

The Occupation Campaign in Hong Kong: A Participant's View

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Abstract

The Occupation Campaign in Hong Kong ended on December 15, 2014 after 79 days reflected the protesters and pro-democracy groups' wish to tell the world that they are not going to give up the cause of democracy and that they will continue to fight despite the understanding that it will be extremely difficult to change the decision of the Chinese leadership in the short term. In the eyes of the supporters of the pro-democracy movement, the challenge facing Hong Kong people is not just fighting for a democratic electoral system, but also struggle to maintain their core values, their lifestyles, and their individual dignity – an uphill battle given that the local business community firmly toes the Beijing line. While the political struggles of the young people of Hong Kong are perceived to have brought hope to the pro-democracy movement, the prospects for democracy remain far from promising.

Keywords: *Hong Kong, Occupation Campaign, protest, pro-democracy movement, united front, China, Beijing*

1. Introduction

When the Occupation Campaign ended on December 15, 2014 after 79 days, over 80% of Hong Kong people, as reflected by public opinion surveys, wanted the campaign to end¹ so as to avoid the inconvenience caused to the city's traffic and the confrontations between those who supported and those who opposed the campaign. It was quite clear to all parties concerned that the Chinese authorities would not allow Hong Kong people genuine choices in the election of the Chief Executive in 2017.

Supporters of the campaign, on the other hand, believed that they had won an important victory. In the first place, the number of participants exceeded the expectations of the pro-democracy movement; and the campaign won the sympathy and support of the international community. The protesters basically maintained their peaceful orientations, and no one had been badly hurt. It would have a significant demonstration effect in China, though the actual impact was difficult to estimate. The Chinese authorities' denial of democracy for Hong Kong people resulted in a substantial price to be paid in their Taiwan policy. At the end of 2014, the Kuomintang lost badly in the local elections, and one of the important factors was the electorate's perception of "today's Hong Kong, tomorrow's Taiwan"². Chinese leaders' objective of winning the hearts and minds of Taiwan people suffered a severe setback. Despite the fact that the Chinese authorities and the Hong Kong government had condemned the campaign as illegal and bound to be futile, the latter had to initiate a public dialogue with the student leaders, though they met only once and the consultation produced no results.

2. The Chinese Authorities' Position

In June 2014, the Chinese authorities released a White Paper³ telling Hong Kong people that whatever power the Special Administrative Region (SAR) has, it comes from Beijing. In the following August, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress announced its decision on the framework governing the election of the Chief Executive in 2017⁴. The decision provides that the pro-establishment elites will return a majority of the Nomination Committee, which will then screen the entire list of the candidates in the election.

The verdict was clear. When the Chinese authorities are willing to pay the price, they can ensure their final say on everything in the SAR. The price is the end of Hong Kong exceptionalism; Hong Kong people have to understand that they are very dependent on the support from Mainland China, and they must cease to generate trouble for the Central Government. They have to accept Chinese leaders' implementation of "one country, two systems" (一國兩制) and their limits on the democratization process in the territory.

Apparently the services that Hong Kong has been providing for China's modernization can now be easily replaced. If Hong Kong talents choose to emigrate, experts from Mainland China are only too eager to fill the vacancies. The question is: Hong Kong people are free, and this free spirit has been the fountain of the territory's innovations. The Marxist-Leninist regime in Beijing does not believe in this; its priority is to maintain stability and its monopoly of political power.

The Chinese authorities throughout the political reform processes from the beginning of 2013 to the final voting on the reform bill in the Legislative Council (立法會) in June 2015 refused to engage in serious negotiations with the pro-democracy movement in the territory. They also rejected all the proposals offered by the so-called "moderate" groups. The final plan announced by the SAR government in fact

adopted all the most conservative elements of the suggestions and models advanced by the pro-establishment political parties. Chinese leaders simply cannot accept that a Chief Executive candidate they endorse would be rejected by Hong Kong people, and a candidate not accepted by them would be elected by the local community.

Since the massive protest rallies on July 1, 2003, Chinese leaders have been feeling more insecure about the local situation. This sense of insecurity has led to more local interferences and substantial resources diverted to strengthening the pro-Beijing united front. These interferences have generated more resentment from Hong Kong people, in turn leading to more interferences, thus creating a vicious circle. Apparently, Chinese leaders had to understand that Hong Kong is a free society; without this freedom, the spirit of Hong Kong will be lost and it will become just another Shanghai.

From 1997 to 2008, Hong Kong people's trust for the central government and their identification with the Chinese nation had been strengthening, according to well-established public opinion surveys⁵. Since then, both trends have been reversed; and the declines have been quite sharp in the recent two years or so. This is food for thought for the Chinese leadership. Unfortunately it still maintains a Marxist-Leninist mindset, and it refuses to relax control.

Beijing's response to the community's grievances, protests and demand for democracy has been more economic support measures within the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement framework and more resources to drum up political support for the pro-Beijing united front. The former have failed because the economic benefits have not trickled down to the grassroots. The latter have partially been counter-productive as reflected by public opinion polls.

In the absence of democracy and in view of its unsatisfactory performance, the SAR government has been suffering a legitimacy

deficit so much so that it has lost the political will to introduce serious policy reforms to tackle the basic livelihood issues ranging from housing to long-term finance for hospital services, an adequate pension system, etc.

Increasingly Hong Kong people perceive business-government collusion as the principal cause for policies favouring major business groups at the expense of ordinary people. The SAR government's failure in ensuring a steady adequate land supply has created price hikes beyond the affordability of even the young middle class. Management fees of the Mandatory Provident Fund (pension scheme) are regarded unreasonably high, favouring the banking sector. The supermarket business is a duopoly, and even Carrefour failed to enter the market.

3. Hong Kong People's Responses

In the first half of 2015, opinion surveys constantly indicated that slightly more than 50% of Hong Kong people wanted the SAR government's reform bill to go through the Legislative Council, and around 40% of the people demanded the Legislative Council to reject the political reform bill⁶. However only about 30% of the respondents in the surveys clearly endorsed the political reform bill as democratic or satisfactory; hence about 20% of the community desired the political reform bill to go through the legislature simply because they did not want to confront Beijing; they wanted to avoid confrontations in the society and gave a higher priority to political stability.

Supporters of the local pro-democracy movement felt cheated. The decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress at the end of August 2014 allows no room for a democratic electoral system enabling people to have meaningful choices in an election with genuine competition. Hong Kong people will be granted universal

suffrage in the 2017 Chief Executive election. But the establishment will capture a vast majority of seats in the Nomination Committee returned by a narrow franchise of less than 300,000 in a population of seven million; and this absolute majority will then control the entire list of candidates.

A vast majority of Hong Kong people fully accept China's sovereignty over the territory, and they have no serious intention to challenge the Chinese authorities. They consider that since 1997, Chinese leaders have chosen three Chief Executives for Hong Kong, and their performances have been far from satisfactory. When can Hong Kong people elect their own leaders? The community believes that it is sensible enough to elect someone who will cooperate with Beijing to ensure the territory's stability and prosperity; the Chinese leadership needs not worry that the electorate will choose someone ready to confront it all the time.

In the eyes of the supporters of the pro-democracy movement, the challenge facing Hong Kong people is not just fighting for a democratic electoral system. They have to struggle hard to maintain their core values, their lifestyles, and their individual dignity. They are reluctant to see Hong Kong reduced to just another big city in Mainland China. This is an uphill battle because the local business community firmly toes the Beijing line.

The younger generations in general refuse to be subdued. They believe that time is on their side; the government has lost its legitimacy, and it will find it extremely difficult to secure effective governance. The picture in the near future is grim, but Hong Kong people have proved that their free spirit always survives. Young people are especially frustrated as they have been suffering from a decline in upward social mobility opportunities, more limited career prospects, and severe difficulty in acquiring their own accommodation which affects their

marriage plans.

In sum, the demand for democracy has been strengthening as the status quo is less tolerable. Hong Kong people certainly understand that democracy is not a panacea, but many of them realized that democracy is an indispensable element in the solution in the deep social and economic contradictions.

The protesters as well as the pro-democracy groups realized that it will be extremely difficult to change the decision of the Chinese leadership in the short term. They want to tell the whole world, however, that they are not going to give up the cause of democracy, that they will continue to fight. As long as they do that, at least they can maintain their dignity and principles. They also realize that if they do not speak out now, they may have little chance to do that in a few years' time.

The Occupation Campaign obviously could not last very long. But it is only a part of an on-going civil disobedience movement which will continue. The purpose is to expose the lack of legitimacy of the SAR government; and that without democracy, it will find it extremely difficult to secure effective governance.

4. The Road Ahead

In the past two decades or so, Hong Kong people have clearly indicated their demand for democracy through public opinion surveys⁷. It is obvious, however, that not too many people are willing to make a sacrifice for the cause; after all, the status quo is acceptable and confrontation with Beijing is too daunting a challenge. The local economy is increasingly dependent on that of Mainland China.

Grievances, however, have been accumulating. A vast majority of people believe they have been suffering from a decline in living standards since 1997. They resent the deteriorating gap between the rich

and poor, and the poor performance of the three Chief Executives chosen by the Chinese leadership. They cannot accept that ordinary people have no say in the election of the Chief Executive, while they have no intention to challenge China's sovereignty over the SAR.

A significant feature of the Occupation Campaign was its spontaneity, but this spontaneity also implied difficulties in coordination. How to ensure that the pro-democracy groups will speak with one voice and maintain unity in action will be the biggest challenge ahead. There are natural differences between the moderates and the radicals.

The mobilization power of the pro-Beijing united front is not to be under-estimated. It has a powerful and resourceful machinery, and it has cultivated four to six thousand civic groups in the past years. The united front has been trying to smear the pro-democracy activists and absorb them with carrots and sticks; the approach of divide and rule has also been adopted. These tactics are effective to some extent.

All parties concerned wanted to avoid a Tiananmen Square (天安門廣場) kind of scenario, and they succeeded. But Hong Kong society will be further polarized. The political struggles of the young people are perceived to have brought hope to the pro-democracy movement although the prospects for democracy are far from promising.

In May 2015, senior Chinese officials came to Shenzhen just across the border to meet Hong Kong's legislators, indicating that the pro-democracy movement might be divided into "moderates" and "diehards". The latter support Hong Kong's independence, try to subvert the Chinese Communist regime and collude with foreign forces; the central government will resolutely struggle against them – meaning suppression. The former still uphold "one country, two systems"; though they embrace different political views, the Chinese authorities will treat them as friends and both parties can engage in communication.

This is typical united front tactics of divide and rule. Upholding “one country, two systems” implies accepting the framework defined by the Chinese authorities, and the “moderates” would then be allowed to remain politically active according to the rules set by Beijing; the “democratic parties” in Mainland China probably serve as an example. The baseline is defined by the Chinese authorities; refusal to accept brings suppression.

This categorization intends to limit the scope of activities on the part of the pro-democracy groups and the student movement, and to strengthen the SAR government's deterrence. As “rational security” is now declared a policy concern, the demand for democracy by the local community becomes a secondary consideration.

Suppression may help to bring temporary calm, but will exacerbate social and political contradictions in the intermediate and long term. The rising local consciousness of some Hong Kong young people is a warning sign; from waving British colonial flags in demonstrations a few years ago, some radical groups now declare that they are not Chinese, adopting a behaviour pattern similar to that of the “deep Green” groups in Taiwan.

On June 18, 2015, voting on the political reform bill in the Legislative Council finally took place. As expected, the pro-democracy legislators held on to their original position to oppose the bill, and they were joined by the independent from the medical constituency. Due to bad co-ordination and misunderstanding, the pro-establishment legislators withdrew to wait for one of their members and only eight stayed to vote in favour of the bill. This created serious embarrassment on the part of the pro-Beijing united front as their internal rivalries and incompetence were fully exposed. The original demonstrations against the pro-democracy movement had to be cancelled, and the newspaper advertisement spaces earlier booked to condemn the pro-democracy

groups the following day were replaced by apologies instead.

Worse still, Hong Kong people clearly perceived that the pro-establishment legislators are accountable to Beijing and not to the local electorate. Soon after the embarrassing vote, those who stayed to support the bill eagerly told the media that the Central Liaison Office had phoned to thank them, and those who were absent rushed to the same office to explain. They only apologized to Hong Kong people as an afterthought; and they ignored the Chief Executive C.Y. Leung 梁振英 entirely.

It appears that the Chinese authorities now consider their relationship with the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong as contradiction between enemies. The local pro-Beijing united front will try to limit the seats won by the pro-democracy political parties in the District Council elections in November 2015 and the Legislative Council elections in September 2016. The former has a district edge as it now has a resourceful and sophisticated electoral machinery; it has established a strong grassroots network; and it can count on assistance from the government, the business community and the bulk of the media. The latter mainly rely on the fact that a considerable segment of Hong Kong people wants to maintain effective checks and balances mechanisms.

In the wake of the stalled political reform, the C.Y. Leung administration declared that it would concentrate on economic and livelihood issues. As its popularity remains low and its relationship with civil society has hardly improved, it cannot expect to secure adequate support for its major policy initiatives easily. Divisions within the pro-establishment camp are still a problem. With substantial fiscal reserves at its disposal, the C.Y. Leung administration can introduce minor policy measures to please the public though, i.e., measures described as distributing “candies” like waiving the payment of public housing rents for one or two months, giving an extra month of old age allowance and

social security payments to the recipients, etc.

The pro-democracy groups realize that they have to endure a very difficult period ahead. They too understand the road to attract the majority of the community and hence they have to engage in peaceful civil disobedience campaigns. Social stability will likely be maintained, though the polarization of society will worsen.

Notes

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1. See “Latest poll of Hong Kong: 80% of respondents want to end ‘Occupy Central’” (in Chinese), 19th November 2014, BBC (Zhongwen). <http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/china/2014/11/141119_hk_poll_occupy_students>
2. For the analysis of emerging solidarity between Hong Kong and Taiwan, please refer to Tsio, G. (August 19, 2014), “Today’s Hong Kong, tomorrow’s Taiwan”, *Foreign Policy*. <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/19/todays-hong-kong-tomorrows-taiwan/>>
3. For the full text of the White Paper, see <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-06/10/c_133396891.htm>.
4. For the full text of the decision by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, see <<http://www.2017.gov.hk/filemanager/template/en/doc/20140831a.pdf>>.
5. Please see “People’s trust in the Beijing central government”, *Public Opinion Programme, The University of Hong Kong (HKUPOP)* <<https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/chinese/popexpress/trust/trustchigov/index.html>>; “People’s ethnic identity”, *HKUPOP* <<https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/chinese/popexpress/ethnic/index.html>>.
6. “Level of support/opposition toward the Government’s Proposal on CE Election of 2017”, *HKUPOP*. <<https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/chinese/features/jointUrollingSurvey/>>
7. See Sing Ming, “Explaining mass support for democracy in Hong Kong”, *Democratization*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2010), pp. 175-205; “People’s satisfaction with HKSARG’s pace of democratic development”, *HKUPOP*

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>; “Appraisal of degree of democracy”, HKUPOP <<https://www.hkupop.hku.hk/chinese/popexpress/socind/socq45/index.html>>.

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