

Chinese leadership plans to honour ousted party “reformer”

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The General Office of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee issued a plan last month to officially mark the 90th anniversary of the birth of former party secretary Hu Yaobang on November 20.

The announcement is significant, as Hu has been deliberately kept out of the spotlight for more than a decade and half. The fact that Hu is now going to be feted as an honoured party leader is connected to the continuing political predicament confronting the current Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing over the massacre of students and workers in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.

Hu was the CCP general secretary from 1981 to 1987 and an advocate of limited political liberalisation. His death in April 1989 was one of the initial reasons why students gathered in Tiananmen Square. To justify the bloody crackdown that followed, the CCP bureaucrats still officially describe the protests for democratic rights as “counterrevolution riots” or “political turmoil”.

As in 1989, the CCP leadership rests on a very narrow social base and, under President Hu Jintao, is seeking to broaden its appeal to layers of the middle class. To do so, however, it has to lay to rest the resentment, hostility and anger generated by the events in Tiananmen Square. The move to pay respect to the memory of Hu Yaobang is a tentative step in that direction.

Ceremonies will be held in Beijing at the Great Hall of People as well as in Hu’s hometown in Henan province and in Jiangxi province, where he is buried. An official biography and his “collected works” will also be published. Hu Dezi, the late leader’s nephew, has confirmed that the local authorities in Hunan province have received instructions from Beijing to build a memorial park for Hu Yaobang, including a statue, a public square and an exhibition hall.

An unnamed Communist Party official told the *Washington Post* that the leadership was not prepared to renounce its position on the events in 1989, but Hu’s rehabilitation was a sign of change. “If the party can change its position on Hu Yaobang, it can change its position on

June 4 and on political reform,” he said. The CCP is not about to admit its crimes, but it is trying to soften its image.

Hu Yaobang was a protégé of the late “paramount” leader Deng Xiaoping and played a key role in bringing Deng to power after Mao Zedong’s death in 1976. By organising a campaign to criticise Mao’s devastating “Cultural Revolution” in 1960s and 1970s, Hu paved the way for the rehabilitation of Deng, the turn to market reform and an “open door” policy to foreign capital.

In the early 1980s, Hu went further. He encouraged criticism of the party’s autocratic rule, and won support among a layer of middle class intellectuals who wanted a greater political role. Hu was purged by Deng in 1987 when this policy led to a wave of student protests that questioned the party’s ruling legitimacy.

Deng was concerned that the regime could face a challenge from below if political control was loosened. His policies had already led to the dismantling of collectivised agriculture and the deregulation of state-run industries had produced growing unemployment. These processes led to deepening social polarisation as the families of Chinese leaders began profiteering and generated widespread resentment.

Hu’s death in April 1989 confirmed Deng’s fear. Beijing students mourned Hu’s death and organised a rally that was initially pro-government and limited to protests against official corruption. These demands began to broaden to include calls for democratic rights. Hu’s successor as party secretary, Zhao Ziyang, attempted to end the growing demonstration in Tiananmen Square with proposals for limited political reforms aimed primarily at reducing the role of the state bureaucracy, encouraging private enterprise and enlisting the support of layers of the middle class.

As the protest continued, hundreds of thousands of workers in Beijing and other cities joined and raised their own demands against rampant inflation, growing unemployment and social inequality. Terrified by the prospect of a working class revolt, Deng ordered troops to move into Beijing and suppress the protests, killing hundreds

if not thousands of people.

Zhao Ziyang was purged and placed under house arrest for encouraging the “political turmoil”. Party elders and army generals installed Jiang Zemin in place of Zhao. Throughout 1990s, Jiang made no concessions on democratic rights and responded to any sign of unrest, particularly by workers, with ruthless repression. Anyone who questioned the official version of events in June 1989 was immediately under suspicion and faced police measures.

Every year the Chinese leadership has responded to the June 4 anniversary with great nervousness. The state-controlled media censor any reference to the massacre, the security forces are mobilised and known political dissidents placed under police surveillance. This year Chinese authorities again flooded Tiananmen Square with police and plainclothes agents to ensure no protests took place.

The death of Zhao Ziyang earlier this year triggered a considerable political crisis in Beijing. The Chinese authorities feared that any public commemoration for Zhao could become the focus for a renewed outpouring of mass discontent (see “Beijing on heightened alert after the death of Zhao Ziyang”).

In 1989, Western leaders and media denounced the Tiananmen massacre as a crime of “communism” against democracy, while Beijing maintained it had been forced to act to defend the “socialist system.” Today, these cynical claims are transparently absurd.

Before their crocodile tears were even dry, international investors began pouring billions of dollars into China, recognising that Beijing was prepared to take the most extreme measures to suppress any political opposition, particularly by workers. The Stalinist bureaucracy responded by accelerating its agenda of free market reform, on a scale not witnessed in the 1980s.

The OECD’s first economic survey of China released on September 16 enthusiastically hailed China’s “big results” in market restructuring. It pointed out that the private sector now generates 57 to 65 percent of China’s non-agricultural GDP. Between 1998 and 2003, the output of private companies increased five-fold and of foreign enterprises three-fold. By contrast, between 1995 and 2005, some 150,000 state-controlled enterprises, or half of the total, were shut down or privatised. Since 1998, 16 million workers have been turned out of work.

Behind China’s so-called “miracle”, tens of millions of Chinese workers labour in atrocious conditions for subsistence wages. The size of the working class is being continuously augmented by millions of peasants who are compelled to migrate to cities by heavy taxation, poverty or landlessness to look for work. Poverty, unemployment and anger over the corrupt and repressive bureaucracy fuel a

growing number of protests, which, while isolated, can involve tens of thousands of people.

A study by China’s Ministry of Labour and Social Security warned last month that if no effective measures were taken to curb the disparity between rich and poor and between urban and rural areas, social tensions could reach a “red light” level in 2010 and threaten political stability. While Beijing would not hesitate to use political repression, the new leadership under President Hu Jintao is seeking to establish new political mechanisms to prop up its rule.

Sections of the Beijing bureaucracy are seeking to revive the program of “political reform” promoted by Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang in 1980s. The aim is not to provide genuine democratic rights but to enlist the support of the better-off layers of China’s new middle classes to offset the opposition of the working class and urban and rural poor.

Political dissidents have long warned of the dangers if such a strategy is not implemented. A comment in the September issue of *Cheng Ming*, a Hong Kong-based journal for the overseas “democracy movement”, urged Beijing to transform class conflict into “parliamentary struggles”. Only such a reform can “eliminate large-scale turmoil and violence, and avoid revolution and civil war,” it warned.

Before he came to power in 2002, Hu Jintao endorsed discussions among the intelligentsia on subjects related to “democratic” reform. At a news conference on September 5, Premier Wen Jiabao promised that elections, now confined to the village-level, should expand to townships in the next several years. The plan to rehabilitate Hu Yaobang is another tentative step in the same direction—to try to bury the issue of the Tiananmen Square massacre and implement cosmetic political reforms in an effort to head off future social explosions.



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