

Coronavirus: The Great Disruption

The three lessons China should learn to avert another crisis

While country has managed to check outbreak, some reforms are still in order

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For The Straits Times

Today, as Covid-19 continues its deadly rampage in different corners of the world, many leaders struggling to contain its spread might look on with envy at China's success in reining in the disease.

Last Saturday, as China mourned the victims of Covid-19 – more than 3,300 have died in the country – another 30 new cases were added to the official tally of more than 81,000 nationwide since January. While the disease lingers, the number of new infections is a dramatic drop from the hundreds reported each day at the height of the crisis.

At the time, some observers wondered whether the virus could prove to be the undoing of the grip on power by President Xi Jinping or the ruling Communist Party over the country. But by March 10, when President Xi visited Wuhan, the epicentre of the outbreak, it was clear that China had overcome the health crisis and was on the road to recovery.

To break the coronavirus' grip on the country, the Chinese leadership employed what it called a "whole-nation" approach, and took draconian measures such as community lockdowns and business stoppages. In Hubei province alone, more than 50 million people were effectively sealed off under strict quarantine measures.

That China succeeded in containing the outbreak does not mean that its system of governance has been vindicated and is a success.

CONTRADICTIONS IN THE SYSTEM

Indeed, in his speech in Wuhan, Mr Xi emphasised that China would strive to improve its system of governance by drawing on the lessons learnt in fighting the coronavirus.

So what are some of the lessons that China should heed in coming up with a better way of managing the country?

There are many lessons, but I would like to focus on the ones affecting three key relationships – between the central leadership and the local authorities; between provinces; and between the government/party and the people. All three vividly demonstrated the contradictions that are deeply embedded in China's political institutions during the Covid-19 crisis. These need looking into for changes to be made as the three

relationships are vital in the administration of China. If they do not function well, China will run into future problems even after the present pandemic is over.

First, the relationship between the central leadership and local governments/bureaucracies.

The central government's performance was laudable and life-saving – it swiftly launched a nationwide mobilisation and dispatched 344 teams comprising more than 42,000 doctors and other medical workers to Hubei province. Without such national-level efforts, victory in Wuhan's anti-virus war would not have been possible.

By contrast, the health crisis has shone a light on the weaknesses of the local government and lower-level bureaucracies.

When criticised for not sounding the alarm over the rising number of cases of the new virus, the Wuhan mayor pointed the finger back at the central government, arguing that for such matters, he needed authorisation from the top.

China's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a state agency, was also criticised for its part in allowing the disease to spiral out of control. But, as well-known epidemiologist Zhong Nanshan noted in a Feb 27 interview, the CDC cannot do much as it is low in the pecking order. "Except for reporting to upper levels of authorities, the CDC has no power to make any decision for the next move," he said.

Both the mayor and Dr Zhong are right. By design, China's decision-making power is highly centralised and that has made it extremely difficult for local party officials and bureaucrats to act quickly in response to local conditions. It also encourages buck passing when things go wrong.

BRAWL AT THE BORDER

Second, the relationship between provinces. Whenever there is a crisis, localism tends to rise and local officials and people will do whatever they can to protect their own interests and ignore their neighbours', even in contradiction to orders from Beijing.

These instincts broke into the open in dramatic fashion recently in a row between Jiangxi and Hubei police over a checkpoint. Although the central government had deemed the situation in Wuhan under control and allowed Hubei residents to travel to other provinces and cities, lower-level officials in Jiangxi thought otherwise. As the Jiangxi police tried to stop Hubei people

from crossing into their province, an altercation broke out between the police on both sides. This soon escalated, as shown in video clips of angry Hubei residents smashing and overturning Jiangxi police vehicles.

This brawl at the border may seem surprising to people who view China as a monolithic whole, run more or less in a seamless manner by the central government. But that view is not entirely true. The stigma of the virus has meant that at the grassroots level, people from Hubei, particularly those from Wuhan, have suffered discrimination from their countrymen in other parts of the country, including in the capital Beijing.

Fearing a shortage, the Dali local government in Yunnan province confiscated face masks that were supposed to be shipped to the city of Chongqing.

It would appear that the lower the level of government, the more likely officials are to put self-preservation as their No. 1 priority. Indeed, in the early chaotic days of the coronavirus crisis, many villages and smaller cities decided on their own to set up barricades and checkpoints to prevent outsiders from entering.

SEEKING TRUTH FROM FACTS

Third, the relationship between the government/party and the people.

In China's highly centralised system, it is perhaps ironic that the central government can be blind to what is happening on the ground. Getting accurate information can be very difficult, if not impossible, because bad news and unflattering facts are stopped by local officials from reaching the top.

So when Wuhan physician Li Wenliang alerted colleagues on social media to a possible new virus outbreak in December, he was

detailed and reprimanded by local police.

The cries of "fake, fake" by residents during Vice-Premier Sun Chunlan's inspection tour of a Hubei estate under lockdown on March 5 exposed window-dressing efforts by local officials as well as the frustration of people over such cover-ups.

Both examples illustrate the risks for the central government when it is not able to collect credible local information. Decisions based on missing or doctored data are understandably problematic. The enforcement of such decisions is likely to alienate the people and run into resistance.

LEGACY ISSUES

For all the problems they pose, these institutional contradictions are not a recent creation of the Chinese Communist Party and have long roots in China's history.

Over its more than 2,000 years of history, China was run as a sort of absolutist managerial state by large-scale bureaucracies. In such a despotic system, as described by German-American historian Karl A. Wittfogel, government representatives come to monopolise political power and dominate the economy.

The country was also frequently divided and presented a challenge to the rulers of the day. Modern-day China inherited the territory of the Qing empire. But how to institutionally unify such a vast country and to make it a state was always a problem.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty, the newly established republic failed to build a set of viable modern institutions and that led to the rise of warlordism; during this period, the government in Beijing became irrelevant to the provinces and they

either announced independence or fought one another.

Mao Zedong used to describe China as "semi-feudal, semi-colonial". When he announced the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, China became an independent state. Yet, the country remained semi-feudal. Indeed, during the Cold War, Mao actually made the country even more feudal in that he encouraged each province to be self-sufficient and independent from its neighbours in order to survive a possible war with the United States or the Soviet Union.

Greater decentralisation in the post-Mao era, particularly the 1980s, led to what I have termed "de facto federalism" in China. Local governments were empowered in their endeavours to promote local economic development and pursue local wealth. The competition between Guangdong and Chongqing in the Hu Jintao era surprised many international observers as both provinces set off in opposite directions of reform and development. During this period, although China was ruled by one party, its provinces were effectively more powerful than the states in the US in relation to the federal government.

As China did not have a tradition of rule of law, the ruling party had to rely on political means in managing the country. Without a sound system of rule of law, this made for a fragile central government, particularly during a crisis. When President Xi came to power, he put a stop to it and began reversing the flow of power back to Beijing and to the party.

It is this centralised system that has enabled him to execute so effectively a nationwide mobilisation and impose draconian measures to stop the spread of the virus. The victory against Covid-19 is undeniable, but it has been achieved at great cost to the people of Hubei, in particular those in Wuhan. The lockdown has also cost the Chinese economy dearly.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Until today, in many aspects of its institutions, the Chinese political system remains pre-modern and is in need of more and better targeted reforms.

In many areas, such as economic development and social management, more power should be decentralised to local governments, while in other areas like public health, education and welfare, the central government

needs to bear more responsibilities.

When Mr Zhu Rongji, China's economic czar, became Premier, he centralised the country's fiscal power. Yet, the central government left all sorts of social-economic responsibilities to local governments, creating new sorts of problems as they looked for ways to pay for these burdens.

When Mr Xi greatly centralised decision-making power, local officials were left with responsibilities but not the power to make independent decisions. What we are seeing here is a mismatch between power and responsibility at local levels. "With great power comes great responsibility," said Voltaire. But great responsibility needs great power too.

If China does not correct this imbalance, effective decision-making at the local level will be hobbled, leaving room for other crises to develop – like it did with the present pandemic.

As for relations among the provinces, without the rule of law, political localism will remain, as local governments are, after all, held responsible for the well-being of their own residents and are more inclined to respond to that imperative when the going gets rough.

Above all, society must play a bigger role in the way China is run. A balanced power distribution between the centre and local government is not sufficient; a balanced relationship between the party-state and society is a must.

Without a relatively, if not completely, independent media and freedom of speech, local officials will continue to monopolise information, distorting or hiding the true state of affairs that the central government sees.

What can the central government do to overcome that? Let society play a role in motivating and constraining local governments and their officials. Centralisation of power may seem a faster, more streamlined way of managing modern-day China. But as the Covid-19 pandemic shows, without timely intervention from diverse players, a small outbreak in a tiny corner of Wuhan can end up having devastating global consequences.

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Medical staff from Jilin province (in red) bidding farewell to nurses from Wuhan whom they worked with during the Covid-19 outbreak, before they left from Wuhan's Tianhe airport on Wednesday. That China contained the outbreak does not mean its system of governance is a success, says the writer. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Coronavirus: The Great Disruption

The coronavirus pandemic raging across the world is taking a huge toll on lives and economies.

Already touted as the biggest global crisis since World War II, it has forced countries to take unprecedented measures – slamming borders shut, quarantining millions, shutting down workplaces and schools, and giving out massive stimulus and job rescue packages.

As the crisis unfolds, expect orthodoxies and established rela-

tionships to be challenged, with some upended and others reshaped.

How will global institutions, nations, economies and societies respond? To make sense of the impact and fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, leading opinion leaders share their views of this global upheaval with *The Straits Times* in Coronavirus: The Great Disruption, a special series that runs this month in the Opinion section.