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China's Anti-Corruption Campaign: Understanding the Rationale

By Loro Horta

Synopsis

Since President Xi Jinping assumed the leadership of China in 2012, the most extensive anti-corruption campaign has been underway in the world's second largest economy. What really lies behind the current campaign?

Commentary

MANY PUNDITS in the West tend to dismiss President Xi Jinping's current campaign against corruption as politically motivated. They argue that Xi is using the campaign to eliminate his opponents and consolidate his power. While there is a certain element of political retribution in the process, the issue is far more complex.

To begin with, far too many mid-ranking and junior officials across the country and from various government and commercial sectors have been swept up in the ongoing drive, the number reaching 63,000. The scope of the campaign cannot be explained as a mere power struggle. Junior and mid-level officials constitute the bulk of those caught in the anti-corruption dragnet, even though such 'small fish' pose no threat to President Xi and his associates. It is true that senior figures like Zou Yongkang, China's former security tsar, have fallen, but the majority of those rounded up have been obscure officials.

Fighting for legitimacy

What this shows is that the current communist leadership is genuinely concerned about the rampant corruption permeating all sections of Chinese society. Endemic corruption has led to a great loss of legitimacy for the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in power since 1949. Corruption took on critical proportions at the provincial and county levels, leading to thousands of anti-corruption protests and riots every year, some with deadly consequences. Provincial and county officials are generally despised by the populace and only a strong security apparatus keeps the situation under control.

In 2011 China spent US\$5 billion more on domestic security than it did on external defence. Growing corruption in the provinces has led to the rise of powerful local interests that have challenged the

centre's control. Corruption and the dynamics of rapid economic growth have seen the gap between rich and poor increase significantly, further eroding the CCP's legitimacy.

While many foreigners who live in China seldom come face-to-face with corruption, the average Chinese deals with it on a daily basis. From getting one's residence permit renewed to trivial matters like obtaining a driver's licence, bribery has become a natural thing. This has created a high level of resentment that could in the short-term generate severe unrest. Corruption threatens the very survival of the Communist party.

From the mid 1990s to the early 2000s there was a general optimism among the Chinese people that despite all the challenges, the average Chinese was becoming better off. While the rich were getting richer, the poor were improving their lot also. This optimism, however, seems to have disappeared in recent years with large numbers of Chinese, including wealthy citizens leaving the country. Almost half of China's millionaires are reportedly planning to leave China.

This explains President Xi's China Dream slogan - an attempt to bring back the spirit of optimism of the past in which all Chinese can benefit from the country's rise. President Xi has adopted a totally different style of leadership from his predecessors, reaching out to the people and giving an image of acting naturally. He frequents simple restaurants and was even reported to have jumped into a Beijing taxi incognito. This is also part of the attempt to address the legitimacy crisis. For years the Chinese people have perceived their leaders as aloof and distant, having little contact with their reality.

The fallacy of democracy

There is also a tendency by foreign observers to see Chinese leaders as conniving Machiavellians merely interested in keeping themselves in power. Chinese leaders, like many American or European leaders, are also patriots who love their nation and want it to prosper.

Many are skeptical of the ability of the Chinese government to build a society based on the rule of law due to the undemocratic nature of the communist regime. They argue that only Western liberal democracies can effectively fight corruption. This is a fallacy clearly demonstrated by the example of Singapore which is constantly ranked among the top five least corrupt countries in the world. The UAE and Qatar's absolutist monarchies, who are ranked rather high in transparency indexes, further underscore this fallacy.

The Chinese leadership strongly believes that it can establish a system based on the rule of law without necessarily having to democratise. The more fundamental question is whether President Xi and his allies will be able to control corruption without undermining the entrenched interests of powerful factions within the CCP that threaten the survival of the party itself.

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