

The 1989 Tiananmen Challenge

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“The call for democratic change during the 1989 Tiananmen event represented the strongest challenge to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) monopoly of power to date”. This essay aims to discuss this argument by comparing the events of 1989 with other challenges to the communist regime in China. In discussing this particular challenge to CCP, analysis of the success and failures of the challenge will also be included.

Before making comparisons between the events of Tiananmen and other movements aiming to challenge the CCP’s monopoly of power, it is important to note the ways in which Tiananmen represented a challenge to the power of the regime. The organisation of a student movement centred round the mourning of Hu Yaobang is argued by some to be the beginning of this challenge. For the students, Hu Yaobang was a “symbol of liberal reform and clean government” (Nathan & Link, 2007: 25). This appears to suggest that students in China wished to challenge the monopoly of the CCP’s power as the political system was perceived by them to be in need of reform. In addition to this, the movement surrounding the events occurring in Tiananmen Square from April to June 1989, can be considered a challenge to the communist regime as it made claims that not only was the Party corrupt but media reports covering the protests were biased in favour of the Party (Nathan & Link, 2007: 161). It could be argued that this demonstrates a challenge to Communist Party’s monopoly of Chinese society and is in support of reforming the press system towards a more open and democratic media allowing criticism of the ruling party. Perhaps the most important factor suggesting that the movement in 1989 was a challenge to the CCP’s monopoly is that it provoked response from the governing regime in the form of martial law as it was not only students which were involved in the protests but also “large numbers of the urban citizenry” (Saich, 2004: 71-2). By imposing martial law, it is possible to suggest that the CCP saw the movement as a threat to their dominance thus provoking action from within to counter it.

Having established some key factors marking the 1989 Tiananmen event as a challenge to CCP’s monopoly of power, it is now possible to examine other challenges to the regime in order to determine whether or not Tiananmen represented the strongest challenge to date.

Students had previously taken to the streets in 1986 demanding democracy, freedom of the press and free speech (Munro, 1988: 70). It is possible to suggest that other student demonstrations, such as in Paris, and the first multi-party elections in Taiwan offered “suggestive models” to young Chinese interested in what democracy had to offer (Munro, 1988: 71). Although this protest in December 1986 attempted to challenge the level of reform the CCP were willing to commit to, the numbers protesting were to be dwarfed by those involved in the 1989 event. Zhang Liang suggests that nearly one hundred million people were involved in one way or another in 1989 whereas the December 1986 protests appeared to involve only fifty thousand demonstrators (Nathan & Link, 2007; Munro, 1988). It is possible to suggest then that Tiananmen 1989 was a posed a stronger challenge to the CCP’s monopoly of power than the student protests of 1986 simply by involving a larger proportion of the population.

It has not always been students at the centre of challenges to CCP’s monopoly of power. In 1976, there was another protest in Tiananmen Square. A loose comparison between 1976 and 1989 events is that both were sparked by the death of party members; in the case of 1976 this was Zhou Enlai. However the challenge to CCP dominance was not centred round the arguments for reform and democratization but rather the public’s discontent with the status quo and their wish to mourn for Zhou Enlai in the way they wanted (Burton, 1987). It is suggested that the 1976 demonstrations were “highly visible” indicators that political instability was likely to ensue if the CCP continued with

The 1989 Tiananmen Challenge

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policies “so clearly out of step with the people’s common aspirations” (Burton, 1987: 435). It is possible to argue that this was a successful protest as the Party was forced to take on board the dissatisfaction of the people, however it did not appear to present a substantial challenge to the CCP’s monopoly of power as the leadership simply presented its post-Mao reform policies in order to illustrate that change was forthcoming while allowing the CCP to retain its mandate to rule (Burton, 1987). This appears to demonstrate that challenges to the CCP’s dominance are suppressed by the Party and thus their monopoly of power remain intact.

Now that other challenges to the CCP’s monopoly of power have been introduced, it is now possible to return to analysis of the 1989 Tiananmen event using previous challenges and demonstrations as benchmarks to indicate the strength of this particular event.

It has been previously suggested that in order to maintain its monopoly on power, the CCP suppress any challenges to their dominance. However it is possible to argue that in the case of the 1989 Tiananmen event the Party could not ignore or simply suppress the demonstrations thus suggesting that it is the strongest challenge to the CCP’s dominance. One factor contributing to this argument would be the influence of the media both internally and internationally with regards to this event. While it has been previously noted that demonstrators were angered by the internal media’s bias towards the CCP, it should also be stated that this was an issue making the reporters themselves discontent as many of them were unwilling to trust what they were reading, hearing on the radio or seeing on the television (Nathan & Link, 2007: 161). This scepticism among the press would appear to suggest that the CCP could not successfully suppress the situation using media bias and provides support to the argument that Tiananmen 1989 presented the strongest challenge to the Party’s dominance. It is also possible to argue that the presence of international media in 1989 contributed to the perception that this event was the strongest challenge to the CCP’s power. The reason for the international press being in attendance was Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit to the People’s Republic of China. Suggestions could be made that the CCP were unsure of how to handle the protests in Tiananmen Square with the world’s eyes on them (Saich, 2004).

The Party had attempted to suppress the movement by issuing an editorial in the *People’s Daily*, labelling the demonstrations (after Hu Yaobang’s funeral) as a “planned conspiracy” trying to produce “antigovernment turmoil”, with previous challenges to CCP power this would have been enough to prevent further action however in the case of 1989 it only served to anger the students further (Zhao, 2001: 155). Saich has suggested that there were disputes within the Party surrounding how best to deal with the situation; on one hand they could not use violent force to repress a peaceful demonstration while on the other hand to enter into dialogue with the protesters would have meant recognising an autonomous organisation, something which went against traditional Party ideology (Saich, 2004: 71). At this point it is possible to note increased support for the argument that the 1989 Tiananmen protests represent the strongest challenge to the CCP’s power monopoly as the Party was forced to open up channels of dialogue with the protestors; the first attempt at dialogue was aborted on April 25 however other negotiations would take place (Nathan & Link, 2007). It may be possible to speculate that had the world media not been focussing on China due to the pending visit of Gorbachev, that the Party might not have opened up the channels of negotiation. This would appear to suggest that the demonstrations throughout 1989 were aided by the fact that China had opened up to the international community, perhaps illustrating that the Communist State was making some progress; however for the demonstrators and other participants more progress and steps towards to democratization had to be made.

Having identified the role of the media within this particular challenge to the CCP’s dominance, attention is now turned to the negotiations between Party officials and members of the primarily student movement. With traditional attempts to suppress and end the demonstrations failing, the Party, still wanting to end the protests peacefully, took the unprecedented action of engaging in dialogue with activists. It is possible to argue that simply by engaging in dialogue with the protesters, the 1989 Tiananmen has gone further than previous challenges to the State thus making it the strongest challenge to date. This is emphasised by President Yang Shangkun’s statement in a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee,

“I think that most students have good intentions and that our emphasis should be on shaping and guiding their actions, not on repressing them.” (Nathan & Link, 2007:114).

The 1989 Tiananmen Challenge

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It could however be argued that such a statement by a member of the Party's leadership indicates that the movement was not so much a threat to the CCP's monopoly of power but simply a campaign to remind China's leaders to follow through on promises of reform in the post-Mao era. Shangkun's statement also appears to be suggesting that the student movement could be directed by the CCP thus demonstrating that their monopoly on power was not being strongly challenged in 1989.

Although it could be suggested that as the CCP have remained in power that the 1989 Tiananmen did not represent a strong nor successful challenge to the CCP's monopoly, it is also possible to argue that no challenge to the CCP before or since the 1989 event has resulted in the level of action taken by the Party in order to end the demonstrations and restore stability to the country. This is exemplified by Premier Li Peng's meeting with students involved in the hunger strike and also that when dialogue broke down between the Party and the demonstrators the use of force in the form of martial law was introduced. In support of the argument that the 1989 Tiananmen event represented the strongest challenge to the CCP's dominance is that when Li Peng met with the students, it was the students who controlled the flow of the meeting rather than the Party leader (Calhoun, 1997: 77). This appears to indicate that CCP's monopoly on power was being seriously questioned thus implying that Tiananmen 1989 was the strongest challenge made on the Government to date. Perhaps it is possible to argue that it was the methods used by this movement which provoked a response from the Party differing from those used against previous challengers to the CCP's dominance. An example of this would be the students' hunger strike; this action taken by the students appears to have forced party leaders not only enter into dialogue with them but also to show that the CCP were taking their demands about reform and tackling corruption seriously (Nathan & Link, 2007: 217). This appears to reinforce the idea that the 1989 Tiananmen event was a strong, if not the strongest, challenge to the CCP's monopoly on power.

Having discussed why the use of the hunger strike provoked a response from the leaders of Party in the form of dialogue with the students, it is now possible to note the reaction of the CCP when dialogue did not achieve the result of getting the protests to end. It has been suggested that Li Peng had thought the students would appreciate the "very fact he had met for dialogue", however the meeting was not regarded as "real dialogue" with it appearing apparent to the students that Li would listen but not act on their requests (Calhoun, 1997: 80). Minutes from Party meetings suggest that senior Party officials regarded the situation in Tiananmen as "chaotic" while proposing that the only way to combat the chaos was to introduce martial law in Beijing (Nathan & Link, 2007: 269). It is possible to suggest that the enforcement of martial law was the CCP's attempt to quell "once and for all" the demands for democracy (Saich, 2004: 210). It may be possible then to argue that by provoking such a response from the Government that this movement represented the strongest challenge to the Party's dominance.

In conclusion, evidence presented in this discussion appears to suggest that the 1989 Tiananmen event did present the strongest challenge to the CCP's monopoly of power. Although the CCP still hold dominance in Chinese politics, the influence of the media and the high number of participants and methods used by the protesters were all factors contributing the high level of reaction from CCP leaders. The main reason for suggesting that Tiananmen 1989 has been the strongest challenge to date is that it provoked responses from the CCP, which have not been evident in other challenges.

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The 1989 Tiananmen Challenge

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