

Hong Kong protests leave Tung administration isolated

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While the immediate political crisis in Hong Kong over plans for draconian anti-subversion legislation has temporarily subsided, none of the underlying issues have been resolved. Following a massive protest of 500,000 people on July 1, the administration of Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa backed away from passing the new laws. But Tung remains under pressure from Beijing to do so in the not-too-distant future, setting the scene for further confrontations with protestors intent on defending democratic rights.

In the midst of the crisis, Tung's own position was in doubt. Sections of the Hong Kong political and business establishment, including some of his close allies, were seeking to make him the scapegoat for the policies that produced the eruption of opposition. While critical of Tung for failing to enact the legislation, Beijing was, however, reluctant to remove him.

When Tung visited Beijing on the weekend of July 19-20, both President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao signalled their support for him and called for a renewed attempt to pass the anti-subversion law. The official Xinhua news agency quoted Hu Jintao as saying: "Only by maintaining Hong Kong's social stability, can a good commercial environment be safeguarded and can Hong Kong's advantages as an international finance, trade and transport centre be maintained." Wen declared on television: "I believe Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa can lead residents out of their current difficulties."

Tung's administration has, however, been seriously weakened. James Tien, leader of the pro-business Liberal Party, pulled out of the Executive Council on July 7 in order to distance himself from the unpopular government. His resignation leaves Tung without a guaranteed majority in the Hong Kong legislature for the passage of the security legislation or other

measures, such as raising taxes.

In order to defuse political tensions, two of the most unpopular figures in Tung's cabinet—Financial Secretary Anthony Leung and Security Secretary Regina Ip—were forced to resign on July 16. Leung was accused of purchasing a luxury car just weeks before he raised car taxes in March. Ip became the focus of opposition after she arrogantly declared there was no need to consult ordinary workers over the anti-subversion laws.

The resignations followed two further large protests. The National Security Bill was originally due to be passed on July 9, but the day saw 50,000 protestors gather before the Legislative Council demanding a complete cancellation of the legislation and universal suffrage. Demonstrators came dressed in white T-shirts with the slogan "Return power to the people" and chanted for Tung to step down. At a press conference, Tung was forced to acknowledge that his administration faces "huge challenges".

Many participants were workers and young people. Liu Yuk-lin, a housekeeper, told the *Washington Post*: "He [Tung] should step down! We don't like him!" Ho Chin, a retired electrician, said he had joined the July 1 protest and wanted to "have a vote." A clerk, Kitty Lam told Associated Press that "the rally on July 1 has taught us about the power of the people. This is the beginning of a democracy."

Another protest on July 13 drew 20,000 people. Like the protest on July 1, the relatively large turnout at the two later demonstrations indicated deep-rooted hostility among broad layers of the population to the assaults on democratic rights. The legislation, which was to be enacted under Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law, would effectively extend China's police state methods to the former British colony. It would enable the

prosecution of groups such as Falun Gong and the China Democracy Movement, which are outlawed in China but currently afforded sanctuary in Hong Kong.

Acutely aware that the protests in Hong Kong have the potential to trigger political unrest elsewhere in China, Beijing has played down their significance, claiming that only a “minority” has been involved. The *People’s Daily* on July 10, for instance, accused the Democratic Party and Catholic Church of instigating the demonstrations. “The vast majority of them [Hong Kong residents] did not want to see their expression of opinion turned into a political storm that would paralyse the government and throw it into a ruling crisis,” it declared.

Beijing dispatched 15 to 20 medium-level officials to Hong Kong for a 10-day consultation with local business leaders and major political parties over the volatile situation. The team included central government officials from the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, the Ministry of State Security and various intelligence agencies.

Privately, the Chinese officials admitted the extent of the opposition. A Democratic Party legislator told the *South China Morning Post* after his meeting with two officials. “I had the impression that they don’t think the rally was mobilised by outside forces. They are concerned that the current political crisis will get out of control, which will affect Hong Kong’s stability.”

At this stage, Beijing feels it has little choice but to support Tung. Shi Yinhong, an academic at the People’s University in Beijing, commented to *Washington Post*: “What they [the Beijing leadership] fear is a double effect. If the central government backs down, Hong Kong will be a base for subversive activities. At the same time, the Chinese public will conclude the Communist Party is not infallible, and that so-called people power can have an impact.”

Tung was “elected” in 1997 and 2002 by an 800-member Election Committee, composed of pro-Beijing businessmen and professionals. Under the terms of the British hand-over of Hong Kong, China is committed to reviewing this anti-democratic system in 2007 and introducing some form of universal suffrage. Beijing wants to push through its anti-subversion bill while it still has complete control over the Hong Kong legislature.

There is growing unrest in Hong Kong over

deteriorating economic and social conditions. The island economy was hard hit by the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis and is being increasingly bypassed as major Chinese cities, such as Shanghai, emerge as competitors. China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001 makes Hong Kong’s role as an economic gateway to the mainland increasingly irrelevant.

Six years after Tung was installed, the Hong Kong government recorded a huge deficit of \$US8 billion or 6 percent of the city’s GDP—a product of falling share prices, deflation and the recent collapse of the real estate bubble. The latest official unemployment figure, after the impact of the SARS epidemic, was 8.6 percent in June—the second highest in Asia Pacific region. But the government’s latest “relief” policy created only 8,000 jobs, paying as little as \$US350-400 a month.

The recent events in Hong Kong have exposed the claims of the new Chinese leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao to represent a move toward a more open, democratic political system in China. Its attitude to the Hong Kong protests has been just as autocratic as its predecessors. It has propped up the deeply unpopular Tung administration and insisted that he press ahead with the anti-subversion legislation to provide the legal basis for police state measures against future opposition.



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