

Student leaders threaten to escalate Hong Kong protests

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Tens of thousands took part in protests yesterday in Hong Kong to demand the resignation of Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying and a full and open election for his post in 2017. Crowds of people, overwhelmingly young, took advantage of the October 1 national holiday to join demonstrations in at least five locations on Hong Kong island and neighbouring Kowloon.

Student leaders threatened to escalate protests today unless Leung resigns. Lester Shum, vice secretary of the Hong Kong Federation of Students, declared yesterday that there was “no room for dialogue” with Leung and warned: “If he does not resign by tomorrow, we will step up our actions, such as occupying several important government buildings.”

The protests have also sparked small demonstrations in Macau and Taiwan. Chinese authorities, fearful that the protests could spread to the mainland, have clamped down on the media and Internet.

Leung has refused to step down or hold talks with any protest organisers. He used his National Day speech to appeal to protesters to accept Beijing’s decision to allow a 2017 election with universal suffrage but limited to candidates vetted by a nominating committee stacked with pro-Beijing appointees.

Beijing’s announcement in late August provoked widespread hostility, which the official opposition “pan-Democratic” grouping sought to exploit to force a compromise on the nomination process. The pan-Democrats threatened to use their numbers in Legislative Council to veto the proposal and, in effect, maintain the anti-democratic status quo. Currently the chief executive is simply chosen by a 1,200-member committee, dominated by pro-Beijing loyalists.

The current protests erupted after clashes last Friday between police and students, who boycotted classes to

oppose Beijing’s plan. The protests were joined by the Occupy Central organisation, which had proposed, but not begun, a civil disobedience campaign. Riot police were withdrawn from the streets after their attempts to suppress the protests over the weekend only caused the crowds to swell.

Those joining the protests are animated by fears that Beijing will impose further anti-democratic restrictions, and by discontent over the deepening social divide between rich and poor. This social polarisation has been intensified by Hong Kong’s economic integration with China, which has accelerated since Beijing’s takeover of the former British colony in 1997.

Industry has shifted to take advantage of cheap labour in southern China, causing a collapse in the manufacturing workforce from about one million in the early 1980s to 20,000 in 2013. At the same time, the banking and financial sector has burgeoned. Hong Kong is the preferred location for Chinese companies to launch initial public offerings—\$43 billion since 2012—and a transit point for investment into and out of China. Last year, two thirds of foreign direct investment into China flowed through Hong Kong.

While a narrow layer of super-wealthy tycoons has prospered, the living standards of the majority of working people have fallen. Jobs in manufacturing have been replaced by low-wage positions in service industries that benefitted from growing numbers of tourists from the Chinese mainland. Despite declining real wages, the cost of living, especially housing costs, have risen sharply. The waiting time for public housing has blown out to ten years, forcing the low paid into makeshift accommodation and what are known as “cage homes.”

Layers of the middle classes, especially the young, have also been impacted. A university graduate earns

roughly the same as a decade ago and faces increasing competition from applicants from the mainland for jobs.

These pressing social issues, however, find no expression in the perspective advanced by those parties and organisations dominating the current protests—the pan-Democrats, Occupy Central and various student groups—which are all, despite tactical differences, narrowly focussed on ensuring opposition candidates can stand in the 2017 election. This is a significant factor in the predominantly middle class composition of the protest movement and its failure to attract substantial support from the working class.

The demand for full and open elections reflects the interests of layers of the Hong Kong elite who resent being marginalised by pro-Beijing tycoons and fear that Beijing's control over Hong Kong's political affairs will undermine its competitiveness as an Asian financial centre. This wealthy stratum is determined to defend what it regards as Hong Kong's competitive advantage, particularly over Chinese financial centres such as Shanghai: the long-established defence of capitalist property that unpins all commercial and financial transactions and is entrenched in the legal system established under British colonial rule.

In April, a group of about 70 current and former financiers and managers, describing themselves as the financial arm of Occupy Central, wrote to Chinese President Xi Jinping to protest over threats to press freedoms, and the political cronyism in the finance industry, and to call for open elections for the chief executive. “In the long run, if you want to maintain an international banking and finance centre in Hong Kong, you need to have a good system, a good framework, in order to protect it,” Lai Chong Au, a marketing manager told the *New York Times*.

Even if the opposition parties and organisations achieved their objective in full—an open election in 2017 for chief executive—the result would be a contest, dominated by big money, between candidates representing rival factions of the Hong Kong tycoons.

The pro-Western orientation of much of the official Hong Kong opposition leaves the present protests open to manipulation by the major imperialist powers. At this stage, the US and Britain have expressed concerns, but not called for the resignation of Hong Kong's chief executive or explicitly backed the opposition's

demands over the 2017 election.

Before meeting with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi yesterday, US Secretary of State John Kerry urged Hong Kong authorities to “exercise restraint and respect protesters' rights to express their views.” In response, Wang declared that “Hong Kong affairs are China's internal affairs,” adding that “all countries should respect China's sovereignty.”

Britain's cautious approach was underlined by the comments yesterday by former Hong Kong governor Chris Patten who appealed for China's leaders to consult with opposition figures. “I think we've got to see dialogue replacing tear gas and pepper sprays,” he told the BBC. “The right thing to do is to embark on a new period of consultation ... because there are a lot of very moderate people on the pro-democracy side.”

Embroiled in an escalating war in Iraq and Syria, and an ongoing confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, the US and its allies appear wary about immediately stoking up another international political crisis. Given the acute state of geo-political tensions, however, that could rapidly change.



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