



BBC World Service

Novel Coronavirus Epidemic China's Battle and System

Robert Lawrence Kuhn

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BBC HOST, DAN DAMON: Hello, this is Dan Damon with World Update from the BBC in London. The director of the hospital in Wuhan, the Chinese city where the coronavirus outbreak began, has died. His death comes after that of Li Wenjiang, the ophthalmologist who tried to warn of the disease but was interrogated by police and then told to stay quiet. This latest death will add to criticism of the way that the Communist Party and President Xi Jinping have handled the crisis. On the one hand, the government has used its top-down approach to build a hospital in record time, shut down cities to quarantine millions — but some critics say the response has created a disaster zone, people are panicked, and there are critical supply shortages. Others also have criticized the Beijing government for instilling a sense of fear that an alert was not issued early enough to prevent the spread of the virus.

HOST: I've been speaking to Robert Lawrence Kuhn. He is an author and political commentator. He has advised China's leaders for more than 25 years. I asked him whether the current system in China is doing more harm than good?

ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN: China's system is unique in the world. It has produced the world's second largest economy. It has brought somewhat close to 800 million people out of poverty. And yet we have this epidemic. We see the results of dealing with the epidemic, the mobilization, which is unprecedented in global health history:

- **Locking down not only the city of Wuhan with eleven million people, but virtually the entire Hubei province, close to 60 million people.**
- **Building thousand bed hospitals literally in 10 days.**
- **Mobilizing the military medical personnel, five or six thousand within days**

BBC HOST: Well, that's very impressive, of course. But the other side of that is that had the doctors been allowed to speak, especially one doctor, and the information had been allowed to spread, then the virus might have been better contained.

KUHN: You're absolutely right. But it's not that the system restrains or prevents information from getting up. But what it does, because of the top-down system, is this: people at

local levels are always concerned of what their superiors will think or allow before they say things. And so, their thoughts are sometimes not to deal with the issue of the moment, but rather to deal with their superiors. And if their superiors have not given them the go ahead or the approval to do something, they will be extra cautious and not do things.

And in particular, they will not want to be looked upon as adding to instability by causing panic. So, the local officials in Wuhan not only held their local party congress in early January — after they knew that the virus was beginning to spread — but had a potluck dinner with forty thousand people, because they didn't want to disturb the stability or the normal process...

BBC HOST: And that meant that things were troubled. And underlying that, I would say — as we know from other communist systems — is when you do have to do things, like you want to run a market, for example, selling animals [for human food consumption], if you need licenses, you buy them, you bribe your way through society at the lower level. And is that what's happening? Because stopping the virus spreading from bats — which people want to eat — that's the start of all this.

KUHN: Well, it's a complicated. First of all, there has just been a remarkable publication of a speech that President Xi Jinping gave on February 3rd in which he described in very remarkable detail what he has been doing. And one of the things he says is that they're cracking down very strongly on



the wild animal markets that have been going on. Some of it obviously is against the law, but some of it does have getting the licenses.

KUHN: I would differentiate between China's system as opposed to other so-called communist systems or authoritarian systems. China's system is sui generis, nothing like it. It has its own unique characteristics: because of the size of the country, the history, culture, the nature of the Communist Party. To really understand the pros and cons, the negative and the tradeoff, we really have to understand the specificity — and the example of poverty that I gave you is very real.

BBC HOST: A lot has been achieved.

KUHN: It is the greatest poverty alleviation achievement in world history.

BBC HOST: Exactly. But you do have that low-level corruption, don't you? That's how people get by in a system that is so strongly controlled in which there's no real accountability.

KUHN: When you have authoritarian systems that have the accountability only to superiors, and you have that absolute power without checks and balances, that is a fertile petri dish to grow corruption.



KUHN: Now, under Xi Jinping, they have made a massive effort to attack this and their anti-corruption campaign — which is relentless — has been unique in modern Chinese history. But still, the nature of this system lends itself, because power is so concentrated in officials and government, it lends itself to that type of corruption. This is a detriment of the system when you don't have a free press. That's another way that corruption can flourish.

BBC HOST: And so let me ask you, do you think this crisis is going to change things? Is there going to be a modification of the top down so that there is more accountability? Yes, you're not going to have a free press in China next year. But is there something going to happen?

KUHN: That's a very good question. What will be the lessons that will be learned? Now, to be sure, President Xi, the Politburo Standing Committee — everybody in leadership — is saying that there are lessons to be learned, that one of the hallmarks of the communist system is a willingness to correct error. Now, they're not going to change the system, but what will they do? This is something we have to watch.

BBC HOST: Robert Lawrence Kuhn, author and political commentator.

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