

Standoff continues between Hong Kong government and protesters

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The deadlock between demonstrators and the Hong Kong government entered its second month this week amid signs of growing frustration in Beijing with Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying's failure to end the protests over the framework for elections in 2017.

China's top advisory body—the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)—formally expelled a Hong Kong delegate, James Tien, on Wednesday for publicly calling on Leung to resign for failing to rein in the protests. Tien, who heads the pro-Beijing, pro-business Liberal Party in Hong Kong, pointed to Leung's failure to enforce court injunctions banning street protests that have blocked roads.

Tien, who undoubtedly expected his expulsion, was expressing broader concerns, not only in the Hong Kong business elite, but in Beijing. In a telephone interview with the *New York Times*, his brother Michael, also a Hong Kong legislator, said there were “corridors of discontent” in Beijing over Leung's performance but Chinese officials were wary about openly intruding into Hong Kong politics to remove Leung.

Leung was installed as chief executive in 2012 by a 1,200-member committee stacked with pro-Beijing supporters, after Beijing's first choice, Henry Tang, the son of a Shanghai textile baron, became embroiled in scandals. Leung, the son of a police officer, made millions from the real estate market, but was regarded in business circles as being too much of a populist and an outsider. (See: “Sham election in Hong Kong reveals sharp social tensions”)

Leung is seeking to implement the decision of China's National People's Congress (NPC) in August that provoked the present protests. While the NPC sanctioned universal suffrage for the first time in the

2017 election for chief executive, it insisted that candidates be vetted by a nomination committee. The protest organisations, including the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS), Scholarism and Occupy Central, are demanding a mechanism to allow for public nominations.

The Chinese government is deeply concerned that the ongoing protests in Hong Kong will trigger social and political unrest in mainland cities. On Thursday, Michael Tien distanced himself from his brother's comments, but declared that Beijing now regarded the protests as “a national security issue” because there were “foreign forces” involved. “They are not fighting for democracy. They are fighting for independence,” he said.

China's state-owned media has repeatedly accused the US and its allies of attempting to foment a “colour revolution” in Hong Kong and use the territory as a base of operations to incite unrest on the mainland. The official media recently seized on a meeting between Hong Kong foreign residents, including a former Pentagon analyst, with opposition politicians and student leaders in June as evidence of a plot. While the US is undoubtedly watching events in Hong Kong closely, and has longstanding ties to opposition leaders, the Obama administration has kept its response low key to this point.

In fact, the opposition pan-democrats in Hong Kong are more intent on finding a way to defuse the protests than promoting a “colour revolution,” let alone an independent Hong Kong. The *South China Morning Post* reported yesterday that pan-democrat legislators “now want to discuss an exit plan with the government.” The group's convenor Alan Leong said that he raised the proposal with Hong Kong Chief Secretary Carrie Lam on Wednesday but no agreement

was reached.

Leong also indicated that the pan-democrats were discussing the possibility of triggering a new election for the Legislative Council through resignations. He claimed that such a poll would be a de facto referendum on electoral reform. In reality, it could serve as a pretext for calling off the protests, while the outcome could be simply ignored by Beijing.

The pan-democrats represent sections of the Hong Kong elite who are concerned that Beijing's encroachment will undermine the territory's standing as a major financial centre and cut across their own business interests. At the same time, they accepted Britain's return of the city to China in 1997, under the formula "one country, two systems," because they recognise that its economic future is intimately tied to China's.

The pan-democrats are just as fearful as the government and its backers in Beijing that the protests will lead to broader unrest in one of the most socially polarised cities in the world. So sensitive is the issue that Chief Executive Leong was compelled to express regret this week for comments to the media in which he implied that the demands of protesters were impossible because they would give too much power to low-income voters.

Occupy Central leader Benny Tai is also seeking to find a way to halt the protests. On Monday, he called on the government to allow a non-binding referendum on electoral reform, saying it would likely bring an end to the protest movement. Before the protests, Tai declared that he would call off his proposed civil disobedience movement if it threatened to get out of control.

Occupy Central's plans for a civil disobedience protest were pre-empted by student organisations, which organised a week-long student strike that provoked far larger protests when police cracked down. However, while more militant in their actions, the student leaders have restricted their demands to calling for an open election in 2017.

The Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) met with Chief Secretary Carrie Lam last week for a televised two-hour discussion that predictably produced no significant concessions by the government. HKFS and Scholarism announced late last week that a vote of protesters would be held on Sunday to decide whether

to continue, but called off the ballot at the last minute in the face of opposition.

The lack of any program by student leaders to address the pressing social issues has opened the door for right-wing organisations, such as Civic Passion, to establish a presence at the protest sites. Civic Passion's demands for open elections are linked to reactionary denunciations of Chinese mainlanders as "locusts" who take jobs and educational opportunities from Hong Kong residents and drive up prices, particularly for housing. The group is bitterly hostile to socialism, which it identifies with the Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing.

Having called off Sunday's vote, the student leaders are now making a lame appeal to the Hong Kong government to organise talks for them with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to discuss electoral reform. At the same time, they are seeking support from various civil organisations, as well as the pan-democrats, whose only perspective is to shut down the protests as quickly as possible.



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