

Beijing shuts the door on democratic reform in Hong Kong

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In a heavy-handed intervention in Hong Kong affairs, Beijing issued an edict on Monday, declaring that there would be no direct elections for the top political post in the former British colony in 2007 and no increase in elected representation at the 2008 poll for the Legislative Council. The decision makes a mockery of China's claims to respect Hong Kong's autonomy. It is likely to trigger widespread opposition and renewed protests demanding democratic reforms.

Hong Kong's current chief executive Tung Chee-hwa, a multi-millionaire shipping tycoon, was appointed by an 800-member committee of Beijing's hand-picked appointees following the British handover of the territory to China in 1997. Under the arrangement, Beijing pledged to abide by its "one country, two systems" formula to allow Hong Kong a degree of independence and to eventually establish a system of universal suffrage to directly elect the local government.

In early April, however, the Standing Committee of China's National Peoples Congress (NPC) arbitrarily announced that any political change in Hong Kong would be subject to its veto. China was intervening to protect "social stability and economic recovery," Chinese official Qiao Xiaoyang declared. The central authorities had "the right to decide on such matters," he said. "China is a unitary state, rather than a federal state."

Up to 20,000 people protested in Hong Kong on April 11 against the NPC announcement. Marchers shouted anti-Tung slogans and demanded that he stand down as chief executive. Others wore black ribbons on their arms signifying the "death" of democracy. "It's a strong signal, especially to Tung, that the demand for greater democracy is still strong," Law Yuk Kai, director of the Hong Kong Rights monitor, told the media.

On April 15, Tung sent a letter to the NPC Standing Committee asking for approval to modify Hong Kong's electoral system. But the formal request, which was aimed at easing growing pressure in Hong Kong for change, stressed Beijing's control over the process and the need for gradual alterations. Tung ignored appeals by the Democratic Party opposition for a meeting over political reforms.

By its decision this week, the NPC Standing Committee has rebuffed all demands for democratic reform and effectively blocked any significant change to Hong Kong's electoral laws in the foreseeable future. Beijing will still select the new chief

executive in 2007 and the formula for the 60-member Legislative Council will remain the same in 2008, as it is for this year. Half of the Council will be elected in September and the remainder will be appointed by small, "functional" groups of businessmen and professionals who are heavily biased towards Beijing.

Beijing made no concessions, offering only the vague possibility of gradual change in the indefinite future. Its fear of political opposition and contempt for democratic rights was expressed in comments by Chinese official Qiao Xiaoyang to a select group in Hong Kong. "Governments who are led by the nose by public opinion are irresponsible," he said. "The result of drastic reform is bound to be violent confrontation. Then there would be no stability, and society would be unable to bear the cost of this political experiment."

The Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy and its puppets in Hong Kong were profoundly shaken by the mass movement that erupted last year against Tung's plans to introduce new anti-subversion laws. A huge demonstration on July 1 involving an estimated half million people protested against a battery of anti-democratic measures, including the prosecution of Hong Kong residents for subversion and treason against Beijing. After attempting to amend the law, Tung was finally forced to shelve it altogether after some of his closest allies deserted him.

In late November, Beijing's political allies in Hong Kong suffered a serious defeat in the local District Council elections. The Democracy Party won 92 seats compared to 62 for the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB)—a loss of 21 seats. If the results were repeated in the Legislative Council election this September, the Democracy Party could wield significant influence in the top body, despite the presence of an equal number of appointees.

Following the DAB's electoral defeat, the Chinese Stalinist bureaucracy went on the political offensive. Last December Chinese President Hu Jintao ordered Tung to stop any preparations for a wider electoral mandate in Hong Kong. In the lead up to the NPC Standing Committee's assertion of control over Hong Kong affairs this month, Beijing orchestrated a media campaign in February and March, denouncing leading pro-democracy activists as "clowns" or "traitors".

There are fears in Beijing that any concessions to democratic reform will encourage further demands for democratic rights as well as improved living standards, not only in Hong Kong but on the Chinese mainland itself. The new Chinese leadership under Hu Jintao, which took over in late 2002, is acutely aware that it is sitting on top of a social time bomb. While a flood of foreign investment into China has benefitted a relatively small layer of the emerging capitalist class and affluent middle class, the vast majority of population confronts widespread poverty and unemployment.

When Hu was installed, he cautiously hinted that he would pursue a course of limited “political reforms”. The aim was never to provide genuine democratic rights, but rather to establish a base for the Stalinist bureaucracy within the middle class and for the new leadership to consolidate its grip over the apparatus. Beijing’s response to the opposition in Hong Kong confirms that the Hu leadership, like its predecessors, will not hesitate to use autocratic measures to buttress its rule.

The timing of the NPC Standing Committee ruling on Hong Kong is significant from another standpoint. It comes immediately after presidential elections in Taiwan, which resulted in a narrow and contentious win for Chen Shui-bian. Beijing has long sought a deal with the Taiwanese ruling elite that would reintegrate the island into China on a similar basis to Hong Kong—“one country, two systems”. China appears to have delayed moving against Hong Kong until after the Taiwan poll in order to avoid strengthening the position of Chen and his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in its struggle for an independent Taiwan.

Britain and the US have mildly criticised the NPC decision. British Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell declared that it was “inconsistent with the ‘high degree of autonomy’, which Hong Kong is guaranteed under the [Sino-British] Joint Declaration”. Like Beijing and the Hong Kong business elite, the two powers are primarily interested in ensuring stability in Hong Kong and China and the continuing flow of profits from the exploitation of cheap labour. As China pointed out, by way of justifying its own anti-democratic methods, the people of Hong Kong had even fewer rights under British colonial rule.

In Hong Kong, Tung displayed obvious nervousness in announcing the NPC statement. While he defended Beijing’s move as being in “the interest of Hong Kong and its long-term prosperity,” he went on to urge “people to stay calm and rational” and to “strive for consensus in the development of Hong Kong”. But in conditions where “consensus” means, in effect, agreement with Beijing, the widely unpopular Tung has very little room for manoeuvre.

Opposition politicians and activists in Hong Kong have angrily denounced the NPC decision. Rose Wu, chairwoman of the Civil Human Rights Front, warned: “The Hong Kong people aren’t going to just take this. We will not stop voicing our disagreement, our grievances and our anger.... This is an immoral government. They may create fear and

disappointment, but they can’t win the hearts of the people.” Activist Leung Kwok-hung declared: “It’s crystal clear now that the Chinese Communist Party is going to put their head on Hong Kong’s body. We are now in a long-term struggle.”

Several opposition figures expressed their disappointment that Beijing had shut the door completely on any change. Christine Loh, chief executive of the Civic Exchange research group, bemoaned the fact that there had been no dialogue with political parties and organisations in Hong Kong. “They [Beijing] went much further than they needed to. Of course people are disappointed, but what has really upset them is the manner in which this has been done,” she said.

What concerns Loh is that a movement against Beijing’s actions has the potential to spiral out of the control of the official opposition. Sections of the Hong Kong establishment, while wanting to maintain a degree of local autonomy, share a common fear with Beijing of any popular movement that threatens to undermine the interests of big business.

During the mass demonstrations last year, those who took part began to raise demands for jobs and improved living standards, as well as for democratic rights. The Hong Kong economy was hard hit by the Asian economic crisis in 1997-98 and then again by the SARS outbreak last year, leading to rising levels of unemployment and deteriorating working conditions.

Large protests have been scheduled for June 4, to coincide with the anniversary of Beijing’s brutal crackdown on protests in Tienanmen Square in 1989, and July 1, to mark last year’s demonstration in Hong Kong of half a million people.



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