

# A new Communist revolution

Change, particularly profound change, is something one does not expect from communist nations. Extreme conservatism, not revolution, has been the hallmark of Marxist regimes.

But, as we enter 1987, accumulating evidence strongly suggests that the communist world may be undergoing its greatest period of transformation in 40 years.

Recent student demonstrations across China have been calling for press freedom, electoral rights and a general lessening of state control. These demands, uncomfortably reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, come against the backdrop of major and dramatic change in China. Deng Xiaoping's second communist revolution has introduced limited free enterprise into China and a spirit of individual assertiveness that was unthinkable a decade ago.

The result of Deng's revolution has been to give China one of the world's fastest growth rates and to force retirement of the Maoist-Leninist old guard. As Deng turns Marxism on its head, the rest of the communist world is watching China with a mixture of awe, apprehension and dismay. Revolution is fine for export, but please, no radical experiments at home.

Until Mikhail Gorbachev got a firm grip on the reins of the Soviet Union, that is. Doing so took him a year. Now he seems to be beaming out change from Moscow the likes of which has not been seen since the days of Stalin. In the West, our media allow that Gorbachev has charisma and dynamism; but, I suspect, the true extent of this remarkable man's talents has not yet been gauged.

So, at least, I am told by people who have spent time with Gorbachev. Even the most hard-bitten speak in awe of his strength, open mind and character. Perhaps most

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revealing, my Chinese sources, a cynical and tough bunch of observers, report that truly massive changes are under way in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev, say the Chinese, is sweeping away two generations of dust and cobwebs and shaking the Soviet Union from the Ukraine to Kamchatka. The nation that will emerge could be very different from the shabby, ham-fisted Russia of Stalin and Brezhnev.

Across the communist world, the old-guard Soviet leaders from World War II are now being replaced, at long last, by younger men whose vision goes further than pig iron, tractors and labor camps. Even Vietnam has just retired its octogenarian chiefs in favor of somewhat younger leadership and has embarked on economic reforms. Economic Stalinism is clearly on its last legs.

So what, then, as a replacement? Communism is, above all, a system of political control — the world's most efficient and ruthless. But communist leaders now recognize that building modern economies — or just getting their rickety economies out of the Marxist horse latitudes — demands more individual initiatives and freedoms. These include freedom of movement, speech, information transfer and even dissent.

The leaders of China and the USSR are now struggling to find some sort of balance between greater individual freedom and the retention of communist party political control. How to ease totalitarian restraints without provoking a general explosion remains a baffling problem.

Riots these past weeks in China and Soviet Central Asia give ample evidence of the dangers awaiting communist rulers.

Dangers or not, communist leaders must somehow elbow and shove their sullen nations into the 21st century. How to do so will produce surprises: Such diverse communists as Korea's Kim Il-Sung, Romania's Ceausescu, China's Deng or Russia's Gorbachev will come up with some very different solutions. Some will work; others will not.

China, if it stays on the course charted by Deng, will likely prosper. As for the Soviet Union, innovators in that gloomy, tradition-bound land often end up unhappily.

If, however, Gorbachev succeeds in re-invigorating the USSR economically, socially and intellectually, the west will then be confronted with a new and even greater challenge. A Soviet Union that still cannot feed itself is naturally self-preoccupied and inward looking. By contrast, a robust Soviet Union feeling its oats — or a wealthier China, for that matter — might rival the West far more than today.

In fact, some time early in the 21st century, a hard-pressed West might well look back on the days of good, old-fashioned bread-line Leninism with a kind of warm nostalgia.