

Profile

Deng Xiaoping



The crushing of the Chinese student democracy movement in June is not the first example of Deng Xiaoping's hostility to student-led movements.

During China's Cultural Revolution (1966-69), he was accused of suppression of revolutionary students at Beijing University, and of suppression of the mass movement through the use of centrally controlled 'work groups' whose function was the containment of the movement within limits acceptable to the party hierarchy.

He was also responsible for suppressing the Democracy Wall movement in 1978-79, as well as the Tiananmen massacre of June 4. The brutality of this latter incident has highlighted the need for a more critical evaluation of the history, policies and leadership style of Deng Xiaoping than has hitherto been very evident in left commentaries on China.

Deng was born in 1904 in Sichuan Province into a landowning family and, following his middle school studies, travelled to France in 1920 to participate in a work-and-study scheme for Chinese students. While in France he joined the Socialist Youth League (1922) and the Chinese Communist Party (1924), and in 1926 he returned to China via Moscow where he studied for several months at the Oriental University. Back in China he took up a post as instructor in the Political Department of the Xi'an Military and Political Academy established by the warlord Feng Yuxiang. With hindsight, one can perceive in this Deng's first official position in the Chinese revolution, a feature which characterised much of his subsequent career and coloured his response to questions of leadership and the party's relations with the masses; for

it was then, in 1926, that Deng's career began to fuse the military and political approaches to revolution and social change. Between 1926 and 1949, the positions held by Deng almost invariably involved both military and political functions: political commissar of the Seventh Red Army, 1929; chief-of-staff of the Third Army Corps, 1930; lecturer in party history at the Red Army Academy, 1933; Director of the Political Department of the First Army Corps during the Long March, 1934-35; and several political appointments within the army between 1936 and 1954.

Deng's pre-1949 career followed a pattern showing his rise to prominence as the party's man *inside* the military. His standing in both the party and military rose during the 1940s. He became a Party Central Committee member in 1945, and in 1949 one of three senior military and political leaders of the Southwest Military Region, a position which he was to use as a springboard to enter politics at a national level in the newly established People's Republic of China.

The Eighth Party Congress of September 1956 confirmed Deng's meteoric rise to power. At this congress he delivered the second most important report (after the political work report given by Liu Shaoqi), which dwelt on the importance of collective leadership and party discipline. As a result of this Congress, Deng became the sixth most powerful figure in Chinese politics, being elected to the Standing Committee of the Politburo and general secretary of the Central Committee. Be-

tween 1956 and his disgrace during the Cultural Revolution Deng also continued to occupy a very senior position in the military hierarchy, as vice-chair of the National Defence Council. In July 1977 he was appointed Chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army (a position he was to hold until 1980), and in 1981 and 1983 he was elected chair of the Military Commission and Central Military Commission respectively. While, during the 1980s, Deng has not occupied the most senior position within the party (indeed, in late 1987 he relinquished all high-ranking party posts), there is no doubt that he is the real power behind the throne, the arbiter of any major party decision.

Deng's dual career - military as well as political - goes some way to explaining the violent response of the Chinese leadership in crushing the recent democracy movement. For here we have a paramount leader who not only has consistently asserted the vanguard role of the party, but whose understanding of the role of leadership in social change has inevitably been coloured by his long association with the military, an organisation predisposed to perceiving the use of force as a means of resolving seemingly intractable social problems. It was thus to the man on horseback that Deng turned when the authority of the party and his own leadership were seriously challenged by the student democracy movement; and the extent to which the military responded is indicative of his long and deep association with it.

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