

UNRESOLVED SUCCESSION PROBLEMS

“What is the main difference between democratically governed states and autocracies?” The question was posed to me by former NZZ correspondent and astute observer Urs Schöttli at one of our regular meetings where we discuss the world situation. I listed the usual things. Participation of the people, sharing of power, control over the elites. “Yes, of course. But I was asking about essentials.” Our analytical exchanges tend to be quite merciless in intellectual terms.

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“Democracies, unlike autocratically ruled countries, have the succession problem under control. Fifty percent plus one vote, that's it.” What we see in Russia, but also in China, can be reduced to an unresolved succession problem. Consider Vladimir Putin, for 30 years at the top of an increasingly corrupt, mafia-like pyramid of power in the form of an outwardly state-like entity. Tending to exaggerate his importance in Russian history. Surrounded by vassals who are loyal until signs of weakness make it advisable to bring accumulated spoils into a safe place – which is why Ukraine's emerging victory threatens to become so dangerous. Then Xi Jinping,

who like his predecessors should have resigned from the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party after two terms in office, but now wants to continue governing for the foreseeable future because otherwise China could allegedly break apart. A ruler to whom there seems to be no alternative but who, with his zero-Covid strategy, has now manoeuvred himself into an economic and socio-political *cul de sac* from which it is difficult to break out or turn back. Xi would like to become greater than Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping. Taiwan, a yardstick for imperial completion, is therefore of immense importance, even though coexistence so far has been enormously beneficial for both sides.

We know from managing private assets and advising families on inheritance and succession issues, among other things, how difficult the replacement of a generation can turn out to be. After all, nothing requires more getting used to than the loss of power. But spin it any way you please: any human is mortal. Any behaviour or structure that amounts to disregarding this fact or depriving it of its inevitable poignancy is foolish. In the case of economic empires, there is the threat of total loss in the end, but in the case of political power, it can quickly come to human lives and geopolitical security.

Sometimes one could wish that there was, somewhere in the world, far away in the southernmost Pacific, a beautiful isle where one could dispose of worn-out autocrats. And yes, they could live there in luxury, at the expense of the global public, for all I care. But one thing they could never do: return to power!

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