

Hong Kong protests denounce Beijing's anti-democratic plans

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The Chinese regime's announcement on Sunday of the framework for the 2017 election of Hong Kong's chief executive provoked protests against the anti-democratic move. While granting "one person, one vote," Beijing will retain effective control of the election by closely vetting candidates. Currently the chief executive is chosen by a committee dominated by pro-Beijing appointees.

About 5,000 protesters gathered on Sunday outside government buildings to mark the arrival of Li Fei, deputy secretary general of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress (NPC), which drew up the plan. Li held a meeting on Monday to explain the new framework.

Opposition law-maker Leung Kwok-hung led a protest inside the meeting hall, unfurling a banner reading: "The central government broke its promise [for direct elections], shameful." Another protester, Alex Chow, head of the Hong Kong Federation of Students, shouted: "Hong Kong is our turf."

Police and security guards escorted, and in some cases dragged, the protesters from the meeting. Outside the hall, police used pepper spray to disperse demonstrators.

The NPC Standing Committee's new rules make a mockery of Beijing's claims to be introducing universal suffrage to Hong Kong. Only two or three candidates will be permitted to stand for chief executive. Each will need the support of more than 50 percent of a 1,200 nomination panel, which will be stacked with Beijing's supporters.

Eligibility for candidates is even tighter than the current requirement of support from one eighth of the election panel. In 2012, an opposition Democrat, Albert Ho, was one of the three candidates formally considered by the panel, although he stood no chance of

actually being appointed.

The changes still must be approved by Hong Kong's 70-member Legislative Council with a two-thirds majority. The so-called pan-democracy camp, which currently has 27 members in the legislature and can block passage of the bill, has opposed the new rules. If rejected, the current anti-democratic method of appointing the chief executive will remain in place.

There is widespread opposition in Hong Kong to China's announcement. The release of a White Paper foreshadowing tighter control by Beijing over Hong Kong was met by protests throughout the summer, including a protest on July 1 involving several hundred thousand people. A protest group known as Occupy Central has threatened a campaign of civil disobedience if Beijing proceeds as planned.

The pan-democrats and Occupy Central represent layers of the Hong Kong elites and upper middle classes concerned over the impact of greater interference by Beijing in the administration of the Special Administrative Region. Britain relinquished control of its former colony in 1997, on the basis of "one country, two systems." Under this formula, China maintained the legal framework established under British colonial rule, most importantly private property rights and commercial law, that ensured Hong Kong remained an Asian financial hub.

Three decades of capitalist restoration in China have transformed Hong Kong into a major gateway for foreign capital to the mainland. Southern China has become a major cheap labor platform, driving down already poor working conditions on the island. The minimum hourly wage is HK\$30 (\$US3.90), insufficient to keep up with inflation. According to the *South China Morning Post*, the subsistence wage level next year would be HK\$39.

While mobilising large demonstrations in the past in support of their limited agenda of universal suffrage and civil rights, the Democrats have deliberately sought to suppress the social aspirations expressed by broader layers of working people. Hong Kong is deeply polarised between rich and poor, lacks any significant welfare provisions and has a tax system geared to the interests of the corporate elite.

Occupy Central's campaign of peaceful civil disobedience is pitched to sections of the middle class. The group has called for a number of sit-in protests as well as student boycotts of classes, leading up to one larger sit-in protest, no date for which has been announced. Benny Tai, a co-founder of Occupy Central, stated: "We're not making threats, we're just sending warning signals. The house is on fire, something has to be done."

Like the Democrats, Beijing is concerned not to endanger Hong Kong's status as a financial centre. At the same time, it fears that the eruption of social unrest could spread to the mainland, provoking major political upheavals. NPC official Li Fei warned on Monday: "If we yield because some people threaten to commence radical, illegal activities, it would only result in more, bigger illegal activities."

Last Friday, an unnamed Chinese official went further, warning "external force[s]" not to use Hong Kong "as a bridgehead to subvert and infiltrate the mainland." While the remarks were dismissed in the Western press as paranoia, Beijing's concerns are understandable amid heightened tensions throughout the region produced by the Obama administration's confrontational "pivot to Asia" against China.

The signs are already evident that the US, with Britain's support, is preparing to exploit the issue of democratic rights to put Beijing under pressure in Hong Kong. An unnamed US official cited by Reuters criticised the 2017 election plan declaring: "The legitimacy of the chief executive will be greatly enhanced if the election provides the people of Hong Kong a genuine choice of candidates representative of the voters' will."

In a comment in yesterday's *Financial Times*, the last British governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten, declared that "Britain is honour bound to speak up for Hong Kong" and to ensure that China respects the commitments made before the 1997 handover.

Yesterday, Beijing sharply criticised plans by the British government to hold an inquiry into the state of democracy in Hong Kong.

US imperialism has cynically used the banner of "democracy" and "human rights" for decades as the justification for provocations, interventions and wars to further its interests. As for Britain, the appointed governor exercised autocratic control over Hong Kong's administration during more than 150 years of British rule.

The Obama administration last year signaled its determination to intervene more aggressively in Hong Kong. Washington reacted angrily to the decision by Chinese and Hong Kong authorities to allow US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden to flee the island to Russia. Obama appointed longstanding diplomatic operative Clifford Hart as the new US general consul to Hong Kong. In one of his first actions, Hart pointedly told an American Chamber of Commerce lunch that the US would always stand for "core democratic values."

Undoubtedly, over the past year, Hart has been developing closer relations with Democrats and other oppositional groups in Hong Kong, in the same way that the US politically and financially supports various right-wing separatist Tibetan and Uighur organisations to weaken and undermine Beijing's influence and control.



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