

China: Increasing Concerns over Corrupt, Undisciplined and Reforms-wary Cadres

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Discernible in China since January 2015, is a trend pointing towards increasing concerns of the central leadership over corrupt, undisciplined and reforms-wary cadres, particularly at senior levels. Confirming it are important speeches being given by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping on different occasions, certain official documents and comments regularly appearing in the party and state controlled media.

The trend became prominent when Xi Jinping himself heavily stressed (at the 5th Plenary Session of the Central Disciplinary Inspection Commission-CDIC , January 13, 2015) on the need for Party members to “follow the constitution as well as political discipline and rules”. Targeting corrupt cadres, he said that his campaign against them will be “arduous and complicated” and demanded that the cadres should “align with the authority of the CCP Central Committee in deed and thought, at all times and in any situation and ensure unity in the party” (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-01/13/c_133916942.htm ^[1]). He vowed to maintain the intensity of the anti-corruption campaign and urged cadres to abide by both “written and unwritten party rules, respecting traditions and working practices that had accumulated in the party's history”. A communiqué issued after the session warned senior Party officials against breaking Party rules and conspiring together for private interests. It asserted that the CCP will not tolerate cronyism nor allow fakery and sycophancy (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-01/15/c_133922246.htm ^[2]).

Important are also Xi's two subsequent speeches. The one given at politburo collective session (June 26, 2015) stressed that anti-corruption campaign will not stop despite some skeptical views in Chinese society. These words could be in response to some reservations on the campaign which surfaced in China. Firstly, Chinese party and state-controlled media (Cai Xin, March 11,2015) themselves admitted the existence of viewpoints in China that anti-corruption work will hamper the country's economic development and damage reputation and image of the government. Secondly, three essays which appeared in the CDIC website (People's Daily, June 10,2015) criticized a small

number of Party disciplinary officials, accusing them of violating procedures, punishing cadres before establishing guilt and unduly pressuring those senior to them; they also gave a warning that the CDIC should not become an “independent fiefdom, besides describing “Anti-corruption as a double-edged sword: while it strikes Party cadres who violate discipline and the law, it hurts the Party organization, and damages the image of the Party.” (Hu Ping, <http://chinachange.org/2015/06/15/has-xi-jinpings-anti-corruption-campaign-been-derailed/> [3], June 15, 2015). Also notable is the leader’s subsequent call (at 94th CCP anniversary, July 1, 2015) directly to leading cadres – who he termed as “the key minority” – to get on board and steamed up in order to accomplish a variety of tasks, from promoting the rule of law [4] to strengthening national defense and the military [5] (<http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/07/21/understanding-xi-jinpings-key-minority/> [6]).

On problems relating to party cadres, deserving attention is Xi’s identification of the following activities as examples of the violation of party rules, in his book (in Chinese) on “building the party and government and carrying out struggle against corruption”, published by the CDIC Publicity Department in January 2015: “forming factions, cabals and mountain strongholds within the party”; “vacillations regarding matters of principle and issues of right and wrong;” “openly expressing views that are opposed to major political questions regarding the party’s theory, guidelines and policies;” and “feigning compliance with but actually going against the party’s goals and policies” (????????????????????????????????????, Xinhua, January 11, 2015, <http://fanfu.people.com.cn/n/2015/0111/c64371-26363681.html> [7]).

The significance of criticism of late against overreach by retired cadres should not be missed. People’s Daily (Chinese language edition), the CCP mouthpiece, carried a signed commentary on August 10, 2015, which alleged that “some retired leading cadres”, while they were in office, put their “cronies” in key positions, so that they can interfere in the work of their original organizations and wield influence in the future. This is making new leaders feel that unnecessary concerns affect their work as their “hands and feet” are being fettered”. Contributed by Gu Bochong, a Deputy chief in the General Political Department of China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and a member of the CCP-managed China Writers Association, the write up caught the attention of China watchers in the world in order to find out whether there is any political meaning in what has been said in it. Quite a few analysts have traced in the article a veiled attack against the former party strongman Jiang Zemin, now 89 years old, but still said to be influential (<http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0810/c1001-27436119.htm> [8]).

Is resistance to reforms a cadre problem? This question assumes relevance considering a commentary entitled “Ferociousness of Forces Opposing Reforms can Exceed Imagination” which appeared in the Chinese language website (<http://www.guancha.cn> [9]) of the Shanghai-based Spring-Autumn (Chun Qiu) Institute of Development and Strategic Studies, (<http://news.163.com/15/0820/19/B1G18JQA0001124J.html> [10], August 20, 2015). According to Guancha, its writer “Guo Ping”, represents a batch of politically strong and professionally able web commentators belonging to the main stream media like the People’s Daily and Xinhua, thus attracting serious attention in the country as it is engaged in attending to important matters, ‘with a high degree of unity with centre’s policies and measures’.

The commentary made a central point – the reforms in China are at a critical stage and they are encountering great difficulties, affecting the interests of various groups. **The scale of the resistance to reforms is unimaginable.** Coming from commentators, being described as close to the Centre, in other words to Xi Jinping, the opinions in the write-up assume great amount of economic and political significance. Who are resisting the reforms in China? The commentary does not answer this question. Media reports have quoted Xu Yaotong, a political

science professor at the Chinese Academy of Governance, as saying that the resistance could be from any of three powerful groups: retired leaders who wanted to exert influence, cadres whose power had been weakened and civil servants unhappy with austerity rules.

Resistance to reforms has also been hinted at another commentary (People's Daily, Chinese, and August 20, 2015). It urged cadres to get behind the leadership's reform push and have results showing they are carrying it forward. It added that "performance reviews and any job promotions would depend on their commitment to reforms and the crucial point is personnel management". It attacked the "shallow" and even "fake" changes being implemented by officials and argued that "changes should bring solutions to problems in reality and that in-depth reforms should attack the problems in the reform itself." It complained that in some places cadres gave "empty slogans about inviting private investment and cutting executives' salaries" and that "public patience for the reforms is starting to wear thin in the absence of obvious results". It however remarked that more time was needed during the current transition phase, expressing at the same time expectations that after holding soon of a central meeting on in-depth reform, there can be handful of powerful, practical, and realistic reform plans on State-Owned Enterprises (<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1851605/no-promotion-slackers-reform-agenda-chinas-state-media> [11], August 21,2015).

According to another authoritative article (Li Jiming, Red Flag Manuscript, Chinese, August 24, 2015) , cadre problems should be approached through a dialectical thinking. It demanded a deep personnel system reform, in accordance with Xi Jinping's call to leading cadres to learn to master the scientific and dialectic ways of thinking while implementing reforms. Quoting Article 36 of the CCP constitution, it cautioned that "leading cadres at all levels, whether they are democratically elected, or appointed by the leading organs, should realize that their positions are not for life and that they can be transferred or discharged." It complained that since the reform and opening up, some of the party members and cadres consciously or unconsciously, remain influenced by "once official, lifelong official" idea and resist leaving posts. Managing leading cadres can be guaranteed by regulatory incentives, rewards and punishments, and other systems of accountability. In this connection, it referred to the central government's introduction of a "number of provisions on the promotion of the leading cadres".

Another official write-up (captioned "Democratization: Paradox and Reflection", Red Flag Manuscript, Chinese, August 24, 2015) by implication cautioned cadres against getting influenced by Western democratic ideas. It laid stress on the need for a comprehensive and objective comparative analysis of different political systems in the world, so that 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' can be developed.

From what has been said above, it becomes clear that the CCP under Xi Jinping has come to face the following main cadre problems – the policies of central leadership are not being obeyed, factions within the party are being formed, interference in party work is being indulged by retired cadres, pursuance of reforms is not sincere and the influence of Western ideas on cadres persist. To tackle these problems, the CCP is strengthening its system on personnel management including promotions of cadres.

The most important measure being taken by the Xi Jinping regime to tackle cadre problems, concerns the ongoing anti-corruption campaign. It has led to the purge of the 'tigers' like Zhou Yongkang, a former member of the powerful CCP politburo standing committee and the former security chief of the country; Xu Caihou (now deceased), former Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission and Ling Jihua, former head of the CCP General Office. The three, along with already disgraced and sentenced Bo Xilai, former Chongqing party chief,

considered once as a potential member of the politburo standing committee, are now being called by some in China as the new 'gang of four' (Mao's wife Jiang Qing and three others were known as 'gang of four' and purged in the 70s). Other 'tigers' who have come under graft charges include Guo Boxiong, former politburo member and former Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission and Su Rong, former Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and a Zhou Yongkang loyalist; Yang Weize, former Nanjing party boss ; Qiu He, former Yunnan Deputy party chief and Zhang Kunsheng, former assistant Foreign Minister of China. Zeng Qinghong, former Vice-President of China, could be under probe, taking into account a historically allegorical article in the CDIC website (25.2.2015) attacking him. Zeng is believed to have been portrayed in the article as Prince Qing Yiguang who gave mahjong lessons to Empress Dowager Cixi (standing in for Jiang Zemin).

It cannot be denied that there are fault lines with regard to Xi's anti-corruption campaign. As all affected are close to the former party supremo Jiang Zemin(89) who still enjoys political clout, its targeting is being seen as selective. Secondly, it remains to be seen whether the campaign can maintain its momentum at a time when there seems to be a widespread feeling in China that the drive, though popular among the people, is causing hesitancy on the part of the authorities to make decisions, leading to a policy paralysis. A third aspect relates to the apprehension within the body spearheading the campaign, the CDIC, about a negative impact of the anti-corruption drive on the unity of the party, as already mentioned above.

The present time looks inopportune for the Chinese leadership. The Chinese economy is slowing down. The stock crash and devaluation of Yuan seems to have given rise to a piquant situation for the government under Xi, which has been giving importance to the role of the market forces in the country's economy. In such a situation, the persisting cadre problems add to the pressures being faced by the CCP. A top party plenum is scheduled for October 2015 by which time Xi is required to further settle his political equations. Personnel changes and finalization of 13th Five Year plan are likely to be the main agenda for the occasion. It will be interesting to watch political developments in China in the run-up to holding of the plenum.

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