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Upheaval in China; CHANGES AT TOP ARE HINTED AS LEADERS MEET IN BEIJING; SOME TROOPS BEGIN TO LEAVE

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF MAY 24, 1989

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As hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in Beijing and Shanghai for the ouster of Prime Minister Li Peng, China's top leaders met in secret in the capital on Tuesday and appeared to make significant progress in breaking the political deadlock.

Early this morning, there were signs that Zhao Ziyang, the Communist Party leader, who was stripped of his powers late last week after he urged a moderate line toward students demonstrating for democracy, might be making a comeback.

There were also hints in official news reports that Mr. Li might be in political trouble, and military troops began to withdraw from some of their positions in the capital. Zhao Gets Good Press

The most striking sign of a change in the power struggle came early this morning when news organizations for the first time in several days referred to Mr. Zhao and identified him as still being the General Secretary of the Communist Party.

Until the brief report this morning by the Government-run New China News Agency, Mr. Zhao had not been mentioned in newspapers or news broadcasts since Saturday morning.

The agency also distributed an article that seemed critical of Prime Minister Li, including an account of the throngs of demonstrators who filled the streets of downtown Beijing to demand more democracy and less of Mr. Li. Li's Propaganda Move

The article said the march attracted a million people - almost certainly an exaggeration - and it added that the "overwhelming majority of the slogans" were directed against Prime Minister Li.

"Since Premier Li Peng declared the imposition of martial law in some areas of Beijing last Saturday, people took to the street every day," the article added in what appeared to be another jab at the Prime Minister.

The criticisms suggested that Mr. Li's shuffle of party officials responsible for propaganda on Monday had not produced the desired results.

A Chinese journalist with good contacts among senior officials said early today that the Politburo met on Tuesday and restored the powers of party leader to Mr. Zhao. The journalist said that Prime Minister Li might be obliged to step down before long, and that pressure was also being applied to President Yang Shangkun.

Other Chinese confirmed that the Politburo had met, but they said they did not know the results of the meeting.

Since there never was any announcement that Mr. Zhao's powers were taken away, it was not clear whether there would be any announcement that they had been restored.

It was also uncertain what if anything the changes would do to the authority of China's senior leader, Deng Xiaoping. Mr. Deng's prestige has waned in recent weeks as a result of the political crisis, but the 84-year-old leader still dominates the party after more than a decade at the helm. Martial Law Declaration

China has been in turmoil and without any effective central Government since Prime Minister Li and President Yang summoned army troops to the capital on Saturday morning to suppress the nation's democracy movement.

Martial law was subsequently declared in parts of Beijing, but an extraordinary outpouring of ordinary citizens blocked troops from entering the capital. The citizens demonstrated for democracy as well as for the resignation of Mr. Li.

All the nation's top leaders then disappeared from view, and Mr. Zhao was said by party officials to have been stripped of his powers while left with his empty title. It has not been clear who, if anyone, has been in control.

"As far as I can see, there's no government," an Asian diplomat said on

Tuesday. "There's just no government." Drama and Some Farce

There was high drama and some farce in the spectacle of much of the world waiting in fascination for the results of a meeting that has not even been publicly announced, perhaps restoring power to a man whose job was never acknowledged to be in doubt. Rumors flew furiously around the capital and across the Pacific during the night as people tried to confirm the tidings.

"Can you confirm it?" a journalist from the Communist Party's newspaper, People's Daily, asked an American newspaper correspondent this morning about the Zhao report.

To add to the mystery, the head of the National People's Congress, Wan Li, cut short his trip to the United States.

Mr. Wan's return is significant because some opponents of Prime Minister Li are hoping to call an emergency meeting of the standing committee of the National People's Congress to veto the declaration of martial law. Some even hope to summon an emergency meeting of the full National People's Congress to try and force Mr. Li from his post as Prime Minister. Five Weeks of Unrest

If these indications are correct, the reversal would be a remarkable triumph for a pro-democracy movement that began just five weeks ago with a few posters pasted on the walls of Beijing University. Those humble posters have led to the greatest expressions of political unrest in 40 years of Chinese Communist rule, and seem to have forced the Government to halt a crackdown on the democracy movement.

If Mr. Zhao, a 69-year-old proponent of greater economic and political change, is restored to power, he is likely to enjoy a mandate for further change that could lead to a major restructuring of Chinese society.

Mildly unpopular just a week ago, Mr. Zhao has already become a hero after having been forced from power following his moderate line toward student demonstrators. Square Is Festive

On Tiananmen Square, in the center of the capital, where tens of thousands of increasingly weary students from all over the nation are holding a sit-in to demand more democracy, the atmosphere was festive in the early morning as rumors spread that Mr. Li had resigned.

"There will be good news!" students cheered. "Li Peng has resigned!" But the students have often reported mistaken rumors in the past, and in the last week there have been false reports that each of the top three leaders - Mr. Deng, Mr.

Zhao and Mr. Li - have resigned.

For all the flurry of rumors and news reports, it was not yet clear whether Mr. Zhao was back or whether Mr. Li would soon be out. While many foreign diplomats seem to think that Mr. Li has been fatally hurt by his apparent inability to put martial law into effect, some Chinese officials seem to think that the stalemate could continue almost indefinitely. Bus Service Returns

Beijing seemed to be returning to normal a bit on Tuesday, as some bus service returned and darkness fell for the first time since Friday night without any major expectation of a violent crackdown by army units on the students in Tiananmen Square. Citizens continued to turn out at dusk to guard the students and to keep a watch out for troops on local intersections, but the knot of fear has disappeared.

Army troops retreated on Tuesday from some of their positions at intersections on the outskirts of the capital. They had been pinned down for several days by thousands of students and workers who lay down in front of their trucks and built barriers to block their passage.

Some army troops were unable to retreat because they were surrounded by citizens who refused to let them advance or retreat. Workers said the soldiers might pretend to retreat, and then come back by a different route.

One convoy of army trucks in northwestern Beijing took advantage of a sudden rain this afternoon to make an undignified dash toward a nearby army hospital, where the soldiers found refuge from the crowds.

Soldiers remained at People's Daily, where they had been sent shortly after the declaration of martial law. But the soldiers there have experienced firsthand the lack of hospitality even from other Government agencies. The People's Armed Police has a nearby barracks, but it refused to allow the soldiers permission to use it, leaving the troops to sleep in a nearby auditorium, a reporter for the newspaper said. Intellectuals Join In

The huge demonstration in the capital on Tuesday was organized by intellectuals, including many from the Government-affiliated Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Many accused Mr. Li of staging a military coup to succeed in his power struggle with Mr. Zhao.

Among the organizations whose workers took part in the rally were the Foreign Ministry, the Communist Party Central Committee agricultural policy research office, and the pro-Communist "democratic parties" that China allows instead of an opposition.

In Shanghai, half a million or more people demonstrated, Chinese journalists from Shanghai said. They said most carried banners or chanted slogans criticizing Mr. Li, as well as Shanghai's own Communist Party leader, Jiang Zemin. Mr. Jiang and Mr. Li have been allied against Mr. Zhao, and Mr. Jiang's political career is now believed to be facing some difficulties. Protests in Canton

A major demonstration was also held in Canton, where Reuters reported that hundreds of thousands of students, workers and journalists marched to demand democracy. The police declined to give a firm crowd estimate.

The protesters in Canton were said to include hundreds of sympathizers from the British colony of Hong Kong, and the nearby Portuguese enclave of Macao, who had crossed the border to take part. Hong Kong is to revert to Chinese rule in 1997 and Macao in 1999.

"As long as Li Peng retains his post," demonstrators chanted in the Beijing demonstration, "we will come every day! Until Li Peng commits suicide by hanging, we will not sleep!"

That was meant to be humorous, as was the chant, "If Li Peng keeps his post, we will divide ourselves into three shifts" to maintain round-the-clock demonstrations.

In an allusion to a famous saying of Mr. Deng - "It doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, so long as it catches mice" - some demonstrators carried a banner reading, "Whether he is a black cat or a white cat, Li Peng isn't a good cat." The TimesMachine article viewer is included with your New York Times subscription.

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