

Exploring Pathways to Optimize China's Anti-Corruption Efforts from the Perspective of the Broken-Window Theory

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Abstract

The Broken Windows Theory is a classic psychological theory first proposed in the 1960s. It has made significant theoretical contributions to the fields of criminology and the governance of policing activities. China's anti-corruption efforts can also fully draw on the theoretical insights offered by the Broken Windows Theory. The theory operates through a causal chain in which the emergence of disorder triggers public fear, which in turn leads to disengagement, thereby undermining the system of non-formal social control. The key to breaking this chain lies in introducing effective formal social control measures before illegal and criminal behavior escalates. In the field of anti-corruption, formal social control measures manifest in the form of oversight and accountability mechanisms, a zero-tolerance policy for punishing corruption, and efforts to address loopholes in anti-corruption systems and mechanisms. Oversight and accountability serve as a crucial mechanism for curbing the "broken windows" effect in corruption; by clarifying responsible parties, holding those accountable for dereliction of duty, and promptly correcting "broken window" behaviors, they prevent their spread. A zero-tolerance policy for punishing corruption can promptly "repair the broken windows" in the anti-corruption sphere. By cracking down on minor disciplinary violations and rule-breaking as soon as they emerge, it eliminates the implicit encouragement of misconduct and prevents the spread of a culture of corruption. Promptly addressing loopholes in anti-corruption systems and mechanisms can effectively block the transmission pathways of the broken-window effect and eliminate the breeding ground for corruption; this is a core measure for curbing the broken-window effect in corruption and achieving long-term effectiveness in anti-corruption governance.

Keywords

Broken Windows Effect; Supervision and Accountability; Zero Tolerance; Plugging Loopholes

1 Introduction

The "broken windows" theory was formally proposed as a psychological theory in the 1960s. After more than a decade of systematic research, the New York City Police Department was the first to apply this theory to local community policing practices, achieving tremendous success in reducing crime rates. Since its introduction to China in the 1990s, the "broken windows" theory has been adopted by Chinese criminological research



institutes due to its outstanding value in crime prevention. In recent years, China has comprehensively deepened reforms of the discipline inspection and supervision system, achieving an overwhelming victory in combating official misconduct and crimes. However, the situation regarding such offenses—represented by embezzlement, corruption, abuse of power, and dereliction of duty—remains severe and complex. Against the backdrop of supervisory system reform in the new era, it is all the more imperative to fully leverage the value of the Broken Windows Theory in the field of discipline inspection and supervision. In particular, before the situation regarding official misconduct and crimes deteriorates further, we must introduce certain practical and effective formal social control measures to foster the formation of a sound informal social control system. This will enable us to address official misconduct and crimes “early and at a minor stage,” thereby realizing the intrinsic theoretical value of the Broken Windows Theory. In his important speech delivered during the 24th collective study session of the Political Bureau of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized: “We must not break the rules simply because one holds great power; we must not condone minor issues; we must not turn a blind eye simply because many have violated the rules. We must leave no ‘back doors’ or ‘loopholes’ and resolutely prevent the ‘broken windows effect.’” The governance of official misconduct and criminal offenses requires the formation of a positive social and public opinion environment characterized by integrity, a willingness to correct mistakes, and a sense of responsibility across society. It also requires leading officials to establish a commitment to fairness and impartiality. This paper analyzes the basic concepts and operational mechanisms of the “broken windows theory” and proposes insights for China’s anti-corruption efforts, with the aim of enhancing the effectiveness of anti-corruption governance.

2 Overview of the Broken Windows Theory

The concept of the Broken Windows Theory originated from a controlled experiment conducted in 1969 by Philip Zimbardo, a renowned psychology professor at Stanford University. He selected two cars—one in perfect condition and the other with its hood intentionally damaged—and parked them on the streets of a small town in California and in the Brooklyn neighborhood of New York City, respectively. It is worth noting that both locations were well-regarded, predominantly white residential communities. Within minutes of being parked on the street, a family of three passing by removed the radiator hidden under the damaged hood of the intentionally vandalized car. Soon after, passersby who saw the damaged and unattended vehicle began removing other valuable parts one after another. Later, as the valuable parts were gradually stripped away, people began to vandalize the car at will, and it even became a playground for children. Meanwhile, a well-maintained car parked in another location remained completely untouched throughout this period. Just as the experimenters were praising the high civic-mindedness of the local residents, Professor Zimbardo used tools to vandalize that car as well. Surprisingly, shortly thereafter, passersby began joining in the vandalism, just as had happened to the car that had been deliberately damaged earlier. This psychological experiment was mentioned in a 1982 paper by Wilson and Kelling, in which they formally introduced the “broken-windows theory,” pointing out that if some windows in a building are broken and left unrepaired, the remaining intact windows will soon be broken as well. This has nothing to do with the personal character of the residents; the true psychological mechanism lies in the fact that broken windows

convey the psychological impression that the entire building is neglected and unattended, thereby leading vandals to believe that their actions will incur no consequences or liability.

The lesson we can draw from the Broken Windows Theory is that if undesirable phenomena in the physical and social environments are not curbed and are allowed to persist, they will lead to an increasing number of members of the public emulating these negative behaviors. Similarly, if minor instances of dereliction of duty among public officials go unpunished, it will encourage more individuals exercising public authority to test the limits of Party discipline and national laws, thereby causing the improper exercise of power to escalate. In the 1990s, the Broken Windows Theory was introduced to China, and fruitful research gradually began in interdisciplinary fields such as economics, sociology, and management. At the beginning of this century, China began exploring the application of the Broken Windows Theory to the study of crime governance, and the theory has gradually become one of the key theoretical pillars in cutting-edge issues related to criminal law, such as crime prevention. Significant research findings have also been accumulated regarding the application of the Broken Windows Theory in the governance of official misconduct and crimes, for example, Professor Wang Xiumei pointed out that if the severity of punishment for bribery crimes is too lenient to effectively prevent and curb their frequency, the occurrence of such crimes will trigger a “broken-window” domino effect; she therefore advocates adopting a “zero-tolerance” stance toward bribery crimes. The “zero-tolerance” perspective can be viewed as an early attempt to explore the relationship between the broken-windows theory and corruption governance; however, the theoretical value of the broken-windows theory extends far beyond this. By analyzing the mechanism through which the broken-windows theory operates, we can further explore its potential as a theoretical guide.

3 The Operational Mechanism of the Broken Windows Effect

The operation of the Broken Windows Effect relies on a causal chain of transmission mechanisms—from disorder to fear, to deterrent behavior, and finally to informal social control. Most existing research also revolves around the interconnections among these elements. In a sense, crime originates from a state of disorder, which includes both physical and social disorder. When applied to daily life, the social-psychological concept of disorder can be understood as the emergence of undesirable phenomena—violations of basic norms and standards—within the physical spaces where people live and interact. In a 1999 paper, Ross and Mirowsky noted that physical disorder refers to the absence of visible signs of order and control in a neighborhood’s overall physical infrastructure and environment, while social disorder refers to the absence of visible signs of order and control in the behavior of the neighborhood’s residents. Disorder, as an objective phenomenon, influences people’s sense of fear. This fear is not necessarily caused by criminal behavior in the narrow sense; uncivilized phenomena that disrupt the order of community life—such as vagrants loitering on the streets, aggressive beggars, and individuals under the influence of alcohol—can all trigger a sense of fear to varying degrees. As a psychological sensation, fear directly influences people’s behavior. Psychology holds that this behavior manifests as withdrawal, which specifically refers to a decline in enthusiasm for participating in public affairs following the onset of fear, as well as a loss of the will to resist negative phenomena that violate laws, regulations, and public order and good morals. The emergence of



such withdrawal behavior further triggers the collapse of non-formal social control, causing crime to evolve from an initial stage to an advanced stage. Once crime reaches the advanced stage, it becomes significantly more difficult to manage. In contrast, during the initial stage—before the collapse of non-formal social control—relatively few resources are required to address crime, thereby achieving twice the result with half the effort.

Here, it is necessary to introduce the concept of social control. Social control refers to the institutional system for maintaining social order and is divided into two types: formal social control and informal social control. The former refers to a form of social control prescribed by explicit laws, regulations, and rules, and enforced by the government and judicial authorities exercising public power; the latter refers to forms of social control—such as moral norms, public opinion, and school education—that lack institutional rigidity and rely on individual self-discipline as well as the subtle, gradual influence of the social environment to take effect. The two work in coordination and together constitute the two pillars of the modern social control system.

From the perspective of the transmission mechanism of the broken-windows theory, the withdrawal behavior caused by fear affects informal social control. When the public withdraws from community governance or turns a blind eye to disorder, the informal social control mechanism fails. At this point, the social moral evaluation system collapses, and people's attitude toward undesirable behavior shifts from conscious resistance to acceptance as the norm. Informal social control serves as the “invisible hand” that regulates social order; the failure of this invisible hand further corrupts social morals, allowing an increasing number of phenomena that violate public order and good morals to go unchecked, thereby fostering the proliferation of serious criminal activities. Therefore, the Broken Windows Theory posits that there is a progressive causal relationship among concepts such as disorder, fear, social control, and criminal behavior; when disorder reaches a certain critical point, it spontaneously leads to criminal acts.

In the context of criminology, informal social control manifests as the immediate deterrence and direct opposition to illegal and criminal acts, as well as active participation in discussions about crime—whether before or after the fact—and a willingness to provide necessary leads to public authorities for the investigation and prosecution of such cases, as well as to offer assistance through testimony and explanations. The weakening of informal social control reflects a lack of values regarding fairness and justice throughout society; the public's first reaction to illegal and criminal phenomena is to avoid and distance themselves from them, rather than actively seeking the legal rights to which they are entitled. Once such an atmosphere of indifference—where people view such matters as none of their concern—pervades society, the effectiveness of informal social control in deterring illegal and criminal acts is greatly diminished. In their empirical research on the “broken windows” theory, Professors Lanfear et al. argue that potential violators of social norms can discern the absence of social control through signs of disorder evident at various levels of society. The fear that disorder instills in the public leads to a tendency to withdraw, which in turn progressively erodes the functionality of the social control system.

Therefore, looking further, disorder instills fear in the public. Any mentally healthy person with normal cognitive functioning, upon witnessing unlawful behavior, will subconsciously harbor a negative premoni-

tion that they might become a victim in the future, thereby triggering a state of psychological vigilance. Of the two types of disorder—physical and social—social disorder often instills a more intense sense of fear in the public. This is because the emergence of social disorder signifies a lack of social governance capacity; public administrative agencies lack the ability to address and resolve various social crises, which is a more complex issue than problems caused by the mere deterioration of the physical environment.

At the same time, the public's perception of social disorder also influences their views on formal social control systems. For example, in an empirical study of Canadian crime data, Professor Sprott found that disorder in urban communities significantly lowered citizens' evaluations of formal social control systems—such as the police and the courts. For example, disorder in the realm of corruption—specifically acts such as embezzlement and bribery—is relatively covert in its methods, yet the resulting injustices are perceptible to those with a stake in the matter. The resulting public discourse spreads by word of mouth among the general public, which indirectly reflects that the corruption prevention mechanisms of supervisory agencies have failed to function effectively. This leads the public to form negative views on the state of anti-corruption governance and triggers public distrust in the supervisory agencies' performance of their duties.

It is worth noting that effective formal social control has a very significant dampening effect on the public's sense of fear. Compared to informal social controls such as moral constraints and public opinion, formal social control possesses greater institutional rigidity; the public can more easily and intuitively perceive its effects, and authorities also conduct regular evaluations of case handling, making it easier to assess through quantitative metrics. In the realm of official misconduct and criminal offenses, the supervision authorities' investigation, handling, and accountability measures regarding such acts by public officials embody formal social control. The number of cases investigated and the number of leading officials held accountable have become key benchmarks for the public to judge the effectiveness of anti-corruption governance. As the backbone of investigating and handling corruption cases, supervisory agencies also play a key role in shaping public sentiment. If improper conduct is widespread across all stages of administrative law enforcement in a given region, and supervisory agencies fail to strictly curb such behavior, the public in that region will harbor doubts about the effectiveness of the agencies' case handling, which will inevitably lead to a certain degree of dissatisfaction. For example, in recent years, the practice of supervisory authorities at all levels dispatching disciplinary inspection teams to Party and government departments, state-owned enterprises and institutions, universities and research institutes, and mass organizations has been a key means of alleviating the public's concerns about corruption-related crimes. These dispatched disciplinary inspection teams have bridged the gap between investigators and those under supervision, thereby serving as a potential deterrent against the proliferation of corrupt practices. Therefore, the formal social control mechanism—through which supervisory authorities investigate and handle cases of dereliction of duty and abuse of power and hold the relevant responsible parties accountable—serves as a crucial intermediary between disorderly phenomena and public rejection. The more forcefully supervisory authorities punish cases of dereliction of duty and failure to fulfill responsibilities, the stronger the external restraining force against such issues becomes, and the lower the incidence rate of such cases will be. Public anxiety regarding improper performance of duties in their immediate surroundings will consequently decrease, and people will be more willing to participate in public life—such as the exercise of “micro-power” at the grassroots community level—thereby fostering a positive cultural atmosphere of accountability throughout society.



In general, the broken-windows theory posits that disorderly behavior triggers public fear and induces withdrawal, thereby significantly undermining the effectiveness of informal social control. With informal social control as a key node, the evolution of crime can be divided into an initial stage and an escalation stage; the failure of informal social control serves as a watershed moment leading to the transformation of disorderly behavior into serious criminal acts. Within the causal chain linking disorder and informal social control, formal social control acts as a critical intervening factor; effective formal social control can reverse the outcome of informal social control being undermined. When the public experiences fear due to disorder, the timely and effective intervention of formal social control can significantly alleviate that fear. This allows for “prevention before it happens” to a large extent before informal social control collapses, thereby preventing the occurrence of serious illegal and criminal acts. Therefore, from the perspective of the Broken Windows Theory, the key to governing official misconduct and criminal acts lies in breaking the causal chain leading from disorder to serious illegal and criminal acts. Particularly during the early stages of criminal evolution—before informal social control collapses—introducing formal social control measures such as oversight and accountability allows authorities to trace the root causes of problems while investigating cases, thereby addressing minor issues that have not yet materialized but pose potential risks through proactive intervention. Consequently, the approach revealed by the Broken Windows Theory—strengthening formal social control during the early stages of criminal evolution—largely embodies the philosophy of “addressing issues early and while they are minor.” Investing human and material resources at this stage can yield twice the result with half the effort. Once disorder leads to the collapse of informal social control, the governance of official misconduct and criminal offenses loses its foundation at the level of social beliefs and public opinion. When the general public subconsciously regards various forms of dereliction of duty as the norm, and when public officials deeply believe that their improper conduct carries no consequences, tackling corruption and criminal offenses at their root becomes significantly more difficult. Therefore, repairing the first “broken window” of dereliction of duty and misconduct is a powerful tool for advancing the comprehensive and strict governance of the Party and driving anti-corruption efforts forward more efficiently.

4 Application of the Broken Window Theory in the Field of Anti-Corruption

4.1 Improving Supervision and Accountability

If we examine official misconduct and criminal offenses from a psychological perspective, we find that the broken-windows effect offers profound insights into addressing these issues. The application of the broken-windows effect is not limited to disorderly behavior and neighborhood environments; rather, it can be extended to any situation where environmental disorder may influence individual behavior. Disorder in the exercise of public power serves as a psychological cue for those who actively violate Party discipline and state laws. Such disorder encourages and condones the further corruption of those who violate discipline and laws, while also eroding the public’s trust in the oversight of public power. This, in turn, leads to a retreating behavior among the public—compromising, yielding, and turning a blind eye to instances of dereliction of duty and malfeasance occurring around them—causing what began as minor disciplinary vio-

lations to eventually evolve into a breeding ground for illegal and criminal activities. It is worth noting that the Broken Windows Theory emphasizes “prevention before the fact” rather than “repression after the fact.” The essence of this theory lies in intervening with formal social control mechanisms during the early stages of criminal evolution—before non-social control mechanisms collapse—to alleviate public fear and prevent corresponding retreat behaviors, thereby “nipping problems in the bud.” In the context of combating official misconduct and criminal activity, the implementation of the supervision and accountability mechanism serves as an effective formal social control measure to sever the causal chain of the broken-windows effect.

The goal of the reform of the national supervision system is to prevent the exercise of public power from becoming distorted by strengthening oversight of that power. The authority to hold officials accountable is a crucial supervisory power granted by law to supervisory agencies. Holding relevant officials accountable for dereliction of duty while pursuing the direct responsibility of public officials who have violated the law serves as a strong deterrent to other public officials, thereby urging them to better fulfill their duties.

Article 37 of the newly revised “Supervision Law” of 2025 stipulates: “While holding public officials who have violated the law directly accountable, supervision authorities shall, in accordance with the law, hold leaders accountable for dereliction of duty or failure to fulfill responsibilities that have caused serious consequences or a negative impact.” Accordingly, supervisory accountability has become the third major accountability system, standing alongside intra-Party accountability and administrative accountability. Article 234 of China’s *Regulations on the Implementation of the Supervision Law* stipulates: “Supervisory authorities may, in accordance with their management authority, hold leading officials accountable through measures such as public censure, admonishment, or administrative disciplinary actions for failing to perform or improperly performing their duties, resulting in serious consequences or a negative impact; they may also propose organizational measures.” Accordingly, the *Regulations on the Implementation of the Supervision Law* further specify the subjects of supervisory accountability and the specific accountability measures.

Therefore, based on existing legal provisions, supervisory accountability is essentially an investigative procedure initiated by supervisory authorities against state public officials due to dereliction of duty or failure to fulfill responsibilities, resulting in a negative evaluation and disciplinary consequences. Accountability is an investigative method that works backward from the outcome to identify the causes of the problem and the relevant responsible parties. It traces back to determine which acts of dereliction of duty or failure to fulfill responsibilities on the part of public officials led to the occurrence of illegal outcomes. In this process, violations are thoroughly identified, thereby summarizing lessons learned to prevent similar behavior in the future. From the perspective of the “broken windows” theory, supervisory accountability is a formal social control mechanism that combines both preventive and punitive elements. On the one hand, it holds public officials accountable for violations of laws and discipline that have already occurred, thereby creating a deterrent effect; on the other hand, the accountability mechanism compels public officials to perform their duties in accordance with the law, preventing future acts of using power for personal gain or abuse of power, and thus serves as a strong preemptive warning. However, China’s current oversight and accountability system still has many shortcomings and requires further improvement to better serve the purpose of resolving the “broken window” phenomenon.



4.2 Combating Corruption with a Zero-Tolerance Approach

The broken-windows theory posits that the first broken window marks the starting point for the deterioration of a situation. If minor disciplinary violations are not promptly corrected, it sends a signal to all public officials that Party discipline and laws are “ineffective,” leading more people to follow suit and ultimately causing the system for combating corruption to collapse. This requires maintaining a high-pressure stance against any form of corruption throughout the governance process. Regardless of the amount involved, investigative authorities must respond to every case. If isolated instances of minor corruption are left unchecked, it will encourage more public officials to “break more windows.” We must consistently adhere to the principle of combating all corruption and rooting out all graft, resolutely investigating and punishing every case as it is discovered to prevent corruption from taking root and spreading. Long-standing experience in handling corruption cases shows that many corrupt officials were initially exemplary cadres who upheld integrity and self-discipline. However, when faced with their first small favors, they failed to hold the line; after accepting requests of a lower nature, they gradually raised their threshold and began accepting requests of a higher nature. Therefore, we must combat corruption with a zero-tolerance attitude, addressing issues early and while they are minor, and promptly dealing with emerging signs and trends to prevent small problems from escalating into major ones. By taking the “first window broken” seriously, we send a clear signal to all public officials that any violation of Party discipline or rules and regulations will inevitably be punished.

The report to the 20th National Congress of the Party states that “comprehensive and strict governance of the Party is the only path for the Party to maintain its vitality and successfully navigate the new journey ahead.” “We must adhere to a strict tone in strengthening conduct and enforcing discipline.” As the most thorough self-revolution of our Party in the new era, the fight against corruption must maintain this strict tone over the long term. We must consistently adopt a zero-tolerance approach to punishing corruption, advance in an integrated manner the efforts to ensure officials “cannot, do not want to, and dare not” engage in corruption, and resolutely win the protracted and arduous battle against corruption. Punishing corruption with a zero-tolerance attitude has been the Party’s fundamental strategy and a key lesson learned in combating corruption since the 18th National Congress. In 2014, Comrade Xi Jinping pointed out at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection: “‘We must persist in combating corruption with a zero-tolerance attitude,’ thereby introducing the concept of ‘zero tolerance’ for the first time. The report to the 20th National Congress of the Party once again called for ‘combating corruption and punishing wrongdoing with a zero-tolerance attitude.’ If our Party is to forever maintain its advanced nature and purity, it must continue to advance the fight against corruption in a sustained and in-depth manner with the strategic resolve of zero tolerance.

According to the broken-windows theory, disorder is the logical starting point for the propagation of “broken-window” behavior. Once good order is disrupted, if not promptly restored, it sends a message of “disorder” to the public, which in turn leads to the failure of non-social control systems. Corruption does not arise overnight; rather, it begins with minor incidents such as “a meal or a gift card.” Lax discipline gradually gives rise to nascent and emerging problems. Punishing corruption under the principle of zero tolerance

requires that minor issues among Party members and officials be addressed promptly, halting them before they escalate into major mistakes, and preventing Party members and officials from sliding from minor disciplinary violations into the abyss of criminal activity. Zero tolerance encompasses two elements: first, the “degree” of corruption, which must reflect the meaning of “none” or “absent”; second, the “state” of corruption, where zero tolerance manifests as keeping corruption in a “zero state”—that is, a state of “none” or “absent.” Combating corruption through a zero-tolerance policy means addressing issues early and while they are still minor, reducing the growth of corruption at its source, nipping problems in the bud, preparing for the future, and shattering the first “broken window” of corruption.

Zero tolerance is also the spiritual core of the culture of integrity in the fight against corruption. It implies that people develop a preventive vigilance toward and a firm rejection of corrupt acts; public officials uphold faith in the rule of law, insist on exercising power for the people and seeking benefits for the people, strictly adhere to rules and regulations, and resolutely prevent the use of personal pronouncements to replace the law or the abuse of power to override the law. In his 2018 speech at the Second Plenary Session of the 19th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Communist Party of China, Comrade Xi Jinping quoted the phrase, “Though my life may not reach a hundred years, I constantly harbor concerns for a thousand years.” Originally referring to the transience of life and the need to constantly worry about future events, this phrase largely embodies the sense of foreboding inherent in traditional Chinese culture. In the context of anti-corruption efforts, this sense of vigilance manifests in the requirement that public officials overcome mediocrity, laziness, and laxity; bear in mind the adage that “a thousand-li dyke collapses because of an ant’s hole”; adhere to bottom-line thinking and risk assessment in their work; anticipate potential conflicts and problems in advance; and proactively take measures to prevent and resolve them, thereby “preparing for the future and preventing problems before they arise.”

The implementation of a zero-tolerance anti-corruption policy requires a corresponding system of institutional norms to ensure its effectiveness. Comrade Xi Jinping pointed out: “We must focus on establishing rules and regulations, setting ‘explicit rules’ and eliminating ‘unwritten rules,’ ... and promote the continuous improvement of the political environment through institutional and systemic reforms and institutional innovation.” The foundation of the zero-tolerance institutional framework is national legislation—specifically, the methods for punishing and sanctioning corrupt acts as stipulated by laws and regulations. China’s Criminal Law and the Law on Administrative Sanctions for Government Officials set forth corresponding provisions regarding the amounts and circumstances of embezzlement and bribery. National laws serve as the fundamental guarantee for the zero-tolerance approach to combating corruption. The construction of the zero-tolerance institutional framework also requires leveraging the constraining role of Party discipline. As the saying goes, “Party discipline precedes the law, and Party discipline is stricter than the law.” The implementation of the zero-tolerance strategy for combating corruption requires consistently placing Party discipline at the forefront. This demands that disciplinary inspection and supervision departments accurately apply the “four forms” of supervision and discipline enforcement, maintain a strict tone over the long term, strictly enforce the Party’s political discipline and political rules, and drive the comprehensive and rigorous enforcement of all disciplines to the very end. There must be zero tolerance for any behavior that crosses disciplinary red lines or breaches the bottom line of integrity. We must prioritize strictness, rigorously en-



force all Party disciplines, and resolutely investigate and punish every instance of Party discipline violations as soon as they are discovered. We must never treat discipline as “rubber bands” or “plasticine,” but rather effectively uphold its rigidity and seriousness. The principle of “resolutely investigating and punishing every single case as it is discovered” aims to ensure that Party members and officials consistently refrain from overstepping their authority, violating established norms, or breaking rules, thereby preventing them from losing their sense of proportion due to “overlooking minor issues.” With the vigilance and intensity of zero tolerance, we must resolutely win the tough battle against corruption.

4.3 Plugging Loopholes in Anti-Corruption Systems and Mechanisms

Comrade Xi Jinping emphasized at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection: “We must deepen the reform of the discipline inspection system and strengthen intra-Party supervision. A key cause of corruption lies in loopholes in certain institutional mechanisms; we must persist in advancing our work with a reform-oriented mindset and strengthen institutional innovation.” The “broken window” theory posits that if broken windows are not repaired promptly, acts of vandalism will continue to occur. In the context of anti-corruption efforts, “repairing broken windows” means promptly identifying loopholes in the institutional mechanisms for combating corruption, plugging these gaps through the establishment of rules and regulations, and preventing corruption at its source. By building a scientific, rigorous, comprehensive, and effective anti-corruption institutional framework, we can achieve long-term governance of corruption.

Comrade Xi Jinping pointed out: “Party committees at all levels must closely examine the corruption cases that have occurred in recent years, identify loopholes, learn from these lessons, comprehensively deepen reforms, and comprehensively strengthen institutional development.” Adhering to the governance of the Party through institutions and in accordance with regulations is an important lesson our Party has drawn from its long-standing practice of managing and governing itself. Institutional issues are fundamental and have far-reaching implications; the key to the fight against corruption lies in strengthening institutional development, plugging loopholes in systems and mechanisms, and achieving governance of corruption at its source. Strengthening the institutional framework for anti-corruption not only imposes constraints on all Party members and officials but also serves as a deterrent to potential corrupt elements. Plugging loopholes in the anti-corruption system and mechanisms can prevent the proliferation of corruption at its source and provide solid safeguards for every stage of the anti-corruption effort. Institutions are a powerful tool for preventing corruption. Our Party’s history and practical experience in fighting corruption demonstrate that strengthening institutional development and plugging institutional loopholes are the fundamental approaches to tackling corruption at its source. At present, the situation in the fight against corruption remains severe and complex, and we still face major challenges in eradicating the breeding ground for corruption. Only by tightening the institutional cage, improving the formulation and establishment of rules and regulations, continuously weaving a tighter institutional net, and filling institutional gaps can we build a “dam” to curb the emergence and spread of corruption. Only then can we address both the symptoms and the root causes, thereby fostering a political ecosystem that is clean and transparent.

To address loopholes in the anti-corruption system and mechanisms, we must continuously improve the

legal and regulatory framework. The focus should be on formulating intra-Party regulations against corruption. We must adopt a problem-oriented approach, directly address issues that the people strongly oppose—such as those that weaken the Party’s leadership and undermine its advanced nature and purity—and leverage the fundamental role of institutions. We must expedite the formulation of practical, effective regulations and systems that are urgently needed in practice and for which conditions are ripe, thereby plugging institutional loopholes. In response to the issues revealed by investigated corruption cases, we must summarize common patterns, conduct in-depth analyses of causes, and focus on identifying loopholes in the exercise of power to address institutional shortcomings. In particular, we must focus on areas where corruption frequently occurs, take proactive measures, and impose precise sanctions.

Addressing shortcomings in anti-corruption systems must focus on key and emerging areas. We must further strengthen corruption early-warning mechanisms in traditional high-risk sectors such as finance, state-owned enterprises, energy, and infrastructure, and continue to deepen rectification efforts in areas characterized by concentrated power, large capital flows, and abundant resources. Corruption governance in other sectors must highlight key areas; for example, in the education sector, institutional loopholes must be identified in areas such as admissions corruption and the misappropriation of research funds, while in the construction of new urban districts and development zones, efforts must focus on addressing typical issues such as land transfers, investment promotion, and bid-rigging. Currently, under the high-pressure anti-corruption campaign, new forms of covert corruption—such as “shadow shareholders” and the “revolving door” between government and business—have emerged, becoming increasingly covert and complex. These forms use various disguises and indirect means to conceal the essence of corruption; therefore, we must prioritize plugging institutional loopholes related to these new forms of covert corruption to enhance the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts. Big data and artificial intelligence technologies should be utilized to build smart oversight platforms capable of detecting anomalous behavior in real time, with particular attention to refining institutional regulations regarding tactics such as “shadow shareholders” holding shares on behalf of others and cross-border money laundering. It is imperative to establish and improve the legal and regulatory framework for preventing and punishing corruption, with a focus on strengthening oversight and constraints on “key officials,” identifying and addressing loopholes in anti-corruption systems and mechanisms, and securing an overwhelming victory in the fight against corruption.

5 Conclusion

The “broken windows” theory posits that the existence of any form of disorder conveys a message that can lead to the failure of social control systems, thereby triggering the unchecked spread of disorder. This teaches us that anti-corruption efforts must address issues early and at a minor stage, nipping problems in the bud. We must prioritize the early detection and intervention of corruption issues, promptly issuing warnings, criticism, and corrections for emerging or trend-indicating problems to prevent “minor mistakes” from escalating into “major corruption.” Through oversight and accountability, a powerful deterrent is established against public officials, ensuring they dare not, cannot, and do not want to engage in corruption. This prevents and reduces the occurrence of corruption at its source, clears obstacles to the comprehensive



and strict governance of the Party, and safeguards the country's long-term stability and security. Adhering to a "zero-tolerance" anti-corruption policy and remaining highly vigilant against mistakes that appear to be accidental, isolated, or minor will help nip problems in the bud. By plugging loopholes in anti-corruption systems and refining the anti-corruption institutional framework, we can strengthen the enforcement of discipline and uphold the authority of the system. The fight against corruption must be conducted without any off-limits areas and with full coverage; corrupt acts, regardless of the sector involved, must be seriously investigated and dealt with in accordance with Party discipline, regulations, and the law, ensuring that discipline becomes a "live high-voltage wire." In summary, the broken-window theory requires us to adopt a "zero-tolerance" attitude toward corruption in our anti-corruption efforts. Only by starting with the smallest details, strengthening the enforcement of systems, and enhancing oversight can we effectively curb the spread of corruption and uphold the Party's advanced nature and purity. All public officials must consciously assume the role of "window guardians" who uphold integrity and self-discipline. Discipline inspection and supervision departments must maintain a strict tone in rectifying work styles and enforcing discipline, cracking down on "broken window" behavior the moment it emerges, strengthening prevention at the source, and resolutely winning the tough and protracted battle against corruption.

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