

Report highlights escalating social and political tensions in Hong Kong

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An opinion survey report released on April 9 by Hong Kong Chinese University's Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies warned of the heightened possibility of social and political unrest.

Professor Wong Chack-kie of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies headed the survey of more than 1,000 people, who were questioned between February 21 to March 1 on their views of Hong Kong's "social harmony". More than one quarter of the respondents said that only "radical means" could force the government to answer their demands. Asked whether Hong Kong is a "harmonious society", only 26.5 percent agreed, a sharp drop from the 37 percent who agreed in previous surveys conducted in 2006 and 2008.

Correspondents identified three main sources of social tensions—the widening gap between rich and poor, conflicts between ordinary people and big business, and the division between the population and the government of Chief Executive Donald Tsang. The survey highlighted mounting discontent with the government. The percentage approving the government's job creation policies, for example, dropped from 52.4 percent in 2008 to just 38.7 percent.

Professor Wong—a former member of the government's Central Policy Unit—admitted that the survey's findings on people's potential use of "radical means" to express their views was a cause for concern. He called on the government to increase income subsidies for lower social classes in order to ameliorate social inequality, while also working with opposition parties to implement democratic reforms. Wong warned that without these measures, the high-pressured "steam pot will explode at anytime".

Wong's colleague at the Institute of Asia-Pacific

Studies, researcher Ho Wing-him, added: "In the past decade, local GDP has expanded, but the incomes of the lower classes have not risen but declined, even the incomes of the middle-classes have not increased. Although the impact of these contradictions is yet to be seen, people feel that the government is not paying attention to them and taking care of them, and this will probably lead to people resorting to radical methods to express their aspirations."

Ho predicted that if the current trend continues, more politicians identified as left wing will be elected into Hong Kong's Legislative Council (Legco) in 2012. Three members of the middle-class radical protest group, the League of Social Democrats—who are led by "Long Hair" Leung Kwok-hung and (falsely) claim to be socialists and even Marxists—had previously been elected into the council's 30 directly elected seats.

The Hong Kong Chinese University survey has generated intense discussion in the local media over the political implications of its findings. Amid bloody street battles in Thailand between the rural and urban poor and the military, Hong Kong's business and political establishment fears similar turmoil driven by deepening global economic instabilities.

An article in the Chinese-language *Oriental Daily News* warned on April 9: "On the surface, Hong Kong society looks stable and prosperous, but in the past several decades, bloody riots erupted several times, mostly triggered by livelihood issues such as rising prices and labour disputes, which were in fact very similar to the present social tensions."

The article outlined a brief history of previous eruptions of unrest on the island. In 1966, a youth staged a hunger

strike against higher ferry service charges and was arrested by police, triggering two nights of riots in Kowloon in which more than 1,000 people were arrested. In 1967, riots erupted after workers in plastic flower factories went on strike, leading to a protracted confrontation with British authorities. In 1984, a three-day strike by taxi drivers blocked roads, caused traffic chaos and confronted riot police. In June 1989, in wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, 1.5 million people marched in the streets of Hong Kong.

Oriental Daily News did not mention that social unrest continued after the former British colony return to Chinese rule in 1997. In 2003, half a million people protested against unpopular former Hong Kong chief executive Tung Chee-hwa's plan to pass draconian national security laws, amid an economic downturn and deteriorating living standards among workers. Tung was forced to step down in 2005, due to ongoing, widespread opposition.

Professor Lau Siu-kai, head of the government's Central Policy Unit, responded to the survey and media coverage in a comment titled "Threat of riots is exaggerated" and published in Hong Kong's English daily *Standard* last Monday. While Lau insisted that most people were satisfied with the existing situation and still regarded Hong Kong as a harmonious society, he admitted that increasing numbers of people felt otherwise.

"[M]ore and more people perceive an increase in social conflicts, especially class conflicts (between employers and employees, management and staff, large consortia and ordinary people, and upper and lower classes), political conflicts (clashes in society and legislature) and conflicts between the government and the people," he wrote. "[S]ocial discontent is mainly caused by the widening wealth gap, perceived cronyism between the government and business sector, concern over the economic outlook, dissatisfaction with government policies and governance, insecurity and anxiety among the middle class, discontent with constitutional development, divergent views on approach of development, difficulties faced by the younger generation in realising their potential, limited upward social mobility, and disjunction between one's expectations and reality."

Lau's comment is a self-indictment of the cult of the "free market" enshrined by the city's wealthy business

elite.

There is no minimum wage for Hong Kong workers, nor any public pensions for the elderly, and only very limited unemployment benefits. In addition, the government has used its control over the sale of land to assist real estate tycoons' creating a series of property bubbles in Hong Kong, leaving countless working households with huge mortgage or rental costs. In the past decade, Hong Kong Housing Authority has frozen public housing programs on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon in order to boost the property market, while selling land for luxurious residential high-rises.

For the 200,000 Hong Kong workers remaining in the manufacturing sector, the rise of China as a cheap labour platform has seen intensified pressure on their jobs, wages, and conditions. Factory wages now average just \$US700 a month, down from \$US1,300–\$2,500 a month in 1980s. Median wages for working people as a whole have stagnated for a decade. According to the official measure, 1.23 million people or 1 in 7 live under the poverty line.

The ultra-wealthy meanwhile continue to enrich themselves. According to *Forbes's* 2010 list of the 40 richest Hong Kong individuals, the group's total fortune increased by an extraordinary 65 percent from 2009, from \$US82 billion to \$US135 billion. Using the Gini coefficient index, Hong Kong is the most unequal society in Asia, worse than mainland China.

The 2010 Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies survey is another indicator of a deeply divided society that will inevitably lead to explosive social and political struggles.



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