

Mass protest in Hong Kong against new chief executive

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Tens of thousands of people in Hong Kong protested on December 4 against the refusal of the city's chief executive Donald Tsang to put forward a timetable for direct elections for the island's government. The massive march indicates that opposition to Tsang is becoming as entrenched as the disaffection that led to the early resignation of his predecessor, Tung Chee-hwa, in March.

The various opposition parties and civil right groups that organised the protest estimated that as many as 250,000 people participated in the demonstration. The Hong Kong police released a figure of 63,000. The Hong Kong University's Public Opinion Program said 80,000 to 100,000 people took part.

The turnout was without question far larger than the organisers' expectation of 50,000. It is the largest protest since July 1, 2004, when hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated following the decision of Beijing's National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee to rule out direct elections for the chief executive in 2007.

On the weekend, banners and placards demanded a timetable of direct elections and denounced the existing system as "caged democracy". Many marchers dressed in black clothes to symbolise the lack of democratic rights. The sentiments expressed in interviews were disgust and outrage at the continuation of an anti-democratic system whereby a pro-Beijing 800-member committee chooses the chief executive.

K.T. Wong, a retiree, told Associated Press: "I'm 75. I want popular elections. Never give up." Andrew Wong, a 40-year-old working in an export company, said the chief executive was "only elected by 800 people, which means he only has to please them. I've brought my five-year-old daughter to teach her what democracy is."

Chan Lai-Keung, a 45-year-old computer engineer, told the *Financial Times*: "This march is very important because we need to remind Beijing that we want democracy, whether it is good times or bad times." Tang Bok-man, 74, commented to the *Washington Post*: "We are here to fight for the rights we should have as citizens. I probably cannot see full democracy in Hong Kong in my life, but I hope my children and grandchildren can enjoy it."

Paul Tsang, an 83-year-old marcher, told Reuters: "You want a clown or a chief executive? Oppose bird-cage political reform".

Tsang, a former official in the pre-1997 British colonial administration, was appointed chief executive in June. His installation created initial public hopes he would be more independent from Beijing and more amenable to the demands for universal suffrage. He enjoyed a 70 percent approval rate only a few months ago.

Tsang's honeymoon with the Hong Kong population has been short-lived however. In October, he dashed popular expectations with a political reform package that excluded direct elections. He proposed only to double the size of the Election Committee—the body that elects the chief executive—from 800 members to 1,600 and to add 10 seats to the 60-seat Legislative Council (Legco).

Half of the current Legco seats are directly elected by geographical constituencies, while the remaining 30 are chosen by only some 130,000 electors in 27 functional constituencies, such as professional, labour, religious and educational associations. Under Tsang's proposal, this affront to democracy would continue at the 2008 Legco election. As well, only five of the new Legco seats would be directly elected. The city's 529 district councillors would elect the other five.

The plan was opposed by 25 opposition legislators and the December 4 protest called. The so-called democrats represent the interests of a section of the Hong Kong ruling elite whose main concern is greater autonomy from Beijing to maintain the city's competitiveness against financial centres emerging on the mainland, such as Shanghai.

If Tsang's plan does not secure a two-thirds majority vote in Legco, he will confront the same political quandary as Tung Chee-hwa—trapped between Beijing's insistence that no timetable for universal suffrage can be given, and popular demands for direct elections.

In the face of opinion polls showing overwhelming support for universal suffrage, Tsang made an unprecedented televised speech on November 30, declaring his package would "advance" Hong Kong's democratic rights and calling for the Legislative Council to pass it by December 21. Tsang was compelled, however, to rule out again any definite timetable for the chief executive being chosen by direct election and admitted that any decision on the issue was actually up to Beijing.

The address generated public anger. The Chinese government further inflamed the situation on the eve of December 4 protest. NPC Standing Committee deputy-secretary Qiao Xiaoyang met with Hong Kong lawmakers and business leaders in nearby Shenzhen city and declared that any inclusion of an election timetable in Tsang's reform package was "unrealistic" and "impossible".

The mass turnout on December 4 reflected more than just democratic aspirations. Alienation in Hong Kong toward the political establishment is also being fueled by growing social inequality and poverty.

Hong Kong's economy has recovered somewhat from the impact of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis and the SARS outbreak in 2003. Unlike the boom in 1980s and 1990s, the recovery—which has primarily taken place in the real estate sector and tourism—has failed to lift the living standards of working people or provide job security.

Like Tung, Tsang's government has no solution to the growing polarisation between rich and poor. Large sections of the population have been forced into low-paying and casualised jobs. The opening of Disneyland in Hong Kong in September, for example, was touted

as marking the city's return to an era of economic prosperity. The theme park, however, has become a notorious example of long-working hours, poor wages and unfair treatment of workers.

At the same time, the government has shut down public schools, axed unemployment benefits and refused to implement widely-demanded minimum wages legislation. Discontent can only continue to grow.

Even before the mass turn-out, the call for the December 4 demonstration had provoked nervousness in ruling circles that it could ignite a movement that went far beyond the question of how the next chief executive on Hong Kong is going to be elected.

The chairman of Hopewell Holdings, Gordon Wu, denounced the protest as "mob politics". Casino tycoon Stanley Ho, one of the wealthiest businessmen in Hong Kong, told journalists that a large demonstration could provoke an intervention by Beijing. Ho declared on November 29: "The central leaders told me that they hope the democrats will show the spirit of loving Hong Kong and loving the country by behaving like patriots, and then the central government will consider the timetable issue."

Beijing is clearly concerned that any concession to democratic rights in Hong Kong will only spur similar demands elsewhere in China. In a bid to placate the Chinese leadership, Martin Lee, the founding chairman of the Democratic Party (DP), declared on Sunday evening that the march was only about democracy in Hong Kong, not the mainland. The DP and other opposition parties would far rather reach an accommodation with Beijing than encourage a broad movement of working people whose democratic and social aspirations they are incapable of meeting.



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