

## In Memoriam for Li Keqiang (1955—2023): The President China Could Have Had, But Never Did

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**Cover Image Attribute:** *File Photo of Li Keqiang, an English-speaking economist, who was once considered a contender to succeed then-Communist Party leader Hu Jintao in 2013 but was passed over in favor of Xi Jinping. / Source: Heng Sinith/AP*

**SUMMARY:** *As we reflect on his life, we reflect on the opportunities that seemed within reach but ultimately remained elusive. Li Keqiang was a man who carried the hopes and aspirations of many, not only as a competent leader but also as someone who could have ushered in a new era of governance for China. In an era of complexities and global challenges, we remember Li with a sense of 'what if.' What if he had risen to the presidency? What if his leadership had steered the course of China's destiny in a different direction? These questions linger as a testament to the potential he*

*embodied. Li Keqiang, the President China could have had, but never did, leaves a legacy of unfulfilled promises. Today, as we commemorate his life, we acknowledge the significance of what might have been and the lasting impact of the road not taken.*

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On the evening of October 27, 2023, Beijing's skyline was bathed in an eerie glow as a giant LED screen displayed an obituary photo of former Premier Li Keqiang. The sudden death of China's former second-ranking leader sent shockwaves through the nation, leaving citizens mourning the loss of a prominent figure who had championed market-oriented reforms but found himself politically sidelined.

Li Keqiang, who had served as China's Premier for a decade, was widely regarded as one of the last remaining reformist politicians in an era marked by increasing political centralization. Tragically, he passed away at the age of 68 following a sudden heart attack. The news of Li's death, who had announced his early retirement at the Communist Party congress in November the previous year, following a clean sweep of top party positions by allies of President Xi Jinping, brought an outpouring of grief on Chinese social media. In an official statement, the Communist Party praised Li as *"an excellent CPC member, a time-tested and loyal communist soldier, an outstanding proletarian revolutionist, statesman, and leader of the Party and the state."* The statement highlighted Li's unwavering support for the leadership of the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core, as well as his commitment to the fight against corruption and the promotion of clean government.

Although Li had, during his two terms as Premier, publicly supported Xi, it was well-known that he had little choice in the matter given Xi's rapid consolidation of power over the party and military. The official obituary from the CPC even mentioned Xi's name six times and commended Li for his *"adherence"* to Xi's leadership. However, the differences between the two leaders, from their political styles to their policy preferences, were stark and an open secret in Beijing. Li was known as a pragmatic technocrat, while Xi emphasized ideology.

Li Keqiang represented a political stance that aligned with the continuation of China's reform and openness, with a strong focus on the economy, particularly the private sector, which played a crucial role in China's growth, job creation, and innovation. In his final press conference as Premier in March 2022, Mr. Li asserted that reform and openness were irreversible, akin to the unceasing flow of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers. These words resonated with the public, coming at a time when China was grappling with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, closed borders, and regulatory interventions that had tempered economic sentiment. In 2020, as Chinese state media lauded Xi for eradicating extreme poverty, Li gained praise for highlighting the plight of 600 million Chinese citizens earning less than \$140 per month.

The differences between Li and Xi became especially evident during the handling of the pandemic. While Xi advocated for continued pandemic restrictions, Li chose to appear in public without a face mask and convened an online meeting of 100,000 officials, emphasizing the importance of jobs and

economic growth amid widespread lockdowns. The People's Daily downplayed coverage of this meeting, reflecting the contrast in their approaches.

Born in a rural county in eastern Anhui province, Li joined the Communist Party at the age of 21 during the final year of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). He was among the first students admitted to the prestigious Peking University when students were allowed to return to campuses after being "*sent down to the countryside*" by Mao. Li graduated with a degree in law, making him the first Chinese Premier with a background in economics and law. His time at Peking University during the 1980s exposed him to a more open political environment, even within the confines of CPC politics. Some of his classmates became advocates for political and legal liberalization, Li followed a more conservative path and immersed himself in party politics through the Communist Youth League, where he forged his association with Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao.

After gaining popularity through various provincial appointments, Li was initially positioned as a potential successor to Hu. However, Xi's emergence ahead of him at the 2007 Party Congress was a surprising twist, appointing Xi as Vice President and his anointed successor for 2012. Li took over as Premier in 2013, with a focus on economic management, but even within this domain, his influence waned rapidly as Xi dismantled the "*collective leadership*" system. Unlike his predecessors Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao, Li had limited say in economic policymaking, which was shifted from the government to new Party Committees under Xi's leadership.

Li was commended by the party leadership for making the "*sacrifice*" of retiring in November of the previous year, even though he was eligible for another five-year term on the Politburo Standing Committee. His untimely passing, shortly after his retirement, came at a politically sensitive juncture for the party, following the surprising removals of the Foreign Minister and Defense Minister, both appointed by Xi, just a few months into their terms. As was the case with the passing of former President Jiang last year, the party is expected to hold a substantial state funeral to provide the public with an opportunity to grieve.

Historically, the passing of popular political figures in Chinese politics has often served as a focal point for those dissatisfied with current policies, most notably in 1989. On Friday, social media posts in China were being closely monitored and restricted, and some videos of Li were deleted, though posting links to official announcements of his death was allowed. Li is survived by his wife, Cheng Hong, a well-known academic in China and professor of English literature, and their daughter.

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