

Hong Kong protests continue after televised debate

Peter Symonds
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A two-hour televised discussion yesterday between Hong Kong government officials and student protest leaders ended, not unexpectedly, without any breakthrough or resolution to weeks of street demonstrations. The event was watched live by thousands of protesters on large screens erected at three main protest sites in the middle of the city.

The three organisations that have dominated the protests—the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), Scholarism and Occupy Central—are demanding a more open election in 2017 for the territory’s chief executive. In late August, China’s National People’s Congress laid out the framework for an election by universal suffrage, for the first time, but open only to candidates vetted by a nomination committee.

The discussion unfolded within this narrow framework, with no reference by either side to the broader issues that have driven the protests. Student leaders insisted on their demand for direct nomination to ensure that candidates will not be ruled out by a committee stacked with pro-Beijing appointees. HKFS general secretary Alex Chow challenged the Hong Kong government to decide whether “to be democratic heroes or historical villains.”

Chief secretary Carrie Lam, Hong Kong’s no.2 official, appealed to the protest leaders to be pragmatic. While insisting that the National People’s Congress decision could not be changed, Lam held out the prospect of negotiations over the composition of the nomination committee and offered to submit a new report to Beijing outlining the concerns of the protesters. At the same time, she called for an end to the protests which student leaders rejected.

Far more revealing were the comments by Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying prior to the televised

event—and the responses of his opponents. Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and the *Financial Times*, Leung bluntly ruled out the direct nomination of candidates, on the grounds that it could give working people and the poor too much political say.

“If it’s entirely a numbers game and numeric representation, then obviously you’d be talking to half of the people in Hong Kong who earn less than \$US1,800 a month,” Leung declared. “You could end up with that kind of politics and policies.”

Leung’s remarks were a rather crass statement that his administration acts on behalf of sections of the wealthy elite in Hong Kong, particularly those with close connections to Beijing, and fears any avenue, no matter how limited, for the expression of the interests of ordinary people.

Hong Kong is one of the most socially polarised cities in the world. A handful of billionaire tycoons dominate the territory’s lucrative financial and property markets, while millions of people struggle to make ends meet on declining real wages. Property prices have more than trebled over the past decade. Welfare services are minimal as a result of some of the lowest levels of corporate and personal tax in the world. At least 20 percent of the population lives below the austere official poverty line.

However Leung’s comment about not wanting the poor involved in politics was also directed towards the official opposition—the so-called pan-democrats—who represent layers of the elite who are just as fearful of social discontent. Their calls for freer elections stem from concern that China’s encroachment on Hong Kong will undermine their business interests as well as the city’s position as a major international financial centre.

The pan-democrats, as well as seeking an opportunity to run their candidates, fear that without the appearance of a democratic vote, popular opposition could take more dangerous forms. Civic Party legislator Claudia Mo told the AFP that she was worried about the outcome of the televised discussion. “If this is going to be a political show—where political animals form a political circus—people will think: ‘Well let’s just take to the streets again’.”

In a similar vein, legal academic Surya Deva declared: “Why should poor Hong Kong people follow laws and believe in the rule of law when they have no hope for political or economic empowerment?” In other words, Hong Kong needs the charade of parliamentary democracy, which, as in the US, Britain and other countries, would be dominated by big business parties, as a safety valve to render social discontent harmless.

While the student organisations voice tactical differences with the pan-democrats, their perspective is just as limited. None of the pressing social issues facing young people—lack of job opportunities, competition for university places, the rising cost of living—has been expressed in the protest demands.

In his comments to the Western press, Chief Executive Leung warned that prolonged protests risked provoking Beijing’s direct intervention. “Challenging myself, challenging the Hong Kong government at these difficult times will do no one any service, will do Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy no service,” he said.

Leung also pointed out that under the Basic Law, the legal framework put in place after Britain handed control of its former colony to China in 1997, Beijing still had the final say over the appointment of the chief executive regardless of the form of election or its outcome. “You could imagine the scale and the kind of constitutional crisis if Beijing said to the people of Hong Kong, ‘Sorry, this person who you have just elected is not appointable and is not acceptable. Go back to the polling station and try again’,” he warned.

The pan-democrats and the student leaders have no perspective other than pressuring the Chinese government and its local representatives in Hong Kong. Beijing, however, is deeply concerned that any, even limited, concessions made in Hong Kong could trigger similar movements on the Chinese mainland, and also open the door for the US and its allies to intervene to

destabilise China.

Leung repeated claims made that external forces were backing the Hong Kong protests. “I didn’t overhear it in a tea house. It’s something that concerns us,” he said. The Chinese state media has been more explicit in accusing the US of trying to replicate in Hong Kong its “colour revolutions” in the former Soviet republics. While Washington’s response to the protests has been relatively low key, their amorphous character and vague democratic slogans leave them open to manipulation.

Any genuine struggle for democratic and social rights involves a turn to the working class throughout China and its independent mobilisation against the Chinese government, which represents the wealthy elites, on the basis of a socialist perspective. This necessarily involves the assimilation of the key lessons of the protracted struggle of the international Trotskyist movement against the betrayals of Stalinism, including its Maoist variant.



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