

# China: the democracy movement and reform

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China has been in considerable turmoil for nearly two months. In the week ending June 10th, the army brutally crushed the democracy movement, killing hundreds if not thousands of people. How did the protests start and what do they mean? MELVIN GOLDBERG reports.

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**O**n the 15th of April this year Hu Yaobang died. The death of the former general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party can be seen as the immediate cause of the huge wave of protests which have spread throughout China since then. For the deeper causes one has to look at the economic and political changes that have taken place ever since the revolution of 1949. This report will confine itself to discussing some of the more recent events.

On Hu's death, demonstrations in favour of greater democracy broke out all over China. The previous demon-

strations in favour of democracy had taken place in 1986/7. Hu had been blamed for those protests and was dismissed from his post as the leader of the Party. Therefore, in the eyes of the students, Hu was the symbol of greater freedom. His death gave birth to the first independent student movement since 1949.

Although the majority of the demonstrators were students, they had the support of intellectuals and teachers, and as the protests grew, workers, journalists and others joined in. Thousands of students from all over China travelled to Tiananmen Square

in Beijing, being allowed to travel free on trains by sympathetic railway workers. At the same time there were protests in many other Chinese cities such as Xian, Guangzhou, Nanjing and the major industrial centre of Shanghai.

In addition, demonstrations in support of the Chinese students took place outside the People's Republic in Hong Kong, Macao and London among other places.

The government did not take immediate action, which at first sight seems puzzling. It seems that it was taken by surprise, both by the size of the demonstrations and by the extent of the support they inspired.

Also, mourning

the death of a former Party leader was quite legitimate, and the government had no idea how long it would last.

Most

importantly, though, many of the leaders were sympathetic to the students' demands and the leadership

was clearly divided on what to do. The Communist Party newspaper, the *Peoples Daily*, accused the protesters of being anti-socialist and anti-Party. It very soon became clear, though, that not all the leaders of the Party agreed with this.

### Divisions in the party

The students' protests not only created serious divisions in the Party leadership, but also within the



*Calling for democracy, students erect a figure resembling America's Statue of Liberty - under the watchful eye of Comrade Mao*

Photo: AP

army. Important figures in the military were opposed to the use of force, as a group of retired army marshalls (some of whom had participated in the Long March) made clear to the Party central committee. It has even been suggested that the Minister of Defence, Qin Jiwei, did not favour a violent response.

Therefore, before the government could respond, the hardliners had to secure a majority in favour of tough measures. The general secretary of the Party, Zhao Ziyang, favoured discussing the students' grievances.

But he was not able to win the backing of the central committee. He was dismissed from his position of general secretary, suffering the same fate as Hu Yaobang after the 1986/7 demonstrations.

The government was concerned about the threat that the demonstrations posed to their authority. They were also worried about the negative effects the demonstrations might have on foreign investors. They were in no mood to consider the students' demands. The most powerful figure in China, Deng Xiaoping, and the Prime Minister, Li Peng, rejected negotiations with the students. They declared martial law and ordered the army to break up the demonstrations.

There were rumours that the Beijing-based 38th army was reluctant to confront the demonstrators, so the Shanxi-based 27th army was ordered into action. Backed by two dozen tanks and armoured personnel carriers it slowly crushed resistance.

It seems though that some soldiers

were sympathetic to the demonstrators. There were reports that they were offering weapons to students at Beijing Normal University, and that there was some fighting among army factions.

### **The demands of the democracy movement**

What do the students want? There are two main demands:

- for greater democracy within the Party
- for an end to corruption.

The students are not making a direct attack on the Party and they are not calling for the establishment of a multi-party system (as in Hungary). They want people to have a greater say in the election of candidates to the Party. They also want an end to privileges which Party members and their families enjoy, and an end to the practice of nepotism.

These two political demands need to be considered in the light of the economic changes that have taken place in China since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Mao stood for the primacy of politics and ideology over economics (although in reality he changed his mind on a number of occasions). For Mao, the road to socialism lay in changing people's consciousness. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969), his policies caused serious economic crises, leading to a decline in the standard of living of workers. As a result, workers began to associate socialism with constant political meetings and low pay.

Workers became increasingly obsessed with wages and the Maoists accused them of economism.

## **Economic reform**

The opposition to Mao came from those members of the Party who believed that the road to socialism lay in building up the economy. The policies followed under Mao had not achieved very impressive results. In fact, living standards fell steadily. Between 1957 and 1977 the average real wages of workers in state industries fell by 19%.

Mao's opponents took the view that rigid centralised planning was responsible for this. They argued that economic growth should take priority over politics and ideology, even if this meant a move towards a market economy. From 1978 major reforms were introduced, particularly in the rural

areas. The communes where people formed collectively, have been abandoned and family farming has been reintroduced. In the urban areas, small private operations from manufacture to transport to medicine and education were allowed, and these have grown steadily. Market socialism seems to have revived the economy but has also caused problems. Between 1978 and 1987 the value of agricultural output grew by 6.5% per year - an impressive figure compared to the average of 2.6% growth per year for the period 1952 to 1978. This growth is reflected in the improved wages and living conditions of the peasants. In the towns there is a better supply of food and agricultural raw materials for factories.

Reforms in industry, especially since 1984, have also improved output, although not as much as in the

**“The picture is very clear. Out of a population of more than one billion, 800 million people live in rural areas and, for the most part, still use hand tools to make a living. A certain number of modern industries coexist with many industries that are several decades or even a century behind present-day standards. Some areas that are fairly developed economically coexist with vast areas that are underdeveloped and impoverished.....nearly one-quarter of the population is still illiterate or semi-literate. The backwardness of the productive forces determines the following aspects of the relations of production: socialisation of production, which is essential for expanded socialist public ownership, is still at a very low level; the commodity economy and domestic market are only beginning to develop; the natural economy and semi-natural economy constitute a considerable proportion of the whole; and the socialist economic system is not yet mature and well developed.” - Zhao Ziyang, addressing the Thirteenth Party Congress in October 1987. ☆**



*It was not only students who made up the crowd of protesters*

*Photo: AP*

countryside. Between 1978 and 1987 industrial output increased by 12%. These high levels of growth, though, have also brought serious problems.

The most serious problem has been inflation. In the towns prices increased by about 40% between 1987 and 1988. Food prices increased even more - vegetable prices in the cities rose by 50% in 6 months in 1988! At first wage rises kept ahead of prices, but today workers' real wages are steady or falling.

Do these changes mean that China has abandoned socialism and is moving towards capitalism? Mao would certainly have argued that this is the trend. The current leadership believes, on the contrary, that socialism is still

on the agenda. They point to the fact that the state sector still accounts for most of the industrial output and industrial employment. Also, although private farming is now practised everywhere in China, the land is owned by the state and is only leased to families. The current leaders now believe that the Maoists moved too rapidly towards socialism and in doing so they damaged the economy and harmed the cause of socialism and the reputation of the Party.

### **Democratic reform**

How do these changes relate to the current crisis? While economic reform has been brought about there has been

no fundamental change in the way politics has been organised. The Party largely decides for the people. In the universities and the factories, the party cadres are the most important people. There have been some changes (increasing separation of Party and government functions, greater authority for managers of state enterprises) but the students are demanding that greater democracy be introduced into Party politics. They do not seem to be criticising socialism or, in fact, saying much about it at all.

Their protests have led to a serious crisis within the Party. In spite of the fact that most of the current leadership supported the economic reforms they are divided on the need for political reform. Zhao Ziyang, who favoured discussing the students demands, was not able to win the support of the Central Committee, and he has been dismissed from his position of general secretary, suffering the same fate as Hu Yaobang. The most powerful figure in China, Deng Xiaoping, and the Prime Minister, Li Peng, have rejected negotiations with the students, at least for the time being, and they have won the current political battle among the leaders.

Does this mean that no reforms will be introduced? In my view, there is a general trend towards reform and it will come about in the near future in spite of the recent brutal crackdown. First of all, this is not the first movement for political reform. There is a long history of such protests in Chinese history dating back to the famous May 4th movement in 1919,

and since 1976 there have been a number of open calls for greater democracy. Secondly, China is desperately short of highly skilled people, and what we witness here is the call for greater freedom from those very people who will be responsible for China's future economic growth. Thirdly, it will not be long before some of the student protesters themselves assume political power. Unless they change their minds completely, it seems clear that even if the students have not prevailed on this occasion, their time will come.

### **Prospects for socialism?**

But what about the prospects for socialism? This is a very difficult question indeed. Without going into detail, it seems that the economic reforms in China are likely to give rise to new economically privileged classes who will demand a political voice, but who will not necessarily favour socialism. The interests of the workers therefore need to be defended, and this can only be ensured by an independent trade union movement.

It is clear that neither a political party alone, nor a party together with the help of Party-controlled unions, can guarantee the interests of workers. An independent union is currently in the making but it is very small and has no power. There have been no demands for an independent movement along the lines of Solidarity in Poland. I am, however, certain that it will not be long in coming. (12.6.89) ☆