

China's Anti-Corruption Drive Builds in Restive Xinjiang

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BEIJING-

Chinese state media say a record number of officials in the country's remote and restive northwest region of Xinjiang were put under investigation for corruption last year. The deepening crackdown came as Xinjiang saw a dramatic increase in what the government says were violent terrorist attacks.

The Xinjiang local government news site, Tianshan Net, reports at least 54 county level officials were put under investigation last year, with nearly 700 cases involving bribe-taking. Investigations have targeted local leaders such as Hotan City Mayor Adil Nurmemet, the head of a major state owned enterprise and the former vice president of Xinjiang Police College, Li Yanming.

The Communist Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection says that recently 32 officials were removed from their posts for taking bribes and other violations in connection with the region's management of pilgrimages to Mecca.

Xinjiang has a large Muslim population and the Chinese government tightly restricts the number of individuals who can make the pilgrimage each year, meaning many must wait in line for years to go.

Wang Xinzhong, the former party chief of the Xinjiang Justice Department was among those allegedly involved in the bribe-taking scheme.

James Leibold, an ethnic studies scholar at Australia's La Trobe University says that what is happening in Xinjiang fits a pattern that the anti-corruption drive is following elsewhere in China, under the leadership of China's president, Xi Jinping.

"Xi [Jinping] is going after party officials who normally are seen as corrupt or lax in terms of their ideological towing the line, but also in the background, I think it is becoming increasingly obvious that this is also about, I guess, purging individuals who are seen as potentially disloyal," said Leibold.

Getting it right in China's resource-rich and ethnically diverse Xinjiang is a crucial focus for Xi. Xinjiang is a gateway for efforts to promote improved relations with China's western neighbors in South and Central Asia and what China calls the New Silk Road project. It is also seen as the centerpiece of his efforts to promote a more ethnically unified Chinese nation.

But the region that borders Pakistan, Afghanistan and northwestern India is also seen as a front in China's battle against terrorism and religious extremism.

Barry Sautman is a professor who studies China's ethnic policies at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

He says that going after security officials is more difficult in Xinjiang because doing so might raise questions about the party's approach to maintaining stability.

"I think it is quite possible, for example, in other parts of China to touch people who are involved in various parts of the security apparatus, the Gong An Ju for example [public security officials] and it is more difficult to do that because of the security situation and the role that people play," **Sautman** noted.

Xinjiang saw a spike in violence last year. In the wake of at least two major attacks, several dozen officials were publicly reprimanded for their failure to prevent the violence. Some were removed from their posts.

James Leibold says it is not surprising that officials would be reprimanded, given that their ability to maintain social stability has long been an important part of evaluating their performance. But he says the public nature of the punishment is surprising.

"In the past that was sort of a party issue that was sort of issue that was handled in the backroom. Someone got a good score or a bad score. Someone maybe got a slap on the wrist or got pushed aside," stated Leibold. "But to do it so publicly, I can't help but think that that is related to the party wanting to look tough on terrorists."

Much like other parts of China, there are questions about just how high the anti-corruption drive could reach in Xinjiang. There has been wide speculation in the Chinese language press about the fate of Xinjiang's Communist Party chief Zhang Chunxian.

Reports have focused on Zhang's perceived connections to the biggest official yet to be tagged in China's anti-corruption drive - Zhou Yongkang. Zhou was arrested and stripped of his Communist Party membership in early December on charges of leaking state secrets and taking bribes. His case been turned over to prosecutors.

Sautman says that when Zhang arrived in Xinjiang, he was widely seen as someone who was flexible and more open-minded than previous party leaders there. It was hoped that he could make some progress in mitigating the violence, but that has not happened.

"Whether he has connections with Zhou Yongkang, whether that will be pursued, probably doesn't make a huge amount of difference in the sense that he probably is not exactly sitting pretty no matter what his connections are," **Sautman** said. "Or what his history has been with top leaders in Beijing."

Leibold says that although the region's persistent violence and Zhang's connections to Zhou have fed rumors about his possible removal, he is still in his post. Still, Leibold says he could still be removed or even prosecuted.

"If you look at the anti-corruption campaign, I think he [President Xi] has been quite calculated in the way he has proceeded, about who gets taken down first. It is not being done in a haphazard way and perhaps Zhang is a dead man waiting for the noose," he said.

Zhang, however, does not seem deterred. Speaking at a recent meeting on the anti-corruption drive in Xinjiang, he voiced support for President Xi's policies and the anti-corruption drive. He noted that Xinjiang officials have been resolutely upholding and carrying out the party's policies over the past year.

In his remarks, Zhang called on party members to shoulder their responsibility and clean up the party just like one would grab a bull by its nose, with both hands and a firm grip.

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