Beijing delays direct elections in Hong Kong for another decade

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The Chinese government has delayed any move toward direct elections for the Hong Kong government for a decade after the executive body of the National Peoples Congress (NPC) approved a report on political reform submitted last month by Hong Kong's chief executive Donald Tsang.

Direct elections for chief executive will not be held until 2017 and for the Legislative Council (Legco) until 2020. Currently the chief executive is chosen by an election committee and only half the 60 Legco members are directly elected.

Tsang acknowledged that a survey had found that a majority of Hong Kong voters wanted direct elections by 2012, when he is due to retire. Well aware of Beijing's opposition to elections, he attempted to justify the longer delay by lamely saying it had "a better chance of being accepted by the majority in our community".

The proposed elections are themselves a travesty of democracy. Candidates will be selected by the same election committee that now chooses the chief executive. The 800-member committee is handpicked by Beijing and includes Hong Kong's most powerful business tycoons and elite professionals. In other words, everyone will get to vote, but only for the candidates that are chosen in advance by Beijing.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that even these limited changes will take place. The NPC resolution stated only that amendments "may be" made to Hong Kong's electoral system. Beijing retains the ultimate power to "interpret" Hong Kong's mini-constitution, or the Basic Law, including the clause referring to universal suffrage.

The opposition Democratic Party, which has campaigned for direct elections in 2012, criticised the plan. Martin Lee, the party's veteran leader, declared: "In 2017, we could end up voting for two persons, both nominated by Beijing effectively, and this may be the final model forever."

The "pan-democrats", consisting of a variety of groups, have held two demonstrations against the plan. The first on December 29 attracted less than 1,000 people. A larger rally, estimated by organisers at 22,000, took place yesterday in the city's Victoria Park. These protests are substantially smaller than previous rallies, indicating growing disillusion with the Democrats over their failure to wage a consistent campaign for democratic reforms.

When the former British colony reverted to Chinese rule in 1997, its Basic Law promised universal suffrage as the "ultimate aim" but set no concrete timetable. After autocratically ruling Hong Kong through colonial governors for 150 years, London's last-minute push for "democracy" was aimed at providing a voice for layers that had been associated with British interests.

The so-called pan-democrats are a loose grouping of professionals, trade unions officials, student leaders and non-government organisations that are agreed only on the need for direct elections. More conservative layers reflect the interests of big business which regard the maintenance of Hong Kong's legal framework as essential to its functioning as an international financial centre. Other elements express the frustration of smaller firms with the domination of the tycoons over every aspect of the economy and the government's collusion with them.

Tsang's predecessor, Tung Chee-hwa, himself a wealthy businessman, was installed by Beijing's election committee in 1997 and never enjoyed widespread support. In 2003, he provoked a protest of half a million people when, under pressure from Beijing, he attempted to impose an anti-subversion law restricting civil liberties. Anger over the anti-democratic legislation combined with widespread concern over an economic downturn and deepening social inequality.

Although Tung retreated on the anti-subversion law, anger soon boiled over on the issue of electoral reform. Beijing reacted heavy-handedly, further compounding Tung's political crisis, with the NPC insisting on its right to decide any electoral changes in Hong Kong. Half a million people again turned out on the streets on July 1, 2004.

The Democratic Party responded by calling for "reconciliation" with Beijing, effectively shutting down the protest movement. Like Beijing, the opposition was distinctly nervous that the huge protests were beginning to express social demands over unemployment and the lack of adequate welfare programs. In the 2004 Legco election, while the Democratic Party made few gains, several independents expressing more radical demands were elected.

Deeply concerned about the ongoing political crisis, Beijing forced Tung to step down in 2005. Tsang, a former civil servant

under the British colonial administration, was installed by Beijing to finish Tung's second term. Tsang attempted to present himself as more enlightened on democratic reform, but his proposed package in 2005 provoked a protest of quarter of a million people. Opposition lawmakers in the Legco, who had been considering a compromise, were forced to vote against Tsang's plan.

The conciliatory attitude of opposition parties toward Beijing was also revealed in last year's "election" for the post of chief executive. Rather than openly condemning the poll as a fraud, the opposition stood Alan Leong, from the Civic Party, and thereby legitimised the process. Tsang was backed by Beijing's supporters in the election committee and easily won a new term.

The opposition's willingness to compromise with Beijing has only led to growing dissatisfaction with its policies, which was expressed most clearly in last November's election for local district councils. The Democratic Party secured only 60 seats—a drop from 96 in 2003—while the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong nearly doubled its representation to 103 seats.

Support for direct elections remains strong, however. The issue was prominent in a Legco by-election in early December as Beijing prepared to consider electoral reform. Anson Chan, a former head of civil service in Tung's administration and supported by most opposition parties, won a landslide victory over pro-Beijing candidate Regina Ip. She supported a direct election for chief executive for 2012 whereas Ip had insisted that any electoral reform had to be "acceptable to Beijing".

Fearful of another political crisis, Tsang has urged the opposition to cooperate. "If emotional debate and conflict between political parties drags on over this matter, Hong Kong's stability and development will be severely hampered," he warned in late December. While the past record of the Democratic Party demonstrates its willingness to conciliate, its moves in this direction are undercutting its base of support.

The issue of democratic rights is bound up with rising social inequality in Hong Kong. Home to a large section of Asia's wealthy elite, Hong Kong's Gini coefficient, a measure of income disparity, has increased significantly over the past decade. In 1996, the figure was 0.518 and in 2006 it rose to 0.533—higher than China's 0.447.

The former British colony has been hard hit by the shift of manufacturing to China and its decline as a regional shipping hub. Large numbers of low-wage workers in service and tourist industries have become a new "working poor", while the middle-class is shrinking. A small layer of financial and real estate speculators have boosted their wealth—thanks largely to rising stock markets fueled by China's growth.

An article in the *Newsweek* magazine last July pointed to the politically explosive character of the social divide. Unlike sections of the middle class who left in 1997, "Hong Kong's have-nots can't vote with their feet. But because they'll someday wield ballots, their lot is a major political issue. Since 1997, working-class incomes have stagnated; unemployment peaked at nearly 10 percent a few years back but has since fallen by more than half, and living costs have risen sharply. Job insecurity is also rife as labor-intensive industries continue their exodus to China. Since 1995, official data show, the percentage of semiskilled workers in the economy has declined by almost a quarter and now accounts for just 16 percent of total employment."

At the top end of society, *Newsweek* noted: "Hong Kong's tycoons are famous for their resistance to political change. They never pushed for democracy under British rule, and since the handover they've argued that the city is not yet ready for it, or that universal suffrage would threaten the economy because low-income voters would elect populists promising costly social programs."

The *Economist* magazine explained this month that Tsang had to placate an impatient public, while not alarming Beijing over democratic reforms. "This may not be possible. So he has given warning that heated argument might jeopardise Hong Kong's 'stability and development'. This threat is not taken lightly. The city prides itself on functioning efficiently in an often chaotic continent. Of course, the best way to ensure continued stability would be to let the people of Hong Kong run their own city. But Beijing is loath to let democracy take root in this 'Special Administrative Region' lest it sets a precedent elsewhere in China".

The comment points to the even more explosive political tensions in China itself. Hong Kong is now part of China. If universal suffrage is allowed in Hong Kong, it raises the question of democratic rights throughout China, where Beijing relies on police-state measures to suppress any opposition, even as protests over the impact of its market restructuring are on the rise.