

In China, Protest Proves Easier Than Organization

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES MAY 1, 1989

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When thousands of cheering and banner-waving Qinghua University students left campus last week to join an enormous demonstration that crumpled police lines and forced the Government to agree to a discussion, they forgot one thing: their leaders.

Fearful of reprisals, Qinghua's student leaders had already resigned and declared that they would not take part. Only after the demonstrators marched down the street and attracted an enormous outpouring of popular enthusiasm did the leaders slink after the crowd and take up positions at the rear of the march.

The incident reflected the spontaneous, almost accidental nature of the students' pro-democracy movement, which is already hailed by many Chinese as having earned a major place in history by taking on the Government against all odds. 'Date Will Live in History'

"It was the first time in Chinese history that the ordinary people won a great victory," a journalist for an official newspaper said of last Thursday's march, in which 150,000 demonstrators were welcomed almost as a liberating army. "The date will live in history."

Less obvious but just as important, the students for the first time showed signs of a capacity for organization that could become a major challenge to the

Government. Chaos and ineptitude and rivalries are still the most striking features of their activities, but the shadow of an effective organization is emerging.

If it is not crushed, it could for the first time in four decades of Communist rule provide a coherent framework to muster sustained pressure on the Government for change. In other countries, non-Governmental organizations like the Catholic Church in Poland or the Shiite Muslim networks in pre-revolutionary Iran played essential roles in disseminating ideas and organizing opposition, but in China there was not even the hint of such an institution. Not Easy to Find Leaders

Without money, telephones, photocopiers or permission, the student movement in less than two weeks has succeeded in establishing a loose network of universities in Beijing and the nearby city of Tianjin, and it is trying to establish links with other universities. An inter-university committee has been established and its decisions seem to be generally respected by most of the city's students.

But in what may be a sign of the difficulties of creating their own leadership, Beijing University students today postponed an election intended to select a new group of student leaders. They said the election needed better planning and would be held soon.

Students there have already set up their own loudspeaker system to broadcast news and they are talking about starting a newspaper.

Posters are also a prime way to communicate ideas. Today, students at Beijing University and other campuses erected new posters criticizing the Government's televised discussion with student leaders, held on Saturday, as inadequate and superficial. Most students said they planned to continue their protests.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of the student movement has been to find assertive leaders who dare to command the ranks. The newly formed student organizations still have no presidents, only committees that are so large that they are ungainly, and many of the most talented students are afraid to take an official position in an organization that is branded illegal.

At Beijing University, for example, the organizing committee has 63 members. Daily operations are managed by a standing committee of five people elected by the full committee.

Aside from prison, there are other risks: the Government still assigns jobs to college graduates, so if a student is marked as a leader he might be assigned to a dreary job in a distant city from which he can never escape. The Young Are the Vanguard

When Wang Dan, a 20-year-old Beijing University history student who is the movement's best-known leader, was asked the other day what he planned to do after graduation, he laughed humorlessly. "My graduation itself is enough of a question mark," he said.

"But I believe that even if I am arrested and so unable to participate, there will be more and more people after me," added Mr. Wang, who appears to have been singled out by the Communist Party for attack in anonymous wall posters.

One of the consequences of this nervousness is that the student leaders are often relatively young and inexperienced. The natural leaders, those who are older and more respected among their peers, are apprehensive of being in the forefront of the movement. Some older students, including young teachers and graduate students, try quietly to advise the young leaders, but tensions are inevitable.

"Those who walk in the front row of the demonstration and get caught are not the most important leaders," said a third-year student who is playing a behind-the-scenes role at Beijing University. "They are young people in their first or second year. They are 17 or 18. For them it's not so bad. But those in their third or fourth year are more careful." Rivalries and Accusations

Students are reluctant not just to lead, but also to be led, causing further problems. The fractiousness and accusations have already split the movement, and unless a single president emerges the divisions are likely to get worse. Some leaders accuse each other of excessive ambition, or even of being Government plants.

The toll that the rivalries take was evident several days ago when Beijing University convened an open meeting of students to elect leaders and plan activities. More than 5,000 students initially gathered for the meeting, but almost all left when rival candidates began fighting over the microphone and calling each other Government stooges.

An unanswered question so far is whether a faction in the leadership is encouraging the demonstrations, or using them. Such speculation is inevitable here, because China is a country where historically the conspiracy theorists have usually been right.

While the overwhelming majority of students clearly rose on their own initiative, it is possible that some leaders who favor more rapid change are doing what they can to help the students succeed, in the hope that this will help create a mandate for change and hasten the retirement of elderly officials such as the senior

leader, Deng Xiaoping. So far, however, there is no evidence that the student unrest is related to power struggles within the party.

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