

Police clash with Hong Kong protesters

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Hong Kong police confronted protesters over the past two days after Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying declared on Sunday that the protests had “spun out of control”—effectively giving the green light for the police to move in. Leung, who called off formal talks with student leaders last Thursday, said the “chance was almost zero” that the Chinese government would agree to their demands.

In late August, China’s National People’s Congress gave the go-ahead for universal suffrage in the 2017 election for chief executive, but insisted that candidates be vetted by a nomination committee stacked with pro-Beijing appointees. The protest organisations—the Hong Kong Federation of Students, Scholarism and Occupy Central—are calling for these restrictions to be lifted.

The mainly young demonstrators have occupied three protest sites for more than two weeks, blocking key arterial roads in central areas of Hong Kong. Numbers, however, have dwindled from tens of thousands to hundreds as the protests have dragged on.

In the early hours of Monday, police dismantled barriers and cleared roads in the Causeway Bay area. Yesterday, hundreds of police in riot gear moved against the main protest site at Admiralty near the main government offices, using chainsaws and sledgehammers to take down barricades reinforced with bamboo and concrete.

Clashes took place early this morning as police used pepper spray to force protesters out of a road tunnel they occupied the previous night. At least 45 demonstrators were arrested for illegal assembly.

The Hong Kong government and pro-Beijing organisations have been whipping up hostility against the protests among people affected by the disruptions to traffic, their businesses and daily lives. Several skirmishes took place on Monday between protesters and those seeking to remove barriers. Last week, a coalition of truck drivers’ associations set today as the

deadline to open roads or they would take action to do so.

While the protests have been driven by broad concerns about democratic rights and the deteriorating prospects for young people, the student organisations and Occupy Central have narrowly confined their demands to the 2017 election. These groups are closely associated with the official opposition—the loose pan-democrat grouping—which represents layers of the Hong Kong elite who fear that Beijing’s domination of local politics will harm their business interests and undermine the territory’s position as China’s top financial centre.

Like the pan-democrats, the protest organisations do not address the pressing social needs facing millions of working people in one of the world’s most socially polarised cities. The economy, including the booming property market, is dominated by a handful of billionaire tycoons, many of whom, but not all, have close links to Beijing. A 2011 study found that 8.5 percent of households were US dollar millionaires.

At the other social pole, millions of working people struggle to survive on declining real wages and soaring housing costs. Some 20 percent of the population is living in poverty, with minimal social services. For young people, places in top universities and job opportunities have shrunk, partly because Hong Kong has become a pole of attraction for youth from the Chinese mainland. Some opposition parties and groups, such as the right-wing Civic Passion, are seeking to stir up Hong Kong parochialism by making Chinese mainlanders the scapegoat for the lack of jobs and housing.

Unable to make any appeal to the working class in Hong Kong, let alone China, the student leaders have been reduced to impotent calls to the city’s government and Chinese authorities for compromise. Last weekend, the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism

issued an open letter to Chinese President Xi Jinping, asking him to rescind the National People's Congress decision on the 2017 election.

The Chinese government is highly unlikely to make any concessions that could fuel demands on the mainland for greater democratic rights. It has been fearful from the outset that the Hong Kong protests could spark broader social unrest in China.

In a comment in the *New York Times* on Monday, Shin Sin-por, head of Hong Kong's central policy unit, baldly spelled out that Beijing has the power via the Basic Law—the constitutional framework under which China took control of the city from Britain in 1997—to appoint, or not appoint, the chief executive, whatever form the 2017 election takes.

Beijing is concerned that the US will exploit the relative autonomy of Hong Kong to undermine Chinese influence in the territory and use it as a base of operations for political intrigue and provocation on the mainland. The Chinese leadership is well aware that the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" has resulted in a concerted diplomatic campaign and military build-up against China throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

A front-page editorial in the Chinese Communist Party's *People's Daily* last Friday accused the US of trying to foment a "colour revolution" in Hong Kong—along the lines of its regime-change operations in former Soviet republics and elsewhere. The newspaper bluntly stated that the US exploited the banner of "democracy" to advance its strategic interests, declaring that a "'democratic' country is one that conducts its affairs in line with American interests."

Although this is certainly true, the Obama administration's response to the Hong Kong protests has been rather low-key. There has been no campaign of White House denunciations of Beijing and demands for Leung's ouster, amplified in the American and international media. Hong Kong's importance as a financial centre amid worsening global economic turbulence, as well as Washington's preoccupation with its war in the Middle East and continuing confrontation with Moscow, are undoubtedly factors.

The US does have close ties with sections of the Hong Kong opposition and is no doubt politically active in the city. Britain, as a US ally and the former colonial power, also has longstanding ties with the state

apparatus, business and the media in Hong Kong. Moreover, the amorphous political character of the largely middle class protest movement certainly leaves it open to manipulation, should Washington and its allies choose to exploit the situation.



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