

Hong Kong “political reform” package rejected

John Chan
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The political future of Hong Kong’s chief executive Donald Tsang is beginning to look like that of his predecessor Tung Chee-hwa, after opposition legislators rejected his proposed package of electoral reforms on December 21.

Just two weeks before the vote in Hong Kong’s Legislative Council, a huge demonstration made clear that ordinary people were opposed to the bogus “democratic reforms” drawn up by Tsang, and effectively ended any prospect of a compromise deal between Tsang and the opposition parties.

Like Tung, Tsang faces the prospect of becoming a political lame duck. Tung resigned last March, supposedly for “health reasons,” after facing a series of mass protests demanding full popular elections for the Legislative Council and for the post of chief executive.

Beijing backed Tsang, hoping he would be a better prospect for defusing the popular opposition. Unlike Tung, Tsang, a senior civil servant under the former British colonial administration, was seen as more independent of China.

Tsang’s high popularity rating has quickly evaporated. He is caught between the aspirations of the ordinary working people for democratic rights and Beijing’s insistence that no direct election take place for chief minister or the Legislative Council.

In October, in an effort to find a compromise, Tsang proposed an electoral reform package to add 10 more seats to the Legislative Council and double the size of the 800-member Election Committee that chooses the chief executive.

The planned “reforms”, however, were purely cosmetic. Only half the additional 10 council seats would be directly elected, leaving the overall composition of the body unchanged. Doubling the size of the Election Committee only meant that Beijing

would select twice as many hand-picked nominees, ensuring that working people still had no say in electing the chief executive.

The opposition parties were dissatisfied with the plan as it meant their aspirations for an expanded political role would be further delayed. In order to pressure Tsang to make more concessions, they called a rally on December 4 but the protest went far beyond their expectations.

While estimates vary, as many as 200,000 marched through Hong Kong’s streets to protest against Tsang’s refusal to implement direct elections. The protest was comparable to the huge demonstrations in 2003 and 2004 against Tung and showed that popular concerns over democratic rights and declining living standards have not diminished.

Shocked by the protest, Tsang attempt to push through his electoral reform by making a deal with the opposition legislators. At the last minute, he pledged to phase out all appointed seats on district councils by 2012. Having called the December 4 rally, however, the opposition was in no position to compromise.

Even before the final vote, 22 opposition lawmakers publicly opposed the reform package. Democratic Party leader Lee Wing-tat declared: “We have no choice but to vote against the package.” Ronny Tong of the Article 45 Concern Group said: “The government is taking one step forward and three steps back. I find the so-called concessions entirely unappealing.”

Tsang criticised the opposition as “horrifying animals” for failing to take “a concrete step” toward democratic elections. “I urged them to be our democratic heroes but they are worried that the media will label them as abandoning their aspirations for democracy,” he said.

Out of the 60 Legislative Council members, 24—all

from opposition parties—voted against Tsang’s measures and one abstained. The package failed to gain the constitutionally required two-thirds majority, or 40 votes. The result delivered a major blow to Tsang, who had described his package “a Christmas present” for the Hong Kong people.

Following the defeat, Tsang declared he would offer no more political reforms but would instead focus on economic issues. A week after the December 21 vote, he went to Beijing to report to top Chinese leaders. Publicly, he received strong backing. The state-controlled media denounced the vote, declaring that opposition parties were responsible for “missing” an opportunity to advance democracy in Hong Kong.

Privately, however, the Chinese leadership was no doubt deeply concerned at Tsang’s failure and the continuing public opposition. Beijing has no intention of introducing direct elections in Hong Kong as such a concession would stimulate similar demands for democratic rights throughout China itself and threaten the existing police state regime.

In a bid to bolster Tsang’s position, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao offered a package of economic concessions, including allowing Hong Kong’s financial institutions to issue yuan-denominated bonds and to lend yuan on the mainland. To boost tourism, Wen also promised to permit the residents of more Chinese cities to travel to Hong Kong.

Wen declared rather ominously, however, that there were “deep-rooted conflicts and problems” in Hong Kong. Tsang attempted to brush off the comments by saying: “What the Premier meant is that the economic restructuring is still not finished. We see problems about our high wages, high rental and land prices. This is what he meant.”

Wen’s words were clearly a threat, however. Since coming to office, Tsang has energetically attempted to build “mutual trust” between the opposition and Beijing. One of his widely-hailed achievements was a visit to the “motherland” last year by a group of leading opposition figures who had previously been refused a visa to enter China.

Now the rapprochement is coming to an end. According to an article in the Hong Kong *Standard* on January 4, Chinese leaders are rethinking their “conciliatory approach” toward the opposition. One Beijing official told the newspaper: “If the democratic

opponents think that what happened on December 21 will be over and forgotten, they are insulting the central leaders’ intelligence.”

As for the Hong Kong “democrats”, they are seeking to confine the opposition to manoeuvres within the present anti-democratic framework. The opposition parties are planning to select a candidate for the next chief executive election in 2007 and to vie for more seats in the next 800-member Election Committee. Given Beijing’s tight control over the entire process, the campaign is purely symbolic.

The opposition represents sections of the Hong Kong ruling elite who regard the “rule of law” and a certain independence from Beijing as essential to maintaining the city as a major financial centre. As Shanghai and other Chinese cities have emerged as competitors, much of Hong Kong’s manufacturing has shifted to the mainland. But the city retains an advantage as a secure environment for investors and a base of operations for businesses in China.

The opposition parties are just as fearful as Beijing that mass protests by ordinary working people demanding democratic rights and better living standards will slip out of their political control.



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