

Huge protest rally in Hong Kong demands democratic and social reform

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Despite intimidation from Beijing, the efforts of opposition leaders to play down the protest, and media predictions of a low turnout, hundreds of thousands of people took part in a march and rally in Hong Kong on July 1 to demand democratic elections and improved living standards. The demonstration was called to mark the anniversary of last year's protest by half a million people against attempts to impose anti-democratic security legislation on the former British colony.

The Civil Human Rights Group, the main protest organiser, estimated that more than 530,000 people, or about 8 percent of Hong Kong's population, joined last week's march from Victoria Park to the downtown area of the city. The police put the number at substantially less—200,000—but other analysts assessed the turnout at around 400,000.

As the *New York Times* noted: "Whatever the exact figure, the crowd included a substantial number of the city's 6.8 million inhabitants. The turnout was even more surprising because the march appeared limited to fairly fit adults who had judged themselves able to withstand several hours packed together on a 95-degree day with very high humidity, no breeze and severe air pollution."

Various last-minute efforts were made to create a climate of confusion and intimidation. Unknown hackers reportedly broke into the Civil Human Rights Group's website and used its email address to send out a false message to supporters declaring the protest had been postponed "due to bad weather".

Just a week before the protest, the Hong Kong government charged a well-known activist Leung Kwok-hung and two of his associates with failing to inform police before holding a protest in 2002. It is the first time the law has been used since Beijing took control of Hong Kong in 1997. If convicted, the three could face five years in jail.

But thousands of workers, young people, housewives and professionals poured onto the streets, determined to show their opposition to Beijing's autocratic policies and their hostility to Hong Kong's chief executive Tung Chee-hwa. Many carried inflated dolls mocking Tung and placards reading "Democracy for Hong Kong", "End one party-dictatorship, establish a democratic China" and "Return power to people". Beijing has branded the last slogan particularly provocative—it was used by the Maoists prior to the 1949 revolution.

A 65-year-old former driver, Cheuk Kuang told Associated Press: "Only democracy can save Hong Kong. The communist

government is intervening too much in Hong Kong and it's trying to shut down all opposition voices." Maggie Yung, a clerk, said: "The Hong Kong government is just foolish. It's completely turned a blind eye to the people." Ben Kwok, a factory owner, said he joined the march because he did not "want to be subservient to the central government".

The march involved a wide range of people from conservative Roman Catholic activists, to Democratic Party members and trade union officials. Many demonstrators chanted slogans demanding that Tung step down and raised a range of social grievances, including unemployment, poverty, the outsourcing of jobs and discrimination against women. A teachers association threatened a hunger strike if the government did not improve their conditions.

The protest was a significant blow to Tung's administration. At a press conference later in the day, he defensively repeated that universal suffrage remained the "final goal" for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region but it had to be carried out in a "gradual and orderly" fashion. He lamely pledged to listen to the complaints of ordinary people and their demands for democracy.

Chinese authorities in Beijing heavily censored news and footage of the rally, claiming that only "a few Hong Kong residents" had participated. Prior to the march, a ban was imposed on tourist groups of more than 100 travelling from the mainland to Hong Kong. The Stalinist regime is terrified that people in other parts of China, angry at the lack of democratic rights and the social disaster created by capitalist restructuring, will follow Hong Kong's example.

Despite the ban, a number of Chinese visitors joined the march. In an interview with *Newsweek*, Peter Zhang from Shanghai said: "I was touched by the scene. Why don't mainlanders do something like this? Our rights have been suppressed so long." A teacher from Hangzhou declared: "Maybe people in China can learn from people in Hong Kong. We can come here and show our discontent with government."

The large turnout provoked a nervous reaction in the media and among political commentators. Before the rally there had been predictions of lower numbers because of Beijing's threats and the conciliatory approach of opposition legislators. After the march, there were warnings of political turmoil if Beijing maintained its hard-line stance.

Columnist Johnny Lau told Agence France Presse: "Last year's rally was more focused but this year's was appealing for broader demands—fundamental demands for freedom... Beijing has to now

show that it is taking the people seriously. There are lots of people who feel left out politically and economically. They have to be drawn in.”

The Asian Human Rights Commission, a non-government organisation, warned: “By withholding democracy from people of Hong Kong, the Chinese and Hong Kong governments are only sowing the seeds of instability and its negative economic consequences by spawning anger and frustration.”

There is no indication, however, that Beijing will make any concessions. Following last year’s huge rally, it stepped up its attack on democratic rights in Hong Kong. Chinese Vice President Zeng Qinghong—a figure close to retired president Jiang Zemin, who is still the chairman of the Central Military Commission—established a special office for Hong Kong. Zeng was one of the architects behind China’s crackdown on Falun Gong religious movement.

In late April, Beijing issued an uncompromising edict on Hong Kong affairs, declaring there would be no direct election for chief executive—Tung’s post—in 2007 and no increase in the elected representation at the 2008 poll for the Legislative Council (Legco). The statement was a blow to hopes fostered by the Democratic Party opposition that Beijing would move toward full direct elections, at least gradually.

Since then, Beijing has waged a campaign of intimidation and threats to undermine political opposition. Three of Hong Kong’s most outspoken radio hosts have been forced to resign after receiving a series of death threats. At the same time, Hong Kong residents reported receiving strained telephone calls from their mainland relatives urging them to vote for pro-Beijing parties in Legco elections due in September.

At least eight mainland police have been arrested in Hong Kong after complaints of suspicious activity. Their secret presence in the city is in direct violation of the legal framework agreed between Britain and China for the 1997 handover. Prior to the July 1 rally, the Chinese government hinted at violent provocations against the participants, branding the planned protest as “combative and standoffish”.

In response, the opposition leaders sought to reach an accommodation with Tung and Beijing. A series of meetings and dialogues were organised in June between the Hong Kong administration and trade union officials, business leaders, the Democratic Party and various lawyers to try to find “a middle ground”. Tung even offered to consider lifting the ban imposed after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre to prevent some prominent opposition figures travelling to the mainland.

The u-turn was exemplified by Lau Chin-shek, from the Alliance in Support of the Patriotic Democratic Movement in China, who called for “a big reconciliation” to improve relationships with Beijing. The party was founded in 1989 after one million people marched in Hong Kong against Beijing’s crackdown in Tiananmen Square. Lau’s comments provoked caused a split in his party after supporters denounced him as a “Judas”.

In the week before the rally, prominent Democratic Party leader Martin Lee proposed a motion in the Legislative Council urging the people of Hong Kong “to join hands with central government”. It was passed unanimously. Lee, one of Hong Kong’s wealthiest

lawyers, even called on protesters not to use the slogan “return power to people,” so as to avoid antagonising Beijing.

The Democratic Party defended its manoeuvres as “realpolitik” and an “actual step” to advance democratic reform. In reality, the opposition leaders are just as nervous as Beijing about the continuing involvement of hundreds of thousands of people in political protests. The party represents sections of the local ruling elite who are seeking to maintain a degree of autonomy from Beijing and preserve Hong Kong’s position as one of the preeminent centres of finance capital in the region.

Since the late 1970s, Hong Kong has been a major entry point for direct investment in China and an exit port for cheap Chinese produced goods. Much of the city’s previous manufacturing industry has shifted to southern China, particularly in Guangdong province, where Hong Kong businessmen are estimated to have \$US80 billion invested in enterprises employing more than 10 million workers.

Hong Kong, however, is facing growing competition from other centres such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Shanghai—cities where labour is far cheaper and access to foreign capital is just as open. The shift is reflected in the fact that only 28 percent of China’s exports now pass through Hong Kong as compared to 67 percent just 11 years ago. Hong Kong entrepreneurs view the city’s well-established business law and independent legal system as one of their last main advantages over their rivals.

These economic changes have also undermined the living standards of large segments of Hong Kong’s population. Following the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, the annual growth rate plunged from an average of 5.1 percent in the 1990s to just 1.9 percent over the past three years. Property prices plunged by more than 60 percent while unemployment rose more than threefold from 71,000 in 1997 to 277, 600 in 2003. While there are some signs of recovery this year, the high cost of living in Hong Kong combined with the lack of basic welfare systems leaves many people in poverty.

Both Beijing and its opponents in the Democratic Party fear that the mass movement for democratic rights will overflow into demands for improved social conditions. As the *New York Times* noted last month: “Loath to enter politics, local tycoons have repeatedly appealed to Beijing for help in the last year in turning back a democracy movement that has called for general elections, but also wants broader social legislation, including the introduction of a minimum wage and regulations on housing costs.”

While the Democratic Party demands a greater say for the local ruling elites in running Hong Kong’s affairs, it no more has a solution to the deepening social crisis confronting ordinary working people than the Beijing bureaucracy. As a result, the ongoing protest movement is not only going to present a political crisis for Tung and his Beijing backers but also open up divisions in the ranks of the official opposition.



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