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Upheaval in China; In China, Chaos Among the Leaders

By FOX BUTTERFIELD and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES MAY 25, 1989

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American analysts of China acknowledged today that they had little reliable information about the power struggle unfolding in Beijing. But they said that everything they did know suggests it will be a bitter and protracted fight in which half the leaders on one side or the other may lose their positions.

"It is clear that the whole leadership has come unglued," said one senior analyst who has followed events in China for years. "This is a Humpty Dumpty that can't be put back together again."

The worst outcome, another analyst said, would be if hard-liners around Prime Minister Li Peng succeed and use the army to put down the pro-democracy demonstrators. "That could lead to prolonged fighting between students and the army and would undermine everything the Chinese have been trying to do for the past 10 years, scaring off foreign investment, ending the opening to the outside world," the official said. "It's a pretty bleak prospect." A Time for Humility

But the analysts cautioned that so few hard facts are available that it is a time for humility in drawing conclusions.

They were not even sure, for instance, what has happened to Zhao Ziyang, the Communist Party General Secretary and leading advocate of liberalization who seemed to lose power last week when Mr. Li called for a crackdown on protestors

in Beijing.

Some reports said Mr. Zhao had resigned, others that he had been forcibly replaced, and still others today that he had been denounced by Deng Xiaoping, China's senior leader, at a Politburo meeting as a "traitor to the Party" and a "counter-revolutionary," extremely harsh language in China. There were even stories, circulated by Chinese in the United States in telephone contact with friends in Beijing, that Mr. Zhao and some of his supporters had been arrested by army troops loyal to Mr. Deng. The latter rumor seemed too far-fetched to the analysts.

But in the latest indication of how serious the conflict is between the conservative supporters of Prime Minister Li and the more moderate backers of Mr. Zhao, there were reports today that Wan Li, the chairman of the National People's Congress, China's legislature, who cut short his visit to the United States on Tuesday, was being held in Shanghai and not allowed to return to Beijing. Mr. Li had abruptly terminated his trip to the United States after meeting with President Bush in Washington. Official Reported Detained

Some Chinese officials in Washington said Mr. Wan would stay in Shanghai for a few days before returning to Beijing in order to learn more about the situation in the capital. But other Chinese officials said Mr. Li was being held in Shanghai by hard-liners anxious to keep him from tipping the balance toward Mr. Zhao. Relatives of Mr. Wan in the United States said he had expressed fear before flying back that he might be arrested on his return.

Mr. Wan, 73 years old, is widely regarded as a pivotal figure. He is a longtime close friend of Deng Xiaoping, China's senior leader, having worked under Mr. Deng since the time of the Communists' triumph in 1949, when they were both in Sichuan province. Mr. Wan is also an outspoken advocate of both economic and political liberalization, having initiated Mr. Deng's most successful program, a return to private farming, when he was governor of Anhui province in the late 1970's.

Some Chinese have expressed hope that Mr. Wan, on his return, would convene a session of the National People's Congress to revoke Mr. Li's martial law decree and replace Mr. Li as Prime Minister.

But in the meantime the current power struggle is more reminiscent of the tumultuous days of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960's or the uncertainty after Mao Zedong's death in 1976 than it is of China in the Deng era of the 1980's. In those earlier years, Chinese leaders disappeared from public view for days,

months, even years at a time with no announcement about their whereabouts or fate.

Sometimes they were gathered at secret meetings in some remote province to thrash out basic national policy. Sometimes they were travelling in search of support from local officials. In other cases, as happened twice to Mr. Deng, they were exiled to work in the countryside or labor reform camps.

One American analyst characterized the situation by recalling one of Mao's favorite epigrams of the Cultural Revolution, which the Chinese Government then used routinely in official communiques to describe world affairs. "Everything under the heavens is in chaos," Mao had said with customary obliqueness, "and the situation is excellent."

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