

Student protest exposes rift in Chinese regime

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Details have surfaced this month of how a large but localised protest by university students in the city of Hefei in early January led to a bitter factional conflict in the upper echelons of the Chinese bureaucracy over the handling of social discontent.

The demonstration by some 12,000 students from the Hefei Industrial University was reported by the Hong Kong press at the time. The students marched on the city government buildings on January 7 to protest against the police response to a traffic accident the day before. Two female students were killed and another seriously injured when they were hit by a truck.

While witnesses alleged the truck had run a red light, the authorities claimed that the students—not the driver—were responsible for the accident. They told the grieving friends of the dead students there would be no charges and no investigation. None of the reports indicated that the protest consisted of anything more than a passionate denunciation of the callousness of officials.

The response from Beijing, however, was anything but ordinary. While the typical attitude of the central government to protests is to ignore them or order their suppression, Hu Jintao, the newly installed secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the man slated to be elected China's president during the March National Peoples Congress (NPC), voiced sympathy for the Hefei students.

In a meeting on January 7 Hu moved for the publication of an appeal in the central daily bulletin of the CCP Central Office, urging the Anhui government to enter into dialogue with the students and “restore social order”. He called for an investigation of the accident and the prosecution of the truck driver “according to the law”.

According to the February issue of Hong Kong-based magazine *Cheng Ming*, Hu's move immediately provoked opposition from the retiring leader, President Jiang Zemin. The magazine reported that Zemin attacked Hu's actions at an expanded meeting of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee on the evening of January 8, saying it would encourage further protests and threaten the

regime with a repeat of the mass anti-government demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in May-June 1989.

Jiang reportedly declared that “some CCP leaders” had failed to “assimilate both the positive and negative experiences of the political events of students and youth in 1987 and 1989.” He warned: “No-one can guarantee that one day, morning or night there won't be thousands or even millions of students and teachers taking to the streets to protest and storming provincial governments and even *Zhongnanhai* [the regime's leadership buildings in Beijing] with other youth. The government will be disabled and the society will fall into chaos and turmoil.”

Jiang went on to accuse the Young Communist League (YCL)—a major base of support of Hu Jintao—of bearing the “major responsibility” for students taking to streets. To substantiate his charge that the YCL was tolerating and encouraging discontent against government officials, he declared there had been more than 1,300 illegal protests and gatherings by student and YCL organisations in 2002 and over 2,000 unauthorised political meetings on campuses.

According to *Cheng Ming*, Jiang made an unsuccessful attempt to convince the Standing Committee that the party should denounce the “illegal” actions of the Hefei students in an editorial in the main state organ, the *Peoples Daily*. But Jiang failed to get the numbers—in part because the protest had already ended without incident.

The rift between Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin over the Hefei protest is indicative of broader tensions within the Stalinist bureaucracy in the face of widespread alienation and hostility, particularly over the impact of its economic restructuring policies. The number of demonstrations by workers, small farmers and others has escalated dramatically in recent months.

Recognising the isolation of the regime, the bulk of the CCP supported the change to the constitution at last year's 16th Congress to allow owners of businesses and property to join the ruling party. Beijing is attempting both to legitimise a political role for the emerging Chinese capitalist class and to create a social base for the regime

among sections of the middle class. Hu wants to go further and is proposing political reforms which Jiang Zemin and other members of the “old guard” fear could lead to protests that rapidly get out of hand.

In May 1989, then party secretary Zhao Ziyang sought to dissipate the student protests by making concessions to their demands for greater press freedom and a curb on state corruption. While Zhao won support from the students, his actions encouraged hundreds of thousands of Beijing workers and poor to join the protests with their social demands. With the student occupation of Tiananmen Square threatening to become the focus of a working class movement, Deng Xiaoping, backed by Jiang Zemin and Li Peng, placed Zhao under house arrest and ordered the military to crack down on the protesters.

Throughout the 1990s, the leadership formed in 1989 under Jiang and Li based its rule on the premise that any tolerance of discontent could re-ignite a mass movement. Any organised opposition has been met with systematic repression. Dissidents, who formed the China Democracy Party in 1998, were subjected to arrests and draconian prison sentences, while the semi-religious organisation Falun Gong was suppressed for organising protests against media accusations it was a cult.

While Jiang argues that any shift to a policy of concessions will stimulate unrest, his factional opponents are arguing the opposite: that the decade-long policy of intimidation and repression has created such alienation the regime’s very survival is in question. According to the November issue of *Trend* magazine, former Chinese defense minister Zhang Aiping appealed to Hu Jintao to make “reform” the axis of the new leadership or the CCP was headed for a “death alley”.

If correct, the *Cheng Ming* report is a further indication that the push for political reform is currently gaining ground in the Stalinist hierarchy. The factional tensions are likely to intensify in the final weeks before the 2003 National Peoples Congress on March 5, at which Jiang Zemin and Li Peng are both slated to resign from their official government positions.

China in 2003 is not the same as 1989. The last decade has seen a further erosion of political support for the CCP, combined with a massive growth in the social weight of the working class. China’s cities have grown in population by over 150 million, with large sections of the rural peasantry being transformed into industrial workers in the coastal free trade zones. If and when they erupt, the movement will dwarf the Tiananmen Square protests.

According to Wang Dan, a student leader in 1989 and

now a dissident commentator on Chinese politics, preparations are well advanced to present the new leadership around Hu Jintao as a reformist break with the Jiang-Li Peng years. In a column in the *Taipei Times* in January, Wang wrote: “Rumours have emanated from Beijing political circles that a group of people who originally followed Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang may gradually be allowed back into the system... Everyone is talking loudly about theoretical and systemic innovation, while debate about political reform is also becoming gradually more vibrant.”

The differences within the regime, however, are entirely tactical. The rival factions share the common perspective of defending a privileged and corrupt ruling elite. Both are committed to protecting the interests of the major transnationals and the new Chinese capitalist class who have profited from China’s opening up to foreign investment in 1990s and the transformation of tens of millions of Chinese into super-exploited labour for the world market.

While Hu Jintao is prepared to exploit the grievances of students in Hefei to factionalise against his opponents, the so-called “reformers” will have no hesitation about resorting to repression when the position of the ruling strata is directly threatened from below. The fact that a relatively minor protest has become a point of debate within the top party leadership, is an indication of just how nervous all factions are about the potential for a social explosion.



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