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Does Handling Many Corruption Cases Prove Oversight Is Independent Enough?

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The claim

The argument runs like this. Since 2012 the PRC (Mainland) has investigated and punished corruption on an enormous scale — senior officials, generals, and local cadres alike. Freedom House, summarising official figures, puts the total at "well over a million people" investigated and punished. If a system were protecting its own, the reasoning goes, it would not devour so many of its own. The sheer volume of cases must therefore show that supervision works, and works independently — that no one is above the law.

The numbers are real and the punishments visible. But volume is the wrong evidence for the proposition it is asked to prove. A system can punish a great many people and still be incapable of constraining the people who decide whom to punish.

What the record actually says

The anchor source for this essay is the State Council Information Office white paper *China: Democracy That Works* (《中国的民主》, 4 December 2021), section 三（五）, "Democratic supervision." It describes a supervision system built from many parts — supervision by people's congresses, by the non-Communist parties, by the supervisory commissions (监察监督), and by judicial, audit, mass, and media channels.

On the question this essay asks, the white paper is direct. "In China, the problem of abuse of power and seeking private gain through power cannot be solved by so-called rotation of ruling parties or separation of powers; it must be solved by scientific and effective democratic supervision." That is a rejection of institutional independence as the test: supervision, in this account, is effective precisely because it is unified under the Party's leadership, not because it stands apart from it.

Section 四（五）, on the effective constraint of power, then gives the anti-corruption record as evidence of that supervision working. It pledges to "lock power in the cage of institutions" (把权力关进制度的笼子里) and declares: "We insist on zero tolerance, with no forbidden zones and full

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coverage in fighting corruption… we insist that every case must be investigated and every corrupt act punished" (坚持反腐败无禁区、全覆盖、零容忍……坚持有案必查、有腐必惩). And it announces the result: "the fight against corruption has secured an overwhelming victory, which has been consolidated across the board" (反腐败斗争取得压倒性胜利并全面巩固).

The white paper claims coverage, severity, and victory. It does not claim that the supervisory organs are independent of the Party — indeed, its theory denies that independence is the point. The inference that "many cases prove independent oversight" is therefore not the white paper's own statement; it is a gloss placed on it by defenders of the system.

The rebuttal

First, **enforcement volume is not the same as enforcement independence**. A prosecutor who answers to a political superior can still prosecute thousands of cases — the superior simply decides which thousands. High volume proves energy and capacity. It proves nothing about who chooses the targets, and target selection is where independence lives or dies. A campaign that removes corrupt officials is compatible with two opposite stories: a system cleaning itself, or a leadership using corruption charges to remove rivals and discipline the bureaucracy. The case count cannot tell them apart, because both stories predict a large number of cases.

Second, **selectivity is the question volume cannot answer**. Genuine independence shows itself at the margins, not in the totals: in cases pursued against the investigator's own allies, against officials close to the top, and against the institutions doing the supervising. The white paper's formula — "no forbidden zones, full coverage" — is a promise about scope, and scope can be verified only case by case, from the outside, by asking who has *not* been investigated and why.

Third, **constraint on supreme power is a different test from punishment of subordinate power**. Every modern state punishes low-level corruption. The democratic question is whether oversight can bite

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upward — whether an investigator, a court, a legislature, or a free press can compel answers from the highest office, block its decisions, or remove its holder against his will. The white paper's supervision system is elaborate, but every strand operates inside a design in which the Communist Party leads everything, and the Party is supervised by its own discipline bodies. That is supervision by the supervised. The ROC (Taiwan) contrast is instructive not because Taiwan is flawless — its constitutional court admits only a small fraction of petitions for full review — but because its oversight bodies, courts, legislature, and press can act against the governing party, and the governing party can lose power. The possibility of losing is the test; the number of cases processed is not.

The test

If a reader wants to judge whether oversight is independent enough, four questions do more work than any case total:

1. **Who appoints the overseers, and can they be removed for investigating the wrong person?** Independence begins with tenure and appointment, not with caseload.
2. **Who is never investigated?** Publish the pattern of targets — rank, faction, region — and let outsiders look for the gaps.
3. **Can oversight act against the top?** Name one instance in which a supervisory body blocked, reversed, or punished a decision of the supreme leadership. If there is none, the system constrains subordinates, not power.
4. **Who checks the checkers?** Is there any channel outside the supervised hierarchy that can review the supervisors themselves?

A system that answers these questions with documents, not slogans, has independent oversight whether it handles a thousand cases or a hundred. One that cannot has not proved independence by handling a million.

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Source note

Primary source (anchor): State Council Information Office, 《中国的民主》 (*China: Democracy That Works*), 4 December 2021, section 三（五） (democratic supervision) and section 四（五） (effective constraint of power). Full text fetched and verified live on 2026-11-19 at https://bb.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/xwdt/202112/t20211207_10463217.htm. All four Chinese quotations in this essay were checked verbatim against that page; the English renderings are the drafter's own translations. The white paper does not state, in so many words, that "many cases prove independence"; the claim addressed here is a reconstructed inference drawn from its language of "no forbidden zones," "every case must be investigated," and "overwhelming victory," and this essay treats it as such, narrowing its target to what the sources support.

Secondary source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026 — China* (via ecoi.net, document #2138116), for the summary that "well over a million people have been investigated and punished according to official figures." That figure is attributed to Freedom House's reading of official figures, not asserted as this essay's own finding.

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