What Next for China’s Anti-Corruption Drive?

By Willy Wo-Lap Lam

With the recent arrests of the highest ranking Chinese officials to be nabbed in President Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption drive, there are indications the hunt for high-level targets may be winding down. It remains unclear whether real reform of the system is still on the cards.

By Zhao Chenggen

The Communist Party of China — which has experienced political upheavals in its history, led the Chinese revolution to victory, and successfully carried out market reform — is bound to overcome its shortcomings, including corruption.
WHILE THE DOWNFALL of “big tiger” Zhou Yongkang has proven the extent of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s power, it is not clear whether his anti-corruption crusade will continue — or, more importantly, whether Xi will push forward real political reforms that could permanently reduce rent-seeking, abuse of power and related ills.

With the arrest in late July of Zhou, a former Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member and security czar, Xi broke the long-standing custom that serving and retired PBSC members are immune from prosecution. Earlier in July, Xi accomplished a similar feat in the People’s Liberation Army by hauling in former Politburo member and Central Military Commission (CMC) vice-chairman General Xu Caihou on charges of massive corruption. Graft is the scourge that has most alienated the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from its people, and Xi’s success in defanging these “big tigers” could win him enough popular support to make him the most powerful CCP leader since Chairman Mao Zedong and patriarch Deng Xiaoping.

CAN XI’S HUNT CONTINUE?

After nabbing close to 40 cadres with the rank of vice-minister or above, the anti-corruption campaign may have passed its high-water mark. According to Beijing-based social scientist Ren Jianming, an expert on clean governance, one third of cadres who have held ministerial-level positions have committed graft-related misdeeds — a figure confirmed by a 2013 internal party survey, according to unnamed sources quoted by Reuters.1 This comes to roughly 10,000 officials in total. Will Xi really go after each and every one of them?

All indications suggest that after tackling Xu and Zhou, Xi could very well wind down the tiger-hunting campaign. The same night that Zhou’s alleged crimes were announced, People’s Daily Online ran a commentary saying that “Knocking down ‘big tiger’ Zhou Yongkang does not mean the end of the anti-graft exercise.” The article, however, was withdrawn from the website several hours later. While it is unlikely that the authorities will officially announce a moratorium on corruption investigations, no further Politburo level, not to mention PBSC-level, big-wigs are likely to be penalized in the foreseeable future. Indeed, the number of mid- to senior-ranked cadres below the Politburo level being nabbed is likely to decline significantly.

Deng Yuwen, a former editor of the CCP Central Party School journal Study Times, is one of many analysts who subscribe to the theory that the decision to bring Zhou to justice represented a deal struck between Xi and party elders — including former presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, former vice-president Zeng Qinghong, and ex-premiers Li Peng and Wen Jiabao. At least for the foreseeable future, Xi has most likely vowed that he will not go after either these former PBSC members or their well-heeled offspring. “Many people want to know if other ‘big tigers’ or ‘old tigers’ will be ensnared,” wrote Deng in Hong Kong’s Chinese-run paper Ta Kung Pao. “The possibility of this happening in the rest of the first five-year term [of Xi’s government] is close to zero.”

The influential mainland website Caixin Online suggested that the entire rectification campaign could decelerate because it had hurt the morale of too many mid- to high-ranking officials throughout the party-state apparatus. Commentators Gao Yu and Wang Heyan pointed out that advocates of reigning in the anti-graft movement “include party supporters who worry that the campaign could tarnish the public’s view of the government and party.” They added: “Others wonder whether the campaign is hurting economic growth and the productivity of officials, some of whom are lying low in hopes of avoiding the inspectors.”2

POWER POLITICS

Another concerns the power of the Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection (CCDI) — China’s highest graft-buster, responsible for the Zhou investigation and other sensitive cases, which is not noted for its transparency. Given that CCDI Secretary and PBSC member Wang Qishan is a princeling and close ally of Xi, the suspension remains that corruption fighting is a cover for factional competition. Can the Xi administration really rid the party of corruption without meaningful political reform, including the establishment of rule of law and some form of checks and balances within the system?

As respected Beijing-based historian Zhang Lifan has argued, the CCDI’s anti-graft campaign has more to do with power politics than the law. It is well known that Zhou was involved in an “anti-Xi cabal” within the party, which also included former Politburo member and Chongqing party boss Bo Xilai, who received a life sentence for corruption last year. Two previous Politburo members brought down for graft-related felonies — former Beijing party secretary Chen Xitong (who received a 18-year jail term in 2008) — were political foes of ex-presidents Jiang and Hu, respec-
tively. Wuhan University public policy expert Professor Chu Jianguo, writing in *People’s Tribune*, said fighting corruption itself could “exacerbate power struggle within a certain [party] unit — and the accomplishments of the crusade are often the by-product of internal power struggles.”


After the Zhou episode, the CCDI’s Wang has been praised by numerous Hong Kong and Taiwan media for being more energetic, efficient and forthright than previous top graft-busters. But the commission essentially reports to only one person, Xi — a system which has become even more centralized since Xi took office at the 18th Party Congress. The question of “who investigates the CCDI” if it abuses its power has prompted comparisons between the CCDI and imperial spy agencies run by emperors in the Ming Dynasty (1368 — 1644). The Commission has also run afoul of the nation’s public intellectuals by using the pretext of fighting rent-seeking to strike at academics who advocate “Westernized” values such as rule of law and checks and balances. A case in point is the accusation made by Zhang Yingwei, who heads the CCDI unit stationed at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, that the elite academic institution has been “infiltrated” by “anti-China foreign forces.” Legal scholar and Peking University professor He Weifang responded by saying that “it is bizarre that graft-busters should be doing the work of the Ministry of State Security.”


WILL A PURGE LEAD TO REAL REFORM?

Xi will have a chance to tell the world that he is serious about reform at the Fourth CCP Central Committee Plenum, scheduled for October. The Chinese media has indicated that one major theme of the conclave will be legal and judicial reform. Last month, the Supreme People’s Court released a blueprint for judicial reform during the years 2014-2018. Among other things, the document indicated that more professionally qualified judges will be hired and that efforts would be made to reduce political influence on due process of the law. Public confidence in legal and related reforms, however, has been dealt a blow owing to the many supposedly promulgated reforms not being carried out. For example, while the much-maligned laogai (“reform through labor”) system was publicly abolished on January 1, police departments recently admitted that more than 100 penal institutions under the Ministry of Public Security are still taking in inmates for “re-education” outside the judicial system. Moreover, Xi has on numerous occasions indicated that the CCP will not accept “universal values” such as the rule of law and independence of the judiciary.

5 See China Brief (Jamestown Foundation blog), June 4, 2014. www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42467&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=f78df4163c84315d8770df441f4a5229#VA3XW2S5y8Z

Xi has surprised observers from across the political spectrum with the success of his power grab, and myriad Machiavellian maneuvers to marginalize real and potential political foes. Optimists including Deng Yuwen seem confident that Xi will use his newly won powers to push through reform. But we have yet to see whether the “great renaissance of the Chinese nation” can be accomplished without more fundamental change to the Chinese system.

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