Hong Kong protests ebb

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4 October 2014

Protests in Hong Kong calling for open elections waned yesterday after protest leaders shelved their demand for the resignation of chief executive Leung Chun-ying and accepted an offer of talks with chief secretary Carrie Lam. After a week of demonstrations involving tens of thousands of people, the crowds at the protest sites fell to the hundreds or less.

As the numbers ebbed, the protests came under attack from thugs who took advantage of the growing frustration over the disruption to businesses, jobs and daily life among working people. The main clashes took place in the Mong Kok area, an oppressed working-class district that is also known for its notorious triad gangs.

Thugs wearing masks repeatedly attempted to break through police lines throughout the evening and force protesters out of the area. At least 19 people were arrested, including eight described by police as having "triad backgrounds."

The ability of the thugs to act was not simply a product of falling protest numbers. None of the organisations that dominated the last week of protests—Occupy Central, the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism—has any political perspective for addressing the pressing social issues confronting the working class—unemployment, falling wages and a chronic lack of essential services.

The protest leaders have been narrowly focussed on the demand that Beijing retract its plans for the 2017 election for chief executive. While conceding universal suffrage for the first time, China's National People's Congress in late August outlined procedures for a nomination committee that virtually ensured only pro-Beijing candidates would be permitted to stand.

As the largely middle-class protests have dragged on, the Hong Kong authorities have exploited public impatience with the disruption caused to set scene for the violent attacks yesterday evening. A group of pro-Beijing legislators, following what has been a steady drum beat in China's state-run media, issued a statement yesterday afternoon, declaring that "we understand students' concern over the city's future… but the situation now is serious and has affected citizen's daily lives, society's operation and its business activities."

In the midst of last night's chaotic scenes, the political confusion and frustration was evident. Victor Ma, a teacher, told Reuters: "We are fed up and our lives are affected. You don't hold Hong Kong citizens hostage because it's not going to work. That's why the crowd is very angry here [Mong Kok]." Speaking to *Bloomberg News*, taxi driver Choi Hao Tze said: "I supported the students' ideology in this movement but I don't like their threatening tactics. The students seem to be too demanding."

Kit Lui, a restaurant owner, told Reuters that she supported the protests, despite their economic impact: "Yes, maybe these few days the economy will be hurt, but if we don't speak up this time the situation will get worse and worse. It's not the future we want to see." However, she added: "Frankly speaking, I don't know where this revolution will go."

The lack of any clear aims was reflected in the response of protest leaders to the violence in Mong Kok, and to a lesser extent at another site in Causeway Bay. The Hong Kong Federation of Students issued a statement last night accusing the government and police of "turning a blind eye to violent acts by the triads" and postponed talks with chief secretary Lam.

The student leaders are, however, under pressure from the official opposition grouping known as the pan-Democrats to agree to talks. Labour Party lawmaker Lee Cheuk-yan told *Bloomberg News* that he hoped that the meeting with Lam would go ahead. "Their positions are so far apart that there does not seem to be much middle ground," he said. "But it's good to talk,

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because dialogues defuse tension."

Like Beijing and its political representatives in Hong Kong, the pan-Democrats fear that the longer the protests go on, the greater the danger that they could spin out of control. They represent layers of the Hong Kong corporate elite which fear that Beijing's encroachment on the territory's political affairs will undermine its standing as a financial centre and major gateway for investment into and out of China. From the outset, the pan-Democrats have sought a compromise with Beijing over the 2017 election that would allow one of their political leaders to stand as a candidate.

The pro-Western orientation and ties of many of the pan-Democrats has provoked concern in Beijing that the US could exploit the election to boost its influence in Hong Kong and use it to promote political unrest on the Chinese mainland. Under conditions of a slowing economy, the Chinese government is acutely aware of the rising social tensions being fuelled by growing social polarisation between rich and poor.

While the Obama administration is clearly following the events in Hong Kong closely, it has made no overt intervention in support of the protests. In a statement on Facebook yesterday, US Consul General Clifford Hart declared "my government's strong support for dialogue as the best means to get beyond the current impasse." With Obama due to visit China next month, a senior administration official told the *New York Times* yesterday that "we're not looking to inject the United States into the middle of this."

The standoff in Hong Kong continues. But having lost the momentum of the protests over the last week, the student leaders have effectively handed the initiative to the Leung administration and to the opposition pan-Democrats, who no doubt in the coming days will seek to end the protests and try to strike a deal on the 2017 election.

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