

Party Blames Zhang Youxia's Fall on Disloyalty, Factionalism

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On September 21, the Politburo announced the expulsion of former Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia (张有喜) and former CMC member Liu Zhenli (刘振立) from the Party following the conclusions of investigations into the two men. They will now face military prosecution (Xinhua, September 21). Their downfall earlier in 2026 was the apex of successive purges that have left only Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Zhang Shengmin (张生民) active on the military's executive decision-making body (Reuters, September 21).

The expulsion notice foregrounds political failings, unlike earlier notices on the removals of senior officers that either framed political violations as failures of responsibility and resistance to investigation or provided minimal explanation. In particular, Zhang and Liu are accused of involvement in cliques and of disloyalty, tying these charges to the sale of promotions while deemphasizing corruption.

Notice Foregrounds Disloyalty and Cliques

The notice starts out by declaring that the duo “became estranged from the Party in heart and mind” (离心离德) and “crossed red lines and bottom lines” (触碰红线底线). The first charge has appeared previously in notices from the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), but had not been applied to a senior officer since the 20th Party Congress (CCDI, September 30, 2021). “Crossed red lines and bottom lines,” however, is a new charge to disciplinary notices. [1]

The accusation of disloyalty is unusual. The notices on the expulsion of Wei Fenghe (魏凤和) and Li Shangfu (李尚福)—both former CMC members and defense ministers—from the Party in 2024 did not use the term. While Li's omitted any mention of loyalty, Wei's instead spoke only of a “loss of loyalty” (丧失忠诚) (Xinhua, June 27, 2024, [a], [b]). Similarly, the October 2025 notice on He Weidong (何卫东), Miao Hua (苗华), and seven others stated only that they had seriously violated Party discipline and were suspected of serious duty-related crimes. Any detailed discussion was absent (Ministry of National Defense, October 17, 2025). Nevertheless, the latest notice does not specify how Zhang and Liu have been “disloyal.” For instance, it does not cite any of the forms listed in Article 58 of the *Regulations on Chinese Communist Party Disciplinary Actions*. [2] Whether a given act counts as disloyalty arguably rests largely on Xi's own judgment.

The notice then proceeds by laying out the two men's serious violations of political, organizational, integrity, work, and lifestyle discipline. In terms of political discipline, it finds that they “formed cliques” (搞小圈子) and were “disloyal and dishonest to the Party” (对党不忠诚不老实) (Xinhua, September 21). [3] Under organizational discipline, it combines political and economic charges together, stating that the two “used their positions to help others obtain promotions, among other things, and accepted huge sums of money” (利用职权为他人谋取晋升等利益，并接受巨额钱财). Their charges referenced with respect to the other three kinds of discipline relate to these same themes but carry less weight.

The notice then further details the extent of Zhang and Liu's political and economic crimes, concluding that the two sets of problems were “intertwined” (交织) and that “corruption and self-enrichment coexisted with dereliction of duty” (腐败与自我 enrichment 交织). This is the first instance of the charge of “dereliction of duty” in a notice on senior officers since the 20th Party Congress. The sentence

again emphasizes the “huge sums” (巨额) of money involved, as well as the “extremely negative” (极其负面) impact of their actions. [4]

The factionalism charge is worded with restraint, suggesting that the leadership wants the case understood as clique-building inside the system, a category that carries no implication of a plot against Xi. Article 54 of the Regulations lists “forming cliques” alongside “banding together for private gain” (拉帮结派), “forming factions” (搞小圈子), and “cultivating personal power bases” (培植个人势力), among other activities, as distinct types of misconduct. The notice uses only the first of these. In comparison, former Vice Minister for Public Security Sun Lijun (孙立军) and his associates were explicitly accused of forming a “political gang” (政治团伙) in a notice that also described this gang’s organizational features, accusing him of cultivating “an interest group” (利益集团) (Xinhua, September 30, 2021). [5] The notice on Zhang and Liu uses none of these terms and does not invoke Article 53 of the Regulations, which concerns “secret groups” (秘密集团). [6]

Conclusion

The Fifth Plenum of the 20th Central Committee, set for October 26–29, will ratify the expulsions of Zhang and Liu and discuss a decision on “persistently advancing comprehensive and strict Party governance” (持之以恒推进全面从严治党的决定) (Xinhua, September 21). The last plenum on that theme was the Sixth Plenum of the 18th Central Committee in 2016. There, Xi criticized “a very small number” (极少数) of senior cadres for “political conspiratorial activities” (政治阴谋活动) such as “banding together for private gain, forming cliques, and forming factions” (拉帮结派、搞小圈子、搞政治阴谋活动). He added that the cases of Guo Boxiong (郭晓雄), Xu Caihou (徐才厚), and others had exposed serious political as well as economic problems (Xinhua, November 2, 2016). A decade later, another CMC vice chairman stands accused of intertwined “political and economic problems.” The charge of “forming cliques,” once reserved for “a very small number,” now appears in a disciplinary notice, albeit shorn of “political ambition” (政治野心) and “conspiracy” (阴谋). Whether the upcoming plenum’s documents restore those words bears watching.

Notes

[1] The object of this charge is the Party. In January, a PLA Daily editorial had accused Zhang and Liu of “seriously trampling on” (严重践踏) the CMC chairman responsibility system (军委主席负责制), which vests command of the armed forces in Xi personally (PLA Daily, January 25). The latest notice drops that formulation and casts the same failing as estrangement from the Party. The change may be meant to prevent opposition to Xi from being read as anything other than opposition to the Party, or it may simply reflect a difference in genre.

[2] These include being “two-faced” (两面派), “complying in public while defying in private” (阳奉阴违), and “acting as a double-dealer” (搞两面派) (Xinhua, December 27, 2023).

[3] These findings correspond to Articles 54 and 58 of the Regulations (Xinhua, December 27, 2023).

[4] The notice stops short, however, of the judgment that Zhang and Liu “caused especially great harm” (造成特别重大损害), which appeared in the 2024 notices on Wei and Li (Xinhua, June 27, 2024, [a], [b]).

[5] The following year, Fu Zhenghua (傅政华), former justice minister, was said to have joined Sun’s political gang, formed factions, and “banded together for private gain” (Xinhua, March 31, 2022).

[6] The notice is also silent on leaking secrets. Media reports in January claimed Zhang had been accused of passing nuclear weapons data to the United States (Wall Street Journal, January 25). Earlier notices show that such matters can be made public. Zhou Yongkang’s (周永康) notice cited his

“leaking of Party and state secrets” (泄露党和国家秘密) (People’s Daily, December 6, 2014), and Ling Jihua’s (Ling Jihua) stated that he had obtained large quantities of core Party and state secrets in violation of discipline and law (Xinhua, July 20, 2015). The notice on Zhang and Liu contains nothing comparable.

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