

Hong Kong protests dwindle ahead of talks

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Representatives of the Hong Kong government and protest groups are due to meet tomorrow afternoon to discuss the demands of last week's mass protests, which have now dwindled in numbers to several hundred people.

The demonstrations erupted after China's National People's Congress (NPC) announced its plans in late August for the 2017 election for the territory's chief executive. While conceding universal suffrage for the first time, the NPC placed restrictions on nominations that all but ensured that only a handful of pro-Beijing candidates would be allowed to stand.

The limited demand of the three organisations that have dominated the protests—Occupy Central, the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Scholarism—has been for an end to vetting by a nomination committee stacked with pro-Beijing appointees.

Hong Kong's current Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying has ruled out any significant concessions in advance. In offering talks last Thursday, he rejected calls for his resignation and insisted that discussions be based on the territory's Basic Law—the legal framework established when Britain handed its former colony to China in 1997—and the NPC's decisions.

The parameters of tomorrow's discussions were finalised on Tuesday, but student leaders accused the government of being "insincere." HKFS deputy secretary-general Lester Shum told the media that "we are very disappointed and angry" because the government was resorting to legal arguments rather than addressing the issue of full and open elections in 2017.

In reality, in accepting the offer of talks, the HKFS and other protest organisations effectively agreed to Leung's conditions. While tomorrow's discussions with Chief Secretary Carrie Lam are unlikely to reach any agreement, they have already served the government's purpose in defusing the protests.

Last week, the protests swelled into the tens of thousands after the police attempted to clear the streets of student protesters the previous weekend using tear gas, pepper spray and batons. The latest media reports indicate

that only a few hundred people are still manning the protest sites. Barricades often have no protesters present.

The Hong Kong administration is clearly hoping the protests will wither away as talks drag on. A government source told the *New York Times* that senior officials "don't want to give them [the protesters] any excuse that the government is taking things by force." As a result, the police have not attempted to remove any, even unmanned barricades.

As the numbers have dwindled, the right-wing Hong Kong nationalist organisation Civic Passion has become more prominent at the protest sites, voicing criticisms of the direction taken by Occupy Central and the student organisations. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the organisation had about 120 members spread across the three protest sites. At each it had a tent distributing food and bottled water, along with a sound system for its members to address protesters and onlookers. Its free monthly newspaper and web site call for "cultural resistance against mainland China," one member told the *Wall Street Journal*.

Civic Passion, formed in 2012, blames tourists and immigrants from the Chinese mainland, as well as the Beijing and Hong Kong governments, for the lack of housing and jobs. According to one report, its more extreme members have told immigrants, especially mainland Chinese, to leave Hong Kong. It feeds off parochial sentiment, encouraged by opposition parties and media outlets that brand mainlanders as "locusts" undermining Hong Kong's culture and language.

The whipping up of anti-mainlander hostility is aimed at diverting the sharpening social tensions produced by Hong Kong's deepening social polarisation in a reactionary political direction. Over the past two decades, as China has been transformed into the world's premier cheap labour platform, manufacturing in Hong Kong has plummeted and the territory has become China's chief financial centre.

The gulf between rich and poor has widened. According to *Forbes*, Hong Kong's 10 wealthiest men

control a combined fortune of about \$130 billion. All of them have stakes in the territory's lucrative real estate market, where prices have more than trebled over the past decade. As manufacturing jobs have been destroyed, young people have been increasingly forced to compete for work in lower-paid service industries. The service sector, which includes retail and tourism catering to large numbers of mainland tourists as well as the finance industry, today accounts for more than 90 percent of the territory's economy. Wages have risen by only 3 percent over the past 10 years.

While broad social concerns, as well as democratic aspirations, animated the mainly young people who joined last week's protests, these sentiments find no expression in the limited demands of Occupy Central and the student organisations, except perhaps to the extent that they promote the naïve belief that an open election in 2017 will result in a government more responsive to social needs.

The only beneficiaries of an easing of the restrictions on the 2017 election would be the official opposition—a broad grouping known as the pan-Democrats. They represent sections of the Hong Kong elite who fear that their business interests and the viability of the territory as a financial centre are threatened by Beijing's domination of the territory's economic and political life.

The pan-Democrats, who did not initiate the protests, have been concerned from the outset that the political unrest could spin out of control. Jim Lai, a prominent Hong Kong media tycoon and pan-Democrat supporter, is the latest to appeal to protest leaders to "call a retreat" and end the street demonstrations this weekend, saying they must not "exhaust the goodwill of the Hong Kong people."



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