

Hong Kong elections reveal a marked political radicalisation

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While the media has generally construed the outcome of the Hong Kong election on Sunday as a failure for the so-called democrats, the results revealed a marked determination by voters to choose candidates whom they hoped would fight more vigorously against the pro-Beijing administration and its policies.

The “democrats”—a loose grouping of parties, organisations and individuals—won 25 of the 60 seats at stake in the Legislative Council—three seats more than the 2000 result. The main pro-Beijing party—the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB)—and its allies took 34 seats—the same number as previously. One “independent” was also elected.

The odds were always stacked against the opposition. Only half of the seats are directly elected. The remainder are chosen by “functional constituencies”—groupings of professionals and businesses, most of which are small, conservative and unwilling to disturb the status quo. In some cases, corporations have a vote. Of these 30 “functional” representatives, 11 were elected unopposed. The “democrats” only managed to win a few comparatively large constituencies, such as education in which over 70,000 teachers voted.

The opposition parties had, however, expected to do better. Over the past two years, there has been a growing protest movement against the anti-democratic methods of Beijing’s appointee Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa and deepening social inequality.

On July 1, 2003, half a million people took to the streets to demonstrate against Tung’s attempts to impose new anti-subversion laws that would have allowed police to crack down on organisations outlawed in China. On the same date this year, several hundred thousand people protested against Beijing’s decision in April to rule out full direct elections for chief executive in 2007 and for the Legislative Council in 2008.

The “democrats” hoped to capitalise on these sentiments, particularly as six more seats were up for direct election than in 2000, but only increased their tally of directly-elected

seats from 17 to 18; the remainder coming from functional constituencies. Expressing the bitter disappointment of the Democratic Party, the largest opposition party, its chairman Martin Lee described the result as a “very sad victory”.

Many factors contributed to the election outcome, not least of which was Beijing’s campaign of dirty tricks against its opponents. In the final weeks of the campaign, Chinese police arrested Democratic Party candidate Alex Ho in the city of Dongguang, allegedly for soliciting a prostitute, and imposed a six-month term of detention without trial. Another Democratic Party candidate, James To, suddenly found himself in the midst of a financial scandal.

Beijing made crude appeals to patriotism, including a military parade in early August and the dispatch of Chinese Olympic medalists to Hong Kong. It used bribes, particularly the freeing up of travel to and from the mainland and closer economic links. It also resorted to outright thuggery against opposition candidates and critics—two prominent radio commentators resigned earlier in the year after reportedly receiving death threats. There are also some indications of ballot rigging.

Beijing can hardly draw any comfort from the results. If there has been direct elections for all the seats, the pro-Beijing parties would have been badly defeated. An estimated 60 percent of voters supported candidates and parties regarded as “pro-democracy”. If the post of chief executive had been at stake, the widely despised Tung, a billionaire shipping magnate, would have been unceremoniously dumped. The DAB picked up several directly-elected seats in the Legislative Council but mainly at the expense of its previous allies.

The most significant aspect of the poll was not the overall outcome but a sharp dissatisfaction expressed by voters in the conservative wing of the “democrats”. The Democratic Party, which is dominated by well-off professionals and businessmen, actually lost seats—dropping from 11 to 9. Concerned that he may lose his seat, Martin Lee, a wealthy lawyer, ran a last minute “Save Martin Lee” campaign. Due to the quirks of the preferential voting system, Lee held his

seat but the 10,000-vote surplus for his ticket cost ally Cyd Ho from the Frontier Party her seat.

The reasons for the alienation from the Democratic Party are not hard to find. The party represents sections of the ruling class in Hong Kong concerned at the impact of Beijing's rule on the former British colony. These layers call for "democracy" in order to maintain a degree of independence from Beijing and to keep the legal system, particularly in commercial law that allowed Hong Kong to become a major financial hub.

Confronted with mass protests that the Democratic Party neither expected nor wanted, its leaders have sought to compromise and placate Beijing. In the lead up to this year's demonstration on July 1, Martin Lee proposed a motion in the Legislative Council calling on the people of Hong Kong "to join hands with the central government". It was adopted unanimously.

The Democratic Party took no action against the provocative arrest of Alex Ho on prostitution charges, despite obvious indications that he had been set up. Fearing a reaction from Beijing, it raised no objections to his imprisonment without trial. As an article on the *Asia Times* website entitled "The end of the HK Democrats as we know them" pointed out: "The Democrats' decision to ignore him and not make a political issue out of the case was considered less judicious than spineless."

The class orientation of the Democratic Party also means that it has no answers to the growing social and economic crisis in Hong Kong. The growth of alternative financial centres on the mainland such as Shanghai has undercut Hong Kong's position. In the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, the economy has slowed, leading to growing poverty and unemployment in conditions where there is no effective social welfare. The Democratic Party's economic restructuring policies would only compound these social problems.

Parties and individuals considered to be more willing to fight for democratic rights and better living standards benefitted at the Democratic Party's expense. The *Asia Times* article noted: "The Democratic Party might be on the wane, but the broad democratic front continues to expand. More than 60 percent of the vote went to people calling for more democracy and opposing Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa. One now sees the Article 45 Concern Group... with four seats in the Legislative Council. This heavyweight legal team's electoral success definitely points to the fear Hong Kong people have of the mainland's lack of law."

The Article 45 Concern Group was only formed last year in the wake of the huge July 1 protest against proposed security laws. The organisation's name refers to the section of the Basic Law—the legal basis for the 1997 British

handover of the colony—that stipulates the goal of universal suffrage and full direct elections for the Legislative Council and the Chief Executive.

Two independent democrats were also elected. Andrew Cheng was one of the two radio hosts forced to resign after receiving a series of threats over their aggressive anti-Beijing criticism. Cheng stepped aside after thugs broke into the office of a trading company where he is a partner, asked for the radio commentator by name, and then doused the office with red paint. Cheng's "Teacup in a storm", which featured biting though limited criticism of Hong Kong's authorities, was rated the city's most popular radio show.

The second independent was Leung Kwok-hung, also known as "Longhair", a 48-year-old protester and self-proclaimed "Marxist" and "Trotskyist", who has featured prominently in Hong Kong demonstrations with his Che Guevara tee-shirt and long flowing hair. While Leung's protest politics have nothing to do with Marxism or Trotskyism, he was one of the few candidates who appealed to working people hit by unemployment and cutbacks to pensions and social services.

Leung won his working class constituency with 60,000 votes—three times the number he receiving in 2000. Luisa Tam, an editor at the *South China Morning Post*, explained his appeal: "People are tired of all the blah-blah-blah from legislators. They wanted someone who will kick some ass, and Longhair's the one to do it."

In the final analysis, none of these "pro-democracy" parties and individuals is fundamentally different from the Democratic Party—all of them seek to pressure Beijing and its loyal supporters in Hong Kong for concessions. But the fact that a significant segment of voters have chosen more confrontational figures and parties signals a political radicalisation is underway as people seek to defend democratic rights and living standards.

Far from the result consolidating Beijing's position in Hong Kong, the outcome reveals an explosive build up of hostility and anger that has been completely frustrated by the contrived and limited poll on Sunday.



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