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.
President Xi Jinping’s Anti-Corruption Storm Is Here to Stay

By Zhao Chenggen

CHINA UNDERWENT a critical moment in its reform and development when the fifth generation of its top leaders, led by Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, took office at the 18th CPC National Congress in November 2012. China’s market reforms and rapid economic growth over the past 30 years have worked miracles, but at the same time have inevitably accumulated a mass of social problems that need to be solved urgently. Among these corruption, ubiquitous in each and every field, has severely undermined the image of the CPC and impaired the credibility and authority of the government in the minds of the people. Accordingly, battling corruption has become the top policy priority under President Xi’s leadership, the other two being the elimination of the unfair distribution of wealth and the realization of industrial transformation and upgrading.

The keynote report delivered at the opening ceremony of the 18th CPC National Congress raised the issue of anti-corruption efforts at a strategic level and proposed to build a clean government. According to the report, we should keep to the Chinese-style path of combating corruption and promoting integrity; we should persist in combating corruption in an integrated way, addressing both its symptoms and root causes, and combining punishment and prevention, with emphasis on the latter; we should advance in an all-around way the establishment of a system of combating corruption through both punishment and prevention and see to it that officials are honest, the government is clean, and political integrity is upheld.

At the Second Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), Xi — who has a plain work style and objects to empty words and big talk — put forward his anti-corruption declaration. He emphasized the need to crack down on both “tigers” and “flies” — powerful leaders and lowly bureaucrats — by resolutely investigating cases of violation of the law by leading officials and also earnestly resolving the unhealthy tendencies and corruption problems which happen all around people. This demonstrated right from the start the determination of the CPC’s new leadership to focus on anti-corruption measures. Xi proposed that “power should be contained within a cage of regulation,” which really hit the mark. He pointed out that “combating corruption and promoting political integrity is a long commitment of the party, while resisting degeneration is a long-term goal. What counts is ‘often’ and ‘permanent,’ that is, to combat corruption often and permanently. We should adhere to the principle that there is no exception in front of party discipline and state laws. Anyone who violates the law would be punished without exception.” The statement demonstrated his strong resolution to “combat every corrupt phenomenon and punish every corrupt official,” and indicated that the CPC leadership will never come to terms with corruption; on the contrary, they will take sharper and more efficient measures to punish the increasing spread of corruption.

The personnel appointments to the CCDI also demonstrated the new leadership’s strong determination to combat corruption. Wang Qishan, member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, was appointed General Secretary of the CCDI. He has long working experience in the financial and economic sector, and his tough, vigorous and resolute work style has earned him a reputation within the CPC for being “iron-handed” — being bold in vision and courageous in action. The media predicted that corrupt officials were going to meet their doom upon this appointment, which showed President Xi’s resolution to fight corruption. And they were right.

Within several months of President Xi taking up his office, some major and serious criminal cases were opened and subsequently prosecuted, including that of Bo Xilai, former Secretary of the CPC Chongqing Municipal Committee; Liu Zhijun, former Minister of Railways; Li Chuncheng, former Deputy Secretary of Sichuan provincial Party committee; and Liu Tienan, former Director of the National Energy Bureau, among others — all of which quickly showed the new leadership’s approach to the problem of corruption, which the CPC has a tradition of fighting, starting from former Presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

More recently, the arrest of Zhou Yongkang, a former member of the Politburo Standing Committee, on corruption charges, and that of Gen. Xu Caihou, also a former Politburo member and vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), demonstrates that President Xi’s anti-corruption drive is willing to reach to the highest levels of government. Besides punishing corrupt officials, China’s leadership has laid down rules and regulations to deal with long-standing problems in governing the country, including political style, formalities and the phenomena of privilege. As President Xi said in his brief and plain inauguration speech, “One must be strong to forge iron” — that is, in order to improve political style, you need to start with yourself. At the time Xi assumed power, the government set forth an eight-point code to cut bureaucracy and maintain close ties with the people, with one point being that “when national leaders travel, there will be no welcome visitors reception ceremonies or police motorcade.” In such a highly integrated country, the publishing of this eight-point code by the CPC’s leadership not only helps to rectify their behavior, it also brings them closer to the masses and also encourages leaders of public organizations.
The Debate: What Next for China’s Anti-Corruption Drive?

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The Chinese government is also addressing such fundamental issues as the declaration of property by officials, which has been a widespread concern for years.

When one puts China’s situation in the context of the history of human modernization, it is worth noting that America and the countries of Europe also experienced difficult times, with high incidences of corruption, during their periods of rapid economic growth and transformation into modern economic systems. China, a nation with the largest population in human history, is also going through a critical moment in its transformation into a modern economic and political system, with rapid economic growth. It is undergoing a severe test of political corruption, market corruption and social corruption. The Communist Party of China, the leader of this great modernization reform, realizes that ubiquitous corruption might severely undermine our country and society, and understands well that anti-corruption efforts will directly influence, even determine, the success of Chinese modernization and the rise and rejuvenation of China. The CPC is combating corruption in an integrated way with a rational approach and strong determination. We should know that this self-revolution of our governing party is a real test of its political courage and wisdom, and that accordingly, it will be a difficult process.

England was not beaten by corruption. The United States was not beaten by corruption. China, a country with a 5,000-year history, a nation with a mature civilization, a people of rich experience with modernization for more than 100 years, will definitely conquer its social problems, including corruption, during its process of modernization. We firmly believe that the Communist Party of China — which has experienced political upheavals in its history, led the Chinese revolution to victory, and successfully carried out Chinese market reform — is bound to overcome its shortcomings, cope with the difficulties in the process of modernization and finally accomplish its goal. In the face of this critical moment in the modernization process, China’s fifth generation of leaders under the CPC, led by President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, should bring confidence and hope to people inside and outside of China.

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