

Hong Kong police crackdown on protests

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Hong Kong riot police fired tear gas yesterday and early this morning in a failed attempt to disperse thousands of protesters gathered around the central government offices. Some 30 people were injured in the clashes and 78 people have been arrested.

The protests are against Beijing's announcement last month that candidates for Hong Kong's chief executive will be vetted when elections for the post are held in 2017.

The demonstrations began with a boycott of classes organized by the Hong Kong Federation of Students and other student groups beginning last Monday. The protests escalated on Friday night when about 100 students scaled fences and began to occupy the forecourt of the central government headquarters. Chanting "Let us in," they demanded to speak with Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-yung.

Riot police moved in to cordon off the area, surround the students in the courtyard, and to prevent more people from joining the demonstration. Several arrests were made, provoking larger protests. By Saturday evening, an estimated 50,000 people had gathered outside the government buildings.

Police clashed with protesters yesterday using batons and pepper spray in an attempt to disperse the crowds before resorting to tear gas. Police also raided the homes of protest leaders, including 17-year-old Joshua Wong, who heads the activist group Scholarism. Wong was among those arrested and held without bail.

The protests are centered on the demand for open elections for the post of Hong Kong chief executive, who is currently chosen by a 1,200-member committee dominated by Beijing loyalists. On August 31, Beijing's National Peoples' Committee decided it would allow elections for the post in 2017 but that only two or three candidates vetted by a pro-Beijing nomination committee.

The proposal has to be approved by Hong Kong's

Legislative Council where 27 legislators belonging to the opposition pan-Democrats who could veto it. However, if the legislation is struck down, the current anti-democratic process for selecting the chief executive would remain in place. Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997 and functions a Special Administrative Region with its own legal system under the formula of "one country, two systems."

The Occupy Central organization had planned to launch a civil disobedience movement in Hong Kong's financial district against Beijing's plan from October 1, but announced on early Sunday morning that it would join the protests underway. Several of the opposition pan-Democrat legislators also joined the protests and three were reportedly detained by police.

Occupy Central and the pan-Democrats have intervened in a bid to ensure that the protests remain limited to the narrow demand for open chief executive elections. They represent layers of the corporate elite and upper middle classes who fear that Hong Kong's position as a major Asian financial center and their own interests will be undermined by Beijing's control over the former British colony.

For its part, Beijing is deeply concerned that the US and Britain will be used the pro-democracy protests to undermine China's position in Hong Kong and to use it encourage similar opposition within China itself. The Foreign Policy website reported that the popular photo-sharing website Instagram had been shut down by the Chinese internet police as part of a general crackdown on news of the Hong Kong protests.

As part of its "pivot to Asia", the Obama administration signaled that it intended to step up the pressure on "human rights" in Hong Kong with the appointment last year of veteran diplomatic Clifford Hart as the new US consul. In his first public statements, Hart declared that he was looking forward to "genuine democratic suffrage" in Hong Kong,

making clear he had no intention of taking any notice of Beijing's warnings not to intervene in its political affairs.

There are undoubtedly close links between the US and sections of the Occupy Movement and the pan-Democrats. *South China Morning Post* commentator David Zweig wrote last week that Albert Ho, leader of the Democratic Party, had told him that he regularly told consular officials in Hong Kong about his party's plans, although he denied receiving strategic advice.

Earlier this year leaked emails between prominent media tycoon Jimmy Lai and his top aide Mark Simon revealed that he had supplied funds to the Occupy Movement and several pan-Democrats. Simon, a former US naval analyst, had been the head of the Hong Kong branch of Republicans Abroad and organized meetings with leading US figures. In May, Lai reportedly met with prominent neo-con and former deputy defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz.

At the same time, the Occupy Movement and pan-Democrats are concerned that the protests not become the focus for the broader social demands of the working class. The social gulf between rich and poor in Hong Kong is particularly marked. A small wealthy elite of billionaires and multi-millionaires lives in luxury while a fifth of Hong Kong's population is below the poverty line. Income tax and corporate tax rates are among the lowest in the world. Welfare measures are virtually non-existent.

The Occupy Movement's tactic of non-violent civil disobedience is aimed at ensuring that it maintains a tight rein on its protests in the face of violent police attacks. Following the large protests over the weekend, local broadcaster RTHK reported that a tearful Occupy Movement founder Benny Tai had expressed concerns that "the situation was getting out of control." It is a concern that all sections of Hong Kong's ruling elite share—both pro-Beijing and "pro-democratic."

As protests continued today, Hong Kong's Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying played down rumors that the Chinese military might intervene to suppress the protests, insisting that the Hong Kong police would "maintain social order." His comments reflect deep concerns in ruling circles in Hong Kong and Beijing that that protests could ignite unrest on the Chinese mainland itself.



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