

COMMENTHK

ICAC can add to nation's anti-corruption success

Tony Kwok says city's agency can serve as a model for others fighting corruption in the Greater Bay Area

According to estimates by the World Economic Forum and the World Bank, over \$1 trillion is paid globally every year in bribes by businesses and individuals while an estimated \$2.6 trillion is stolen annually through corruption, which is a sum equivalent to more than 5 percent of the global GDP. Corruption is a serious crime that can undermine social and economic development in all societies, as it affects education, health, justice, democracy, prosperity and people's livelihoods. No country is immune from corruption, and China is no exception. Efforts since the 18th National People's Congress have demonstrated that China's fight against corruption has achieved unprecedented success. Indeed, its resolute anti-corruption drive was instrumental in enabling the country to realize its first centenary goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects on schedule last year.

The highest Party organ responsible for combating corruption in China is the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). It is noteworthy that President Xi Jinping paid special attention to addressing its annual plenary session on Jan 18. In his address, which received wide interest, he called on its officials to not let up their efforts in tackling corruption within the Party and the government, emphasizing that there should be zero tolerance, and all hidden dangers must be rooted out. He also urged officials at all levels, especially senior officials, to improve their awareness and capacity to guard against corruption, and that they must lead by example through disciplining their own family members and distancing themselves from wrongdoing. This is a clear and loud "tone from the top" message, a firm demonstration of the top leadership's political will to eradicate corruption at its roots and at all levels, and top political will is regarded as the most crucial success factor in the war against corruption.

In his address, President Xi reiterated the national strategy of fighting corruption "in creating a deterrence against corruption, strengthening measures to prevent corruption and building moral defenses against corruption". This is similar to the Independent Commission Against Corruption's successful three-pronged approach, through deterrence, prevention and education, which turned Hong Kong from one of the most corrupt places in the '70s to one of the most corruption-free at present.

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Most importantly, on the education side, the recent public airing in the Chinese mainland of the anti-corruption TV documentary *Zero Tolerance* has aroused huge public interest. Its first episode revealed shocking details that led to the downfall of Sun Lijun, a former vice-minister of public security. He was prosecuted for taking bribes, manipulating the stock market and illegally possessing guns. It showed how Sun cultivated his followers to form a small corruption syndicate and took huge amounts of bribes under the guise of accepting "a little seafood". Sun ascended to ministerial rank in March 2018, when he was only 49, the youngest of all ministerial-level officials. It shows that without moral rectitude, intelligence alone cannot prevent a man's fall from grace. Sun made a sincere confession on the screen, saying, "I'm supposed to be



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the guardian of justice, but now I've become someone who has sabotaged the justice system." This reminds me of the most successful anti-smoking TV advertisement, made by a terminally ill famous movie star, Yul Brynner, shortly before he died from lung cancer caused by his heavy smoking: "Now that I'm gone, I tell you: Don't smoke, whatever you do, just don't smoke." Brynner's final words of admonition became one of the most effective anti-smoking advertisements ever made because it was based on the words of someone who made the mistake. Sun's confession should no doubt have an equal impact in deterring bribery nationwide.

As the CCDI said in a commentary on its website, such a documentary demonstrates the Party's determination to face the scourge of corruption squarely. The name of the documentary — *Zero Tolerance* — sends a signal that disciplinary supervision and an unrelenting crackdown on corruption will not ease up, but will become even more aggressive.

One of the successful milestones established under President Xi's campaign against corruption is the setting up of a national independent anti-corruption commission in 2018 called the National Supervisory Commission, whose head is appointed and can be removed only by the National People's Congress. The latest figures released by the commission certainly shows its deterrent effect. In the first nine months of 2021, a total of 470,000 cases of corruption were investigated, in which 414,000 officials, including 22 at the provincial or ministerial level, and 2,058 officials at the municipal or bureau level, were punished for corruption-related wrongdoing. And from January to November, a total of 1,114 corrupt officials were brought back from foreign countries to which they had fled, with 16.14 billion yuan (\$2.55 billion) connected with their cases recovered, 5.6 times that of the same period the year before.

From Hong Kong's experience, given the politically sensitive nature of many corruption investigations and the embarrassment they may cause to governments, such investigations can be effective only if they are carried out by a truly independent enforcement agency and free from political interference. Interestingly, the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada do not have a dedicated independent agency to combat corruption, which is contrary to the statutory requirement under the UN Convention Against Corruption. My experience as an international anti-corruption consultant for over 19 years tells me that when a

country does not have a dedicated and independent anti-corruption agency, it will at best be able to tackle just the overt type of corruption, leaving those covert corruption cases involving politicians, senior government officials and influential businessmen to go scot-free unless exposed by the media. My observation dovetails with a recent Guardian article in which the commentator Simon Jenkins described corruption in Britain thusly: "The joy of British corruption is that there are no crude brown envelopes stuffed with notes. Money is never seen changing hands. Negotiation is via a pat on the shoulder, a placement at a dinner, a nod at the tennis net. There need not be a direct quid pro quo, but favors can flow both ways: a party donation, a contract, a planning refusal overturned, all rounded off with the knighthood or peerage." The author concluded that if the full picture of corruption in Britain is exposed, "It should be standing room only at the Old Bailey" (the criminal court)! In the US Congress, it is an open secret that many politicians are bribed by the gun manufacturers not to impose strict gun control.

In Australia, there is at this moment a strong voice to set up a federal independent commission against corruption, but it is resisted by the federal government, for the obvious reason to protect their self-interest. China certainly has a more robust anti-corruption infrastructure than most Western countries, as can be seen in how it would parade disgraced former top officials in public and read out their misdeeds that landed them there.

One of the striking features of the TV documentary is the willingness of the wealthy businessmen to offer luxurious services and gifts to the senior corrupt officials, such as the service of private jets, golf course memberships, holiday apartments, etc., and of course huge bribes. However, it seems that the punishment meted out to these bribers was much less severe than to the officials at the receiving end. The mainland can take a leaf from Hong Kong's effective anti-corruption law, which ensures equal liability for both bribers and the bribed. There is no reason why wealthy and influential businessmen who initiated the bribery should be treated less severely than the government officials and their relatives who succumbed to their bribes.

I am disappointed that this excellent documentary is not available for viewing in Hong Kong, which doesn't make sense in view of its highly educational value. The ICAC and the special administrative region government should arrange to have it aired by our government TV station, RTHK, as soon as possible. Indeed, I find it incomprehensible that Hong Kong is the only place in China whose citizens have no access to CCTV's productions!

Hong Kong's ICAC, as a successful anti-corruption model, should continue to work closely with its counterparts in the mainland to build a corruption-free society, especially in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, to make it an integrity management model for the country. The timing is perfect, as Simon Peh Yun-lu, the ICAC commissioner, has just been elected the new president of the International Association of Anti-Corruption Authorities, to lead the global fight against corruption.

As President Xi reminded the anti-corruption officials, "There is no need to be afraid to offend the corrupt officials, no matter how senior they are; otherwise, you would offend the 1.4 billion people!" This spirit of zero tolerance should be embraced throughout our country.

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Setting up shop



A shop vendor displays Lunar New Year decorations for sale at Tai Kiu Market in Yuen Long on Tuesday. CALVIN NG / CHINA DAILY

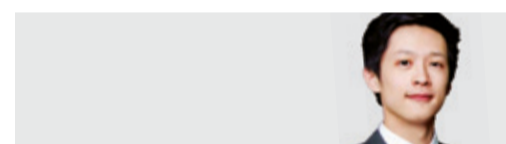
ITUC: An international labor body or US propaganda outlet?

The International Trade Union Confederation, ITUC for short, is the self-proclaimed "global voice" that represents "the world's working people", with regional offices littered all over the world. While the organization claims to defend workers' rights and interests "through international cooperation between trade unions", the ITUC seems to have demonstrated a stronger interest in advocating Washington's foreign policies and agendas, employing the same rhetoric as the latter, which has brought its entire brand of "global voice" into disrepute.

There have been many telltale signs that the ITUC was operating like a propaganda organ, promoting Western ideologies and agendas, but it has been particularly noticeable in the past couple of years, when the ITUC has been laser-focused on condemning China over alleged labor abuses as well as political matters concerning Hong Kong and members of the Belt and Road Initiative. In fact, many of the articles published by the ITUC between 2019 to 2021 picked on Hong Kong, and Sharan Burrow, the current general secretary of the ITUC, was very vocal in some of these articles — especially when a few Hong Kong organizations affiliated with it were being shut down after the introduction of the National Security Law for Hong Kong. Hitting the ITUC the hardest was the arrest and imprisonment of Lee Cheuk-yan, the general secretary of the ITUC-affiliated Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, for illegal assemblies and inciting subversion. Other unions, like the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, the General Union of Hong Kong Speech Therapists, and the labor advocacy organization, the Asia Monitor Resource Centre, disbanded after the promulgation of the National Security Law.

More recently, on Nov 9, the ITUC published a follow-up article titled "China: A gold medal for repression", based on a five-page poster of the same name that was published a day prior, calling for a boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. All the talking points were on boycotting China on political grounds, but of the five points raised in the article, only one loosely concerns the ITUC: It was not happy that China does not allow foreign unions to be set up on the mainland out of national security concerns as labor unions like the ITUC could cause social unrest by way of instigating unrestrained strikes.

Another point raised by the ITUC in its article, which I believe can be tantamount to libel, is the allegation that China was spreading the SARS-CoV-2 virus in 2019. Not only is it patently false and absurd for the ITUC to claim that the virus first emerged in Wuhan toward the end of 2019, when it has now been revealed that the novel coronavirus had already been circulating in Europe since September 2019, as shown in a study by the National Cancer Institute in Milan; it is also misleading to the public. The ITUC's narrative on COVID-19 matters is no different from then-US president Donald Trump's strategy to shrug off his responsibility to curb infection rates by blaming China. Furthermore, 9,308 athletes from 110 countries participated in the Wuhan Military World Games 2019 in October; no one can exclude the possibility that the virus could have been brought in by overseas athletes. It is also equally absurd that the ITUC is claiming that China "has failed to



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ITUC's boycotting of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics is just smoke and mirrors. It is a widely known fact that the International Olympic Committee has a long-standing stance of being apolitical. To be influenced by the poorly argued article published by the ITUC in any way is to break the committee's commitment to political neutrality. In other words, the ITUC is only interested in making noise, and it knows for a fact that its organization will not be making any meaningful changes for the people it claims to represent anytime soon.

provide to the world accurate information about COVID-19 infection rates", when China has the most stringent anti-COVID protocols in the world. The country's low infection rate reflects just how serious the ruling party is at preventing the spread of the virus as opposed to the dismal leadership shown by the Five Eyes alliance (with the exception of New Zealand's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern).

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Finally, President Xi Jinping's commitment to seek peaceful co-existence and win-win outcomes for everyone can only come to fruition if Western powers are willing to meet him halfway; and the continued use and rehashing of Cold War tactics is not going to help anyone's cause in the long run.

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