign to revive traditional communist morality. Government departments, companies and community groups were encouraged to spend large sums of money organising singalongs of Cultural Revolution-era "red" songs and to glorify the country's communist traditions. The government sent Mao Zedong quotations out to citizens via text message, patriotic historical dramas replaced game shows on television and advertising was banned from primetime airwaves. The local government even commissioned a new 37-metre statue of Mao. This fixation on communist "morality" elicited scorn from people who pointed out that Bo's own son Guagua was now studying at Oxford, where he had a reputation as a spoilt and wealthy "huahua gongzi" – literally "flower prince". The hypocrisy was further exposed when he was rusticated (suspended) for a year for not studying and when pictures spread over the internet of him at parties wearing women's make-up, kissing western girls and urinating in his undergraduate gown on the gates of an Oxford college.

THE EMPRESS UNRAVELS

While her husband was "smashing black and singing red" and her son was living his champagne-fuelled life at Oxford, Gu Kailai's behaviour was becoming more erratic.

In 2005 or 2006, after Gu had fallen out with Patrick Devillers, Neil Heywood stepped in to take his place as her main business agent abroad. Friends of Heywood and acquaintances of Gu say she had a sexual relationship with Devillers and possibly also with Heywood, but he gave the impression his role was limited to helping her with overseas business interests. In 2008, he began negotiating on her behalf with the British Museum about the possibility of her becoming its "godmother" and patron in China. "He was an interlocutor, the quintessential western go-between of the kind that is very common representing powerful people in the Middle East," according to someone familiar with the discussions. But talks were broken off in late 2010, when Heywood quietly informed the museum that Gu had suffered a nervous breakdown and could not continue with the proposed deal.

At about this time, Heywood began telling friends that Gu was "mentally unstable" and he described an extraordinary feudal world within the Bo household in which servants and hangers-on would swear celibacy in order to serve them. Her marriage to Bo had become increasingly distant since she moved to the UK and that added to her depression. In a conversation with a friend on November 13, just two days before he was found dead, Heywood seemed nervous about having been summoned to Chongqing to see Gu, but he did not mention any fears for his safety. The official public announcement of Gu Kailai's arrest in connection with Heywood's murder said the two had a "conflict over economic interests, which had intensified".

Police believe Gu plotted to murder Heywood after he demanded a bigger commission for helping her to transfer funds abroad illegally and threatened to expose her offshore financial dealings if she refused, according to people briefed on the investigation. According to other people familiar with Gu, she had become ever more paranoid and depressed since she discovered she was the subject of a corruption investigation, instigated by her husband's numerous political enemies. Four high-ranking party members who claim to have knowledge of the matter say that powerful retired and serving members of the party elite, who opposed Bo Xilai's bid for promotion to the nine-member politburo standing committee, had launched a secret party investigation to gather evidence on him and his family and associates. These people say the plan was to confront Bo with this evidence in order to block his advancement to the pinnacle of Chinese political power, forcing him to retire quietly to a less prominent position. These efforts included a prolonged investigation into

While her husband was "smashing black and singing red" and her son was living his champagne-fuelled life at Oxford, Gu Kailai's behaviour was becoming more erratic

police chief Wang Lijun and especially into his previous role as police chief in the medium-sized north-eastern city of Tieling, where he served until 2003.

Wang's successor as chief of police and vice-mayor in Tieling, Gu Fengjie, was detained by Communist party anti-corruption investigators in May last year, following the detention of at least two other senior police officials. In a macabre development, the body of another vice-mayor from Tieling, Yuan Weiliang, was found floating in a canal in the Liaoning provincial capital of Shenyang in September 2011. Police ruled his death a suicide and said he had been depressed.

Friends say Neil Heywood was almost certainly unaware of the ongoing investigations into Wang and Gu and the pressure Gu was under as a result, and he could not have known that his threats would prompt her to take drastic action. Few details have been released about the circumstances of Heywood's death, but salacious reports circulating in political and diplomatic circles claim Heywood spat out a cyanide-laced drink given to him by Gu and her accomplices, who then held him down on the floor of his hotel room and poured the poison into his mouth. His body was found in the hotel room on November 15, which happened to be Gu Kailai's 53rd birthday.

In his later account to US diplomats and Chinese investigators, Wang Lijun said he was informed about the case by police officers who did not want to sign off on Heywood's cremation because no autopsy had been performed. Wang then took samples of hair, skin and blood from Heywood's body before it was cremated on November 18. People familiar with the case say they believe Wang already knew at this point that Gu was responsible for Heywood's death, but had agreed to help cover it up.

"TU SI GOU PENG" - WHEN THE RABBITS ARE ALL DEAD THE HUNTING DOG IS BOILED FOR FOOD

The events leading up to Wang's flight to the US consulate in Chengdu, a 300km drive from Chongqing, are shrouded in mystery. According to those familiar with the account, Wang told US diplomats in Chengdu that the police chief went to see his patron Bo Xilai on or around January 18 and informed him that he had evidence Gu had murdered Heywood. In a rage, Bo Xilai struck him in the face, shouted at him and told him to leave his sight.

There are a number of theories as to why Wang went to Bo with his evidence, the most credible of which seems to be Wang's realisation that a party anti-corruption investigation into him and his past was closing in. In an attempt to secure Bo's protection, he presented him with the bombshell of Heywood's murder, implicitly suggesting he could make it all go away if Bo guaranteed his safety. Another theory is that Wang did not know or care about the investigation in Tieling and it was his blind loyalty to Bo that caused him to miscalculate by presenting what he knew and asking for advice on how to handle it. Regardless of Wang's motivation, it was at this point that Bo's arrogance and sense of invulnerability got the better of him.

Almost all of the dozens of people interviewed for this article believe that if Bo had agreed to protect Wang in exchange for making the case go away, Heywood's death would never have emerged, and Bo would still be a leading contender for a top party post this autumn. "If Bo was modest and down to earth, he could have looked after Wang Lijun, but he saw him just as a tool or a dog and dismissed him, that was his fatal mistake," said one party theorist with close ties to the leadership. "He was just too arrogant and his sense that he was untouchable was too great."

Not long after, on February 2, Wang was fired as police chief and appointed the city's vice-mayor in charge of sports, sanitation and education instead. On February 6, Wang Lijun slipped out of his house past officers who had been sent by Bo to watch him and drove the 300km to the US consulate in Chengdu. Once inside the US consulate he requested political asylum on the grounds that Bo Xilai was trying to have him killed and he handed over evidence of Heywood's murder and Gu's involvement.



Chongqing Bo's stronghold

Neil Heywood was allegedly poisoned at the three-star Lucky Holiday Hotel in the region. Chongqing has a population of 33 million and a land area about the size of Austria

THE KING FALLS

Instead of travelling to Beijing to explain his decision to send his own security officers from Chongqing to retrieve Wang from the US consulate in the separate jurisdiction of Chengdu, Bo Xilai did something that further alarmed senior party leaders. He flew to the south-western city of Kunming, 650km away from Chongqing, and visited a military complex that is home to the 14th Group Army, the same unit commanded by his father during the communist revolution. As he toured the base where a wax-work model of Bo Yibo is on prominent display, state media noted Bo Xilai was there to “cherish the memory of revolutionary ancestors”. The symbolic visit highlighted his deep ties to the military, as well as his powerful pedigree as the son of a revolutionary leader and indicated he was not worried by Wang’s allegations.

At the opening of the annual Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference on March 2, Bo showed up and put on a brave face for the 3,000 assembled delegates and journalists. But in internal government meetings, Bo was livid, haranguing Chongqing officials and telling them that Wang’s flight and the rumours swirling around him were all part of a “plot instigated by foreign reactionary forces”. Over the next two weeks, Bo appeared in public nearly a dozen times. In a typical final bout of showmanship, he even held a two-hour press conference on the sidelines of the National People’s Congress.

Appearing relaxed, Bo said that unspecified enemies had “formed criminal blocs with wide social ties and the ability to shape opinion” and were “pouring filth” on him and his family. He also dismissed suggestions he was being investigated or in any political trouble. Four days later, on March 14, Bo attended the closing ceremony of the National People’s Congress and sat alongside his politburo colleagues on the stage in the Great Hall of the People. Looking tired and distracted, at one point he stared up at the cavernous ceiling of the Great Hall as if saying a silent prayer. As the ceremony ended and China’s most senior leaders got up to leave, Bo rose quickly and strode off the stage. Waiting in the

Bo said that unspecified enemies had ‘formed criminal blocs with wide social ties and the ability to shape opinion’ and were ‘pouring filth’ on him and his family

wings were officers of the elite Central Guard Unit charged with protecting China’s top leaders, who led him away, according to two people with knowledge of the matter. Gu and more than a dozen of Bo’s close associates were detained at the same time and are currently being held in undisclosed locations around China.

AWAITING TRIAL

As Beijing slips into its scorching summer months, there is still no word on how the government plans to deal with Gu Kailai, Wang Lijun and Bo Xilai. Going by past experience, most people expect some kind of carefully staged show trials that will be held in secret and announced after the fact. But here the party faces a dilemma that could further destabilise the political situation.

Given Bo’s enormous popularity among ordinary people, an unconvincing official account backed by threadbare evidence could lead many Chinese to assume the entire affair was a stitch-up and Bo was the victim of political infighting. On the other hand, if the case against him is presented too fully, with gory details of corruption, murder and plots, then the public may question how someone so craven and deranged could rise to the top of the political system, and scrutiny may turn to other senior leaders. For now, the once-in-a-decade leadership transition scheduled for October or November appears to be back on track. Some analysts are even saying that without Bo’s destabilising presence, a more harmonious and effective leadership will emerge.

“Bo and his ambition were seen as the most dangerous force in Chinese politics and people inside the party always compared him to Hitler,” said one senior Chongqing official who worked closely with Bo. “He was a Marxist-Leninist who opposed western liberal democracy, but the irony is that if the Chinese people were allowed to vote, he probably would have been elected president.” **FT**

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