

Occupy Hong Kong: Protests for democracy and universal suffrage

Editorial

Since September 28, 2014, key districts in Hong Kong have been occupied by students and other protesters demanding genuine universal suffrage and the resignation of Hong Kong's current Chief Executive, C Y Leung. The protests were sparked by the August 31 decision of the Chinese government that only allows two to three candidates to stand for election in the 2017 chief executive election, all of whom would need to obtain the approval of 50 percent of the members of the nominating committee. This committee itself is not seen as truly representative of the Hong Kong people, heavily weighted towards business interests.

Students gathered in thousands in front of the government offices in Central on September 28, demanding that Hong Kong be allowed free elections, and calling for the Hong Kong government to do more to ensure genuine democracy. These student protests were joined by the Occupy Central group, composed of academics, professionals and members of the public.

The police used harsh tactics to disperse the students, by firing teargas and using pepper spray. Although the students held their ground, this use of force shocked the city, leading to spontaneous crowds gathering in Admiralty, Causeway Bay, Mongkok and Tsim Tsa Tsui as well. The protests have continued now for three weeks, although the police have attempted to clear the roads a few times. When their barricades have been removed, protesters have simply replaced them.



Using a bus as their bulletin board



Protesters in Mongkok

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Protesters in Admiralty

Political freedom and universal suffrage

"In Hong Kong we have been in very difficult times. We are going to have a selection of Chief Executive, that means our Hong Kong leader. We will have a right to vote our leader in 2017. But the Hong Kong government and the Chinese government limit our selection of our leader. We will have a right to select a leader, but the candidates have been chosen by them. So it's not a real nomination from the public."

Protester

"We are here to communicate several messages to, not only to Hong Kongers, but the whole world. What we are looking for is true democracy. We are looking for a government which has high recognition of people. At the same time we want to have a Chief Executive who represents all we Hong Kongers. We want him to be truly 100 percent elected by we Hong Kong people. We don't want to have a designated Chief Executive in Hong Kong who doesn't really represent our opinion. At the same time, we are here today also in response to violent incidents that happened few days ago. I didn't really know why the Hong Kong police use force and throw tear gas bombs to we students, 87 tear gas bombs. That is a very huge number to students and citizens who were totally unarmed." Hong Kong student

"Hong Kong is my home and I care very deeply about this city and the people of Hong Kong. So I am here to support the cause. And fight for democracy." Protester

"Hong Kong is my home. Living here, I have experienced what democracy means in substance, not just a form of government. I joined the protest and sympathize with prodemocracy protesters for my children. I dream that someday, in Hong Kong, my children can chose a leader of their own choice, and who listens to ethnic minorities" Danilo Reyes, a Filipino Hong Kong resident with the right to vote, who has lived and worked in Hong Kong for nearly ten years.

"The quest for unfettered right to self-determination, and dignity of the people of Hong Kong has taken a planned and new dimension in late September 2014. Since September 28, thousands of students have gathered in front of the government secretariat in Hong Kong, demanding Beijing to allow the people of Hong Kong the right to choose and elect their Chief Executive. At the core of the protest is the right of the citizens of Hong Kong to choose their own government and its chief executive. To be instructed by the government, on who should elect whom, a system dictatorial governments like the one in China, find convenient to implement, has provoked wide criticism in Hong Kong, since the people of Hong Kong

consider such rigid and narrow arrangement infringing their dignity, intellect, and self-esteem." Bijo Francis, Executive Director, Asian Human Rights Commission, Hong Kong

"We are here to protest and to fight for our real democracy. A real vote for our future. Because the China government just release a fake vote system for us. To vote for our leader in the future. So we don't like that." Hong Kong student

"I'm Natalie. I live in Hong Kong since 1991. I was born here. I live here for 23 years. There is a serious issues that happen in Hong Kong. It's about the Occupy Central. As a University student in Hong Kong, I joined this issue. Why I joined this issue I think since 1997 Hong Kong was handover to China. The (Hong Kong) Government and the China government promised us that we will have "One country, Two systems" to maintain the law, rules in Hong Kong.

"But after the handover for ten years, we find that there are more and more control by the China government. They want "One country, One system". Many of the freedom we have, like the press freedom, the freedom of speech, are more and more affected by the control of the China government.

"That's why the people are coming out to Occupy Central because they want to have a real election in 2017." Natalie, university student

"I was in Admiralty for two days, and central. The first day that I went to the protest, the commonly asked question by the people to me is that: "you're not Chinese, and you're fighting for Hong Kong". Basically what I just said was: "I was born here, I study here, I lived here, and I think that whatever happen to Hong Kong is also going to affect me, my future and future generations who are coming



here. So, I think that if I can do something to change the system right now, then I will be willing to," Jianne Soriano, Filipino student born in Hong Kong, interview via DBC

Police use of force

Investigations into police excessive use of force against the protesters are also said to be underway, with seven police officers suspended. The Hong Kong police have enjoyed a very good image in the region earlier, and their present behaviour against the Hong Kong public, who have been very peaceful and well behaved in the protests have sparked much local outrage. After a video went viral of police officers assaulting a protester on October 15, large crowds gathered outside the police headquarters in Wan Chai.



"After seeing the tear gas on Sunday, I think we just have to come out. If now is not the time, then when? So, I have been here for two days. And then I wanted to do something to tell the world what is happening here. So, we made this wall with 41 languages with the phrase "support democracy in Hong Kong". So there has been a lot of support and a lot of expats adding languages to it. And I hope the whole works out peacefully, and ultimately we will get universal suffrage. Real universal suffrage." Hong Kong student

"We don't want violence. We want a peaceful society and we just need democracy." Protester

"Unlike most Asian countries, the Hong Kong Police enjoys a reputation for policing by consent and policing without the use of torture and ill treatment. This reputation was achieved largely after the establishment of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), controlling bribery and corruption within the police force and instilling a high level of discipline. Also, Hong Kong's policing model is based on the tradition of the London Metropolitan police, in which the investigative and public control systems were developed in line with modern scientific methodologies and police officers were expected to act calmly even under the most provocative and trying circumstances.

"There is at present a general fear in Hong Kong of more coercive forms of social control coming into play, similar to practices that exist in mainland China. Public reports about excessive force against peaceful demonstrators should therefore 'ring bells of alarm' and both the authorities and the public should take such complaints with utmost seriousness. Investigations into these reports should also include considerations relating to the crime of torture, as under the Crimes (Torture) Ordinance 427." Basil Fernando, Director of Policy and Programmes, Asian Human Rights Commission, Hong Kong

"We have never used violence but the police treat us like this. They use tear gas and batons, and I don't know why." Protester

The government has agreed to hold talks with the students on Tuesday, October 21. It is clear that the current impasse facing the city will be difficult to surmount, given the huge role played by the Chinese government. It is important for the Hong Kong government however, to be seen as representing and responding to the interests and concerns of its own citizens. The government and all those fighting for democracy should therefore come together to discuss conditions that would allow true universal suffrage in 2017.

Those who have been out on the streets, and those who have come out to help them, have all shown remarkable courage, fortitude and creativity. Hong Kong can be proud of its youth, its non violence, its voice.

"Went down to Harcourt Road earlier today, to offer some supplies (food, water bottles, towels, bandages, panadol, etc). Everyone was so friendly, well behaved and respectful. Everything was also surprisingly clean. I was met with smiles, thanks, offers of yellow ribbons and even some BBQ! Everyone wanted to have a chat. It was a bit like being at a festival (with the singing and the whole feeling of togetherness), apart from the occasional call / chant for CY to resign! Have never seen anything like this before—it is amazing, but not sure how much difference it will make to China." Daisy Cooper, PhD student, Hong Kong

"You can't live in Hong Kong and be untouched by 'Occupy'. If you haven't been moved by the brave, well intentioned, remarkably well behaved protestors, you must have thought of them on your daily commute when the traffic has ceased to move as a result of blocked routes, or when you felt closer than you wish to be to your brethren in super packed trains. Thoughts of pride, of support, of respect; or as per some news reports, impatience, annoyance and anger.

"The cynics say nothing will change, the realists expect nothing in the short term, and the idealists, well, they are walking the talk down at Admiralty. So it was only a matter of time before even someone apolitical like me had to go see for himself. Take a look at some of the posters: "Can you hear the voices sing". There was plenty on the PA system and some of it remarkable and unique to this protest: "Not everyone is fortunate to go to college, so students, please keep up with your studies, go to college and then come to the protest; Hong Kong will need your skills." This was no frivolous 'party' as some mass gatherings can easily become. I was struck by the sense of purpose, hope and yes, love. What will be the end game and political result? I don't know. But they have already achieved something by their existence. Because cut out all the noise and you will feel it in the crowd, the sense of something special, something never before, something momentous. And that, already is and will always be, their very own slice of history." Hong Kong resident

"Hong Kong has a proud history of peaceful demonstrations and marches. However, this is the first time that such large areas of the city have been occupied for so long a period. Everyone has been impressed by how well behaved the demonstrators have been. On two nights after work, I slowly strolled along the streets from Central to Wanchai. The mood of the mostly young persons was relaxed and almost festive. At some places, persons were shouting slogans, while at other sites speakers were taking turns analyzing the situation, but the majority of the demonstrators were sitting in small groups holding discussions. I watched how some persons were offering bottles of water to the demonstrators, others were handing out bananas, while still others were bringing bags of prepared food from fast food outlets and giving them to the demonstrators. Large black bags had been fastened along the railings into which people were placing their refuse, while other young persons were going around picking up the small amount of litter that remained on the streets. Some union drivers volunteered to use dump trucks to transport the accumulated garbage from the demonstration sites." Jack Clancey, lawyer and Hong Kong resident

There have also been a large number of ethnic minorities supporting the protests, indicating not only the migrant nature of the city, but also that all those who live there see the city as home, as a place where they can voice their opinions and take part in change. Many of these minorities come from repressive and non-democratic societies, and are thus even more vested in Hong Kong's future.



Banners reading 'Protect the citizens, End policing', 'Student movement without fear', 'Violent dispersal, Unforgivable sin'



Photos courtesy Danilo Reyes