

Hong Kong students protest Beijing's decision on 2017 election

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Hong Kong university students embarked Monday on a week-long boycott of classes to denounce Beijing's anti-democratic decision to vet and restrict the candidates in Hong Kong's scheduled 2017 chief executive election. Students from 24 universities took part, as well as hundreds of supporters.

The August 31 decision by Beijing's National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee means that only two or three candidates will be permitted to stand and each must receive the support of at least 50 percent of a 1,200-member nomination panel, stacked with Beijing loyalists.

Approximately 13,000 students gathered at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on Monday. During the protests, students shouted slogans like, "United we stand," and "Democracy now." Banners carried by students read, "The boycott must happen. Disobey and grab your destiny."

About 400 professors and other university staff also took part Monday. High school students are planning to join the boycott this Friday. The protests are organized by the Hong Kong Federation of Students, supported by other student groups.

Further protests took place Tuesday near government buildings at Tamar Park, where students clashed with police. Students attempted to deliver a petition letter to Hong Kong's current Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying, but were blocked by police as Leung was led away.

"On 31 August, when the National People's Congress made their decision, it crushed the dreams of some Hong Kong people who have been fighting hard for democracy for the past 30 years," third-year student Hong Yuen told the media.

Students are demanding that Hong Kong citizens elect their own officials directly, without interference

from the central government. They accuse the Chinese government of breaking its promise to allow "one country, two systems" when Britain ended its colonial rule over the territory in 1997.

That formula, supposedly providing for greater democracy than on the mainland, maintained the British colonial legal framework, especially private property rights, to ensure that Hong Kong remained a major Asian financial centre.

The changes made by the NPC must still be approved by Hong Kong's 70-member Legislative Council. The opposition pan-Democrat grouping currently holds 27 seats on the council and could veto the law. In this event, no direct election of any sort would be allowed. The current system whereby a pro-Beijing panel selects the chief executive would remain in place.

Students and young people have voiced strong opposition to Beijing's suppression of democratic rights. According to polls, 76 percent of people aged 15 to 24 believe that the Legislative Council should veto the electoral law.

"Universal suffrage is the mission of this era and this era belongs to the young people, so let the young ones complete the mission," Joshua Wong, a university freshman and founder of the student group Scholarism, told reporters.

Popular opposition is being confined to limited protests by the pan-Democrats and groups such as Occupy Central, who are seeking to use the demonstrations as a bargaining chip to pressure Beijing for concessions to parliamentary democracy. They represent sections of the Hong Kong elites and upper middle classes, concerned that Beijing's repressive hand could undermine the territory's role as a global financial hub.

At the same time, these privileged layers are

concerned that pro-democracy demands could bring broader layers of the population, particularly the highly-exploited working class, into social and political struggle.

With the gap between rich and poor widening, many workers are suffering. While the number of millionaires grows, a fifth of the population lives in poverty. The hourly minimum wage of \$HK30 (\$US3.90) is insufficient to keep up with inflation. However, demands for better living and working conditions find no expression in Occupy Central's or the student groups' demands.

The student protests are part of a larger civil disobedience movement being organized in Hong Kong. During a July 1 protest, following the release of a White Paper by Beijing that foreshadowed the NPC's decision, hundreds of thousands took to the streets.

In October, Occupy Central is planning a sit-in at Hong Kong's financial district. The protest is set to fall on China's National Day, or the anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Benny Tai, a leader of the Occupy group, referred to the protest as a "democracy banquet."

The student boycott was arranged to coincide with a trip to Beijing by 70 of Hong Kong's most influential corporate leaders who discussed, among other topics, Hong Kong politics with Chinese President Xi Jinping. It was the largest business group to visit the capital since 2003.

The delegation was led by former Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa and included Asia's richest man, Li Ka-shing, as well as Pang Yiu-kai, the chairman of Hong Kong's General Chamber of Commerce, and Stanley Lau Chin-ho, the chairman of the Federation of Hong Kong Industries.

Big business is clearly concerned by the potential for broader protests. "They will give a bad impression to the outside—some people might think, 'Wow, Hong Kong is out of control with these kinds of demonstrations'," Stanley Lau said.

In his reported remarks to the delegation, Xi reassured the tycoons: "The central government has not changed and will not change its basic policies in Hong Kong."

Beijing used the trip to impress upon the business chiefs the need to use their influence to sway public opinion in Hong Kong in favor of Beijing's agenda. Xi

declared that the fates of Hong Kong and mainland China were intertwined, and both required the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party in order to ensure "prosperity and stability."

Since 1997, Hong Kong has been transformed into a major gateway for foreign capital into mainland China, as well as a base of operations for the burgeoning Chinese capitalist class. International business interests have expressed anxiety over the potential for larger protests. That is why Xi commented that any changes in Hong Kong must "comply with the interests of the country and Hong Kong, as well as foreign investors."

The Beijing elite also has concerns about signs that the US, supported by Britain, is working to hypocritically exploit the issue of democratic rights to put pressure on China in Hong Kong, as part of Washington's "pivot" to Asia to confront China.

Above all, the Chinese regime fears that any working class eruptions in Hong Kong could reverberate across China, fuelling the discontent of hundreds of millions of poorly-paid and oppressed workers.



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