

# Yang Shangkun clique on the move in China

by Linda de Hoyos

Although Zhao Ziyang and his closest advisers were summarily removed from positions of power in the immediate days surrounding the June 4 massacre of thousands of students at Tiananmen Square, the power struggle appears to be as ferocious as ever in the People's Republic of China, according to reports seeping out of Beijing. It is not clear, however, among the factions now contending for the power-hegemony within the leadership, whether anyone realizes the primary implication of the internecine struggles within the Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army: the inherent fragility of the Deng Xiaoping regime as a totality.

The contention centers on the issue of who will replace Deng, China's so-called "paramount" leader. On Aug. 11, Prime Minister Li Peng, who with President Yang Shangkun and Deng himself, led the crackdown against the Beijing students, announced that martial law would be lifted before Oct. 1. The decision was announced at a meeting chaired by Yang Shangkun and attended by the powerful commanders of the country's military regions. By the time of the October deadline, also the time of the party congress, it was hoped, factional issues would be ended and the successor to Deng would have been chosen.

However, nearly a month later, the prospects for such reconciliation look dim. The first hurdle was the choosing of Zhao Ziyang's successor as the first vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission. Deng is himself chairman of the Military Commission, the only official post he holds. Most actively campaigning for the position was Yang Shangkun, who heads a clique powerful in the military. This includes his brother Yang Beibing, who heads the "Political Department" of the PLA, and his son-in-law, who heads the 27th Army that led the bloody crackdown in Tiananmen Square.

## Scrapping for the top post

In the month before the commission meeting, Yang Beibing emerged in the limelight, as this clique, which reportedly includes Li Peng, worked to accrue more power and "stump" for its factional elevation. One indication of the clique's power came from the Hong Kong daily *Cheng Ming*, which reported that the central authorities had decided "that the chief editors of all major newspapers and journals will be assigned by the PLA General Political Department"—making the press a newly acquired fiefdom of the Yang family.

For the next several weeks, Yang Beibing appeared prominently in the press, as he visited wounded soldiers, conferred awards to soldiers, or chaired a conference of military and party leaders in Jilin province as if he were the new Caesar of China.

All this was leading up to the meeting of the Military Commission in mid-August. According to reports from Hong Kong, there were two contenders for filling Zhao Ziyang's shoes: Yang Shangkun, backed by his brother and Chief of Staff Chi Haotian (another relative); and Wang Zhen, another octogenarian of the Central Advisory Committee, who was reportedly backed by Deng Xiaoping.

But, reported the Hong Kong *Sing Tao Jih Pao*, Defense Minister Qin Jiwei, National Congress President Wan Li, and the commanders of three military regions—Xiang Shou-zhi of Nanjing, Zhou Yibing of Beijing, and Zhang Wanping of Guangzhou—abstained from voting and insisted that the entire matter be tabled. It is known that military leaders in the south have been particularly concerned that the Li Peng clique might put a halt to the southeastern provinces' lucrative relations with Hong Kong and other trading partners. *Sing Tao Jih Pao's* sources "revealed that as the Central Committee was afraid that the armies of various military regions might fight against each other because of this, the commanders of the seven military regions were ordered to stay in Beijing after the meeting . . . so as to prevent them from making any deployment in the regions."

(It was the political scuffle at this meeting that led to the false rumors that Defense Minister Qin Jiwei and other military leaders had been arrested.)

Within a week the issue was put to rest; sources cited by the Hong Kong *South China Morning Post* on Aug. 22 said that Deng had simply eliminated the vice-chairman post altogether. This leaves Yang Shangkun as the next vice-chairman, but with no definite elevation in position. In this case, Deng was likely following the advice of his fellow octogenarian and sometime policy opponent Chen Yun, the political godfather of Li Peng, who argued that all factional decisions should be put off for a couple of years.

The upshot is that the group of elders—including Deng—who came out in unified force behind the butchery of China's students as a necessary safeguarding of the great Maoist revolution, are still in the saddle. But even if one member of this group—such as Yang Shangkun, who is 82—were to attain preeminence, this still leaves up in the air the question of how power will be transferred to the next generation in an orderly way. An associated problem the leadership has been unable to resolve, is the fate of Zhao Ziyang himself.

Seen from this vantage point and given the inability of the collective leadership to solve China's gigantic economic problems, the prognosis coming from Yan Jaqi and other Chinese exiles from the Tiananmen crackdown, that the Deng regime will last only another two or three years, may not be an exaggeration in the least.