

Flowers Wilt

The student unrest which has dominated recent news from China, and which has now led to the downfall of the Communist Party's general secretary Hu Yaobang, was the largest popular demonstration by students for a decade. This time the unrest did not start in Beijing, but in a number of provincial capitals, including Hefei in Anhui province, and Kunming in the south-western province of Yunnan. Only when the demonstrations broke out in Shanghai did the Chinese media begin to report them. As they died down in Shanghai, so they flared up in Beijing and other cities in north and east China.

So often with student protest in China, the initial spark is something quite minor, such as complaints about canteen food or about the university syllabus, and this time was no exception. But issues of national importance became the object of debate. In Hefei, the students specifically addressed themselves to the way that people are elected to local government. The regulations on local elections, which were drawn up in 1979, were not being adhered to, and instead suitable candidates were simply being appointed by the party at each local level.

But the local issues soon took on a wider context as the students began to call for democracy and freedom. It is still not absolutely clear what they mean by this. Many of the students stated they still supported Deng Xiaoping and his reformers, and wanted more freedom of debate within a one-party system, but others made a more dangerous demand - a multi-party system.

Who was behind the demonstrations? It can be argued that both the conservative and reformist elements would have something to gain and something to lose by inciting the students. But it



seems reasonable to assume that the students themselves started the movement, probably with support from some university academics who want the academic field in China to have greater intellectual freedom. We know that Fang Lizhi, the vice-president of Hefei University of Science and Technology, where the trouble all started, has advocated that the universities should be independent of political constraints. He has also made the much more dangerous assertion that democracy is something which the people obtain through struggle, and not something which is bestowed upon the people by the leadership. Fang Lizhi has now been expelled from the Communist Party, having become, with others, a target of attack following a hardening of the party leadership's attitude.

Towards the end of December, Deng Xiaoping decided that the protests had gone far enough, and issued a warning to local officials to toughen their attitude towards the students.

That hardening has now culminated in the resignation of general secretary Hu Yaobang. That Mr Hu, for 40 years a friend and protege of Deng Xiaoping, should fall

victim to the fears that liberalism had gone too far in China is a sign of the deep seriousness with which Deng must view the developments of the past weeks.

The fall of one of the supporters of greater liberalism will confirm the worst fears of those, both inside and outside China, who wondered how long it would be before there was a reaction to the increasing outspokenness of many people in intellectual and cultural circles within the country. The present situation leaves Deng Xiaoping in a dilemma of his own creation. He is still committed to a path of economic reform, but has been forced to placate his conservative critics on the question of ideological freedom which they felt to be moving too far and too fast. To this end, he has had to sacrifice his old colleague Hu Yaobang and others who symbolised the increasing liberalism.

But China will never be able to progress economically if the intellectual straitjacket is not loosened as well. The resignation of Hu Yaobang will indicate to everyone in China that once again the brief period of 'One Hundred Flowers Blooming' has come to an end. •

Elizabeth Wright.