

Beijing on heightened alert after the death of Zhao Ziyang

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The death of former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary Zhao Ziyang on January 17 has generated a tense and potentially explosive political atmosphere in Beijing.

The disgraced Zhao, aged 85, was closely identified with the mass protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Authorities fear that his death could become the focus for widespread discontent and demands for democratic rights and decent living standards. In fact, the events of 1989 were triggered by public mourning over the death of former party secretary Hu Yaobang in April of that year.

The Chinese leadership has been so nervous about Zhao's death that he "died" several times during the past two years, after the government leaked false news to test public reaction. Last week top CCP leaders held a series of emergency meetings to decide how to respond to Zhao's actual death. No such reaction occurred when another senior party elder, Song Renqiong, died on January 8.

According to the Hong Kong-based *Oriental Daily*, President Hu Jintao has established a special taskforce, headed by himself and state security chief Luo Gang, that has assumed direct control of the police and paramilitary police units. Concerned that the lead-up to the Chinese New Year could be a "highly sensitive period", Beijing has urged university students and millions of rural immigrant workers to leave major cities and return home early for the holiday. Local governments have been told to prevent any public mourning for Zhao.

News of Zhao's death has been heavily censored. The official Xinhua news agency wrote two short paragraphs noting that "Comrade Zhao Ziyang" had died from respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. There was no mention of his background or record. Authorities shut down a number of Internet bulletin boards. The *Washington Post* reported on January 18: "On the Internet, especially on college bulletin boards, users posted hundreds, if not thousands, of notes of sorrow, only to watch as censors deleted most of them quickly."

Well-known dissidents, particularly those who played a role in the 1989 protests, have been placed under strict police surveillance. Some have had their telephone lines cut off.

Zhao's protégé Bao Tong, who was also purged in 1989, was reportedly prevented from leaving his bedroom or visiting Zhao's home. According to Radio Free Asia, the security agents told him: "You cannot go out the door. This is the order from top." As part of an obituary to Zhao, Bao declared that the leadership's isolation of Zhao "only served to reveal their weakness and their shamelessness".

A large contingent of police has been stationed outside Zhao's home. Initially even friends and relatives required official permission to pay their respects. Since authorities eased restrictions on January 19, at least 3,000 people, including laid-off workers, students and

farmers, have visited the house. Since then, however, security officials have again imposed strict limits, provoking clashes with mourners.

According to a report by Human Rights in China, a number of small ceremonies to pay tribute to Zhao took place in private homes in Beijing on the day of his death. In Shanghai, a group of 700-800 protesters outside a joint session of the Political Consultative Conference and People's Congress in Shanghai spontaneously expressed their sympathy for Zhao. A thousand police were sent to break up the demonstration.

An extra 1,000 police have been deployed in Tiananmen Square to prevent any public grieving or protests. Security further tightened in a number of Chinese cities last weekend following attempts to hold public demonstrations to mark Zhao's death. In Beijing, Zhao Xin, a former student leader in the 1989 protests, was arrested for organising a rally of 5,000 people on Sunday.

Beijing is caught in a dilemma. If it permits even limited public mourning, such gatherings could take on a life of their own and spiral out of control. But if it cracks down on all expressions of sympathy for Zhao, it could face a backlash.

In order to put on an official show of mourning, the leadership has decided to hold a "farewell ceremony" at Beijing's Babao Hill—the burial site for China's senior leaders. In another token action, Vice President Zeng Qinghong and several other leaders reportedly rushed to see Zhao in his last minutes.

Even the "farewell ceremony" is creating political difficulties. No date has yet been decided and, more importantly, the present Chinese leaders have yet to decide what to say about Zhao. Any reference to his opposition to the bloody military crackdown of the 1989 threatens to trigger public debate and open up simmering divisions within the ruling party itself.

At least 20 party veterans have demanded a full state funeral for Zhao. Members of his family have told the media that they disagree with Chinese leadership's assessment that Zhao made a "serious mistake" in 1989. They have warned that they will not cooperate with Beijing if this judgement is included in official statements.

The crisis surrounding Zhao's death highlights the fact that the Stalinist bureaucracy has resolved none of the issues raised by the events of 1989. The massive inflow of investment into China over the past decade and a half has only deepened the social polarisation between rich and poor, and heightened the contradictions that lay behind the protests. The social base of the ruling apparatus, particularly among the peasantry, has further eroded and its political position is even more fragile.

Beijing confronts the same predicament as in 1989: how to prevent a social explosion and preserve its rule? Zhao argued that it was

necessary to create a new social base of support for the regime by intensifying market restructuring and granting limited democratic reforms to woo the new middle class. Deng Xiaoping and the hardliners who ordered the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square pointed out that Zhao's encouragement of student demonstrators had only opened the door for protests by the working class and the rural poor—whose demands for jobs and decent living standards could not be accommodated.

It was at the point when large contingents of workers began to join the Tiananmen Square protests that Zhao and his supporters were purged in May 1989. They continued to express sympathy for the students' demands for political reforms and opposed the use of the military against the demonstrators. As a result, Zhao is broadly regarded as a symbol of the Tiananmen Square movement. For the past 15 years, he has been kept under house arrest and completely isolated.

In the aftermath of the crackdown, a central leadership report blamed Zhao for the events, declaring: "Comrade Zhao Ziyang committed the serious mistake of supporting the turmoil and splitting the party. He had the unshakeable responsibility for the shaping and development of turmoil." While the Chinese leadership no longer describes the 1989 protests as a "counterrevolutionary rebellion", its assessment remains unchanged.

Andrew Nathan, co-editor of *Tiananmen Papers*—a compilation of internal CCP documents on the events of 1989—told the BBC last week: "I know that China has changed a great deal, and it's not the China of 1989. But a lot of those changes have brought in new elements of social tension, new groups of dissatisfied people in society. So as a symbol, Zhao still stands for the downtrodden, for the idea of justice that applies to new social issues. And so as a symbol, he could still be dangerous."

Underscoring the dangers confronting Beijing, a statement circulated on the Internet last week, calling for liberal intellectuals, banned Falun Gong members, unemployed workers and landless farmers and "all those who suffered injustices under the politically corrupt regime as well as foreigners concerned about China's political fate" to rally in Tiananmen Square.

"Mr. Zhao Ziyang's house arrest has been the most humiliating 15 years in China... In the last 15 years, the stains of blood of June 4 have not dried. Repression against religion is intensifying and human rights disasters have frequently occurred. People's living standards are deteriorating. Protests are rising everywhere and the government is increasingly fascist."

In contrast to the sentiment among many students in 1989, this statement placed no faith in the self-reform of the current or future Chinese leadership, and called instead for "practical action". Recalling some of the more revolutionary rhetoric of 1989, it declared: "Let Beijing prepare more police and prisons for that day. We will return to where we should go and bring down the Bastille."

Zhao was never sympathetic to the overthrow of the Stalinist bureaucracy. His political disagreements, while significant, were of a purely tactical character. He encouraged student protests and sympathised with their demands for reform as a means of putting pressure on the leadership to accelerate the process of economic restructuring. But like the rest of leadership, he recognised the dangers posed by the workers and the poor when they began to intervene in 1989. After his ousting, Zhao made no appeal to these social layers and quietly accepted his removal from office.

It is not surprising therefore that Zhao has over the past week been

hailed in Western capitals and in the international media as "China's Gorbachev" in appreciation of his leading role in reintroducing market relations in China. White House press secretary Scott McClellan, for example, declared Zhao to be "a man of moral courage" and "a key architect of China's open door economic policies..."

Much of China's economic program rests on the foundations laid by Zhao in the early 1980s when he deregulated collective agriculture, dismantled state planning and established "special economic zones" in coastal China to attract foreign investment. The worsening social inequality, inflation and official corruption that were behind the 1989 unrest were the direct products of Zhao's policies.

Moreover, while much attention is paid to Zhao's role in 1989, his responsibility for previous crackdowns against ethnic minorities is largely forgotten. In May 1985, Zhao ordered the suppression of a student movement for democratic rights among the Ughur Muslim minority in Xinjiang province. He authorised another round of repression in June 1988, against a second wave of student protests in Xinjiang. A month later, Zhao presided over a crackdown on protesters in Tibet in which hundreds were killed and thousands jailed. At the time, China's current President Hu Jintao was provincial party boss in Tibet.

Significantly, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, the party leadership as a whole continued to pursue the policies of market reform that Zhao had championed. In fact, the willingness of Beijing to suppress any opposition, particularly that of the working class, sent a powerful signal to international capital that China was open for business. Billions of dollars of foreign investment has flooded into China to exploit the country's cheap, regimented labour. Wholesale privatisation has taken place and, in 2002, the so-called Communist Party formally opened its doors for capitalist entrepreneurs to join.

All of these are policies that Zhao would have readily agreed with. In the final analysis, he shared the same material and political interests as the so-called Chinese hardliners, in defending a privileged bureaucracy and the new capitalist elite that they all spawned.



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