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China: Looking back on the 1989 democracy movement and the Tiananmen Square massacre

Tuesday 16 June 2009, by [LIANG Guosheng](#) (Date first published: 26 June 1996).

To mark the 20th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* reproduces an excerpt from an analysis by an eyewitness to the 1989 democratic upsurge that preceded the brutal attack. The writer was an Australian socialist who was studying in China at the time. It first appeared in *Green Left Weekly* on June 26, 1996.

On June 4, 1989, troops, armoured personnel carriers and tanks of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) forced their way through human and constructed barricades into central Beijing, taking control of Tiananmen Square. In the process, according to an estimate by Amnesty International soon afterwards, approximately 1000 unarmed protesters were gunned down or otherwise killed.

Numerous eyewitness accounts confirmed the extent of the massacre. The dead were students and other Beijing workers and residents who had gathered the previous evening to protest against the PLA's forced entry into central Beijing and the square, which on May 20, 1989, China's Premier Li Peng had declared a martial law district.

Since the massacre more eyewitness interviews, analytical articles and quite a range of books have been published concerned with what has come to be termed the 1989 Democracy Movement and Beijing massacre. More recent works have also covered the ensuing government crackdown and the fate of those protesters captured by the government, executed or imprisoned.

In the main, parties historically influenced by Stalinism quickly lined up either to defend the "crackdown" against the "counter-revolutionaries" in the square (declaring: "the protesters were CIA dupes"). Others grappled with the problem of how, in the light of quickly mounting evidence, to present a wait-and-see attitude ("how can we trust the Western media's reporting?").

Alternatively, papers produced by far-left organisations in the West correctly identified the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as bearing direct responsibility for the massacre. However, they by and large failed to distinguish between the lower to middle echelons of the party and the factionalised leadership at its apex. In Beijing, at least, vast numbers of party members overtly and covertly supported or helped lead the movement.

Just one example: at several protest marches in late May 1989, even after Premier Li Peng's declaration of martial law, journalists from a large number of newspapers marched along the Boulevard of Heavenly Peace to the square. Prominent was a contingent from the party's main official organ, the People's Daily — with many of the staff being CCP cadre. On the whole, party members were easily identified — many wore their party badges at the demonstrations.

During those spring months in Beijing, the movement drew support and leadership from groups and activists who, at least prior to the massacre, were far more concerned with what they saw as an opportunity to “reform” the CCP than with its overthrow.

The students, and those whom their actions inspired, including impressive contingents of workers, were united by a range of key demands. Generally these called for the official political rehabilitation of then recently deceased CCP former Secretary-General Hu Yaobang; measures to rid the CCP of corruption, especially the flagrant abuses at its higher levels; the introduction of government transparency and official accountability; measures to increase the democratic rights of students and citizens; the freeing up of academic life and improved study conditions for students together with increases in pay for academics. A call for increased freedom of the press was high on the list following the banning of several prominent newly founded popular newspapers and magazines.

In particular, the students demanded the official reversal of a People’s Daily editorial in April which had denounced the student movement as “a small handful of people” misled by counter-revolutionary elements. The day after the editorial was published, students from across Beijing spilled out of their campuses in unprecedented numbers to hold a well-organised peaceful protest march. That day many observers had spotted a sign in the middle of the sea of protesters on which was written, “A Small Handful”.

A call for anti-inflation measures was also high on the list. Inflation had raged in the urban centres during the late 1980s, but the party/state leadership had shown little capacity to deal with it. By late May 1989 the post-Cultural Revolution “honeymoon” of Deng Xiaoping was well and truly over. Deng’s toppling of two all-but-anointed party successors in a row, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, ensured his own increasing vilification by many as the country’s “new emperor”.

The Democracy Movement was, up until June 4, more a move for “democratisation”. The push for “democratisation” leaned significantly, for political and ideological sustenance, on what was viewed, especially by Chinese students, as a contemporary trend to democratise the state and party in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev.

The mistake, intentional or otherwise, of many foreign journalists who had flown in for the Gorbachev visit during April and had stayed on to cover the events in the square, was to assume that “democratisation” implied a general desire of the students to embrace Western bourgeois-democratic models within the context of a capitalist system. In reality, few students at the time had more than a very hazy theoretical notion of “bourgeois democracy”. Many felt that, given China’s poverty and other problems, transplanted “bourgeois-democratic models” were not appropriate.

The construction of the Goddess of Democracy statue in the square by students from a Beijing Arts College days before June 4 was sufficient to drive most remaining journalistic sobriety out the window. The resemblance to the US Statue of Liberty was striking. Any possibility of multiple interpretations of this act was sidelined as the journalists and editors, collective tears in eyes, packaged those students’ action as equivalent to having erected a giant apple pie or even a McDonald’s burger with the lot.

With hindsight, the movement and subsequent massacre and crackdown in Beijing possessed far more in common with earlier democracy movements in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), and their outcomes under Stalinism, than with a general urge to adopt a US bourgeois “democratic” system. Few at that time were willing to swap the dictatorship of the Stalinist CCP for an outright “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie”.

However, it would be utopian to suggest that after June 4, 1989, many people in Beijing would have

felt that “socialism” in China could still be reformed towards an anti-Stalinist model.

Immediately after Premier Li Peng’s declaration of martial law on May 20, there was a definite “get stuffed” attitude by the people towards the party leadership. The population of the capital, with a voluntary unity unprecedented in recent times, declared by their words and actions that they had had quite enough of decades of dictatorial high-handedness and factional stupidities. This was expressed in the spontaneous massive mobilisation, lasting several weeks, of human barricades to stop the PLA entering central Beijing.

A key difference from Hungary ’56 and Czechoslovakia ’68 was that in 1989 the Chinese democracy movement was not crushed by Soviet tanks, but by PLA ones.

Many Western leaders were politically “king hit” by the scenes of tanks rolling through the square.

Along with many Chinese, they had admired “Deng the political survivor”, and enthusiastically followed his leadership as the Chinese people struggled to free themselves from the horrors and stupidities of the CCP-imposed Cultural Revolution.

Meanwhile, the arrival of each anniversary of the massacre continues to worry the CCP leadership. In the lead-up, dissidents continue to be arrested as a matter of course. The government’s crackdowns in Tibet and Xinjiang serve as a reminder that placards for Tibetan independence were amongst those held high in the pro-democratisation rallies of 1989.

As for Tiananmen Square, since 1989 the government has been keen to maintain it as a centre for rallies only in support of the party leadership. Not long after 1989, the Beijing authorities erected a “Notice for Visiting the Monument to the People’s Heroes” on a lower tier at this shrine at the centre of the square.

Learning the lesson that even individual expressions of grief for “revolutionary martyrs” can be the catalyst for mass anti-government protests, the authorities have stipulated: “Any commemorative activities at the Monument must be authorised by the Beijing Municipal Government or the Tiananmen Square Administrative Committee”, and “Presenting wreaths, baskets of flowers, garlands and small flowers to the Monument must be approved by the Tiananmen Square Administrative Committee. Registrations of formalities should be made 5 days ahead.” It would be hard to invent a more “perfect” bureaucratic solution to public spontaneity.

The Chinese economy is booming, but only for some. Hardly rating a mention has been the trend to rapidly increasing social disparity, dislocation of the rural and urban poor, the massive and continuous rise in official corruption, the arrests of struggling workers and repression of “illegal” worker organisations, the jailing of political dissidents, the special repressive measures within “ethnic minority areas” such as Tibet and Xinjiang — policies that are also encouraged by the investment interests of both Western imperialism and south-east Asian capitalism.

It’s a sign the government still fears the next of the mass movements, which, as far as China’s bureaucratic leaders are concerned, have a habit of resurfacing with disturbing regularity.

P.S.

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