Lessons for Mainland China from Anti-corruption Reform in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Hong Kong, with its government ranked among the “cleanest” in the world, presents an excellent example of successful anti-corruption reform. Its experience offers four general lessons for ongoing anti-corruption efforts in mainland China. First, by creating a powerful independent anti-corruption agency, the government clearly signalled its commitment to anti-corruption enforcement. Second, the anti-corruption agency achieved major enforcement successes quickly and publicized them widely to consolidate its reputation. Third, it accompanied enforcement with broad public education, reaching out to the community in innovative ways. Fourth, it studied government work procedures and proposed measures to reduce incentives for corruption in institutional design. Flaws in anti-corruption reform in mainland China are illuminated by the contrast with the Hong Kong experience. First, leaders in Beijing have responded to corruption with ambivalent signals, creating two anti-corruption agencies with overlapping jurisdictions and an unclear division of labour. Second, with routine enforcement handicapped by agency design, leaders have launched intensive anti-
corruption campaigns that denigrate the law at the same time as they emphasize “punishment according to law.” Third, until recently, mainland Chinese efforts have neglected institutional design and corruption prevention. Essentially, they have yet to “tie their hands” to signal to ordinary citizens a credible commitment to anti-corruption reform.

Since the early 1980s, the abuse of public office for private gain in mainland China has grown in both scope and severity. More than two decades of anti-corruption reform measures have not brought the problem under control or significantly changed public perceptions of corruption as widespread. Leaders in Beijing have acknowledged that corruption is more serious than at any time since the communists won power in 1949. The contrast with Hong Kong, which experienced its own widespread corruption in the 1960s, is striking. With its government ranked among the “cleanest” in the world today, Hong Kong offers mainland China perhaps the best example anywhere of successful anti-corruption reform. To be sure, despite a shared Chinese language and culture, the contextual differences between tiny Hong Kong and mainland China are huge. The state in mainland China continues to play a major role in the economy, the communist regime projects an instrumental orientation to rule of law, and civil liberties on the mainland are notably absent. Can mainland China learn anti-corruption reform lessons from Hong Kong? This article concludes that the Hong Kong experience offers four useful lessons for mainland China, despite fundamental differences in context, but that mainland anti-corruption reformers are unlikely to embrace all of these lessons.

I begin with a brief description contrasting corruption in mainland China today with the relatively clean government of Hong Kong. I then review the anti-corruption experience of Hong Kong and summarize lessons this experience has to offer mainland China. An examination of anti-corruption efforts in mainland China follows. This illuminates weaknesses in orientation as well as a rejection of policy instruments integral to anti-corruption reform in Hong Kong. I conclude by noting a recent reorientation of tactics by mainland Chinese reformers, but argue that contextual limitations will probably prevent a reorientation of strategy.

Contrasting Mainland China and Hong Kong Today
The distinction between corruption in mainland China and clean