

Police crack down on Hong Kong protest site

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At least 148 people have been arrested in Hong Kong since Tuesday night, when thousands of police were mobilised to clear the Mong Kok area of protesters demanding open elections for the city's top post of chief executive. Mainly young demonstrators have been camped out in Mong Kok and two other sites for nearly two months.

Rather than acting directly on the city administration's orders, the police carried out the operation in the name of enforcing court injunctions obtained by local business associations, which claimed the protests were affecting their incomes. The administration's attempt to suppress student protests in late September using tear gas provoked rallies of tens of thousands and demands for the resignation of Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying.

As riot police carrying batons, shields and pepper spray moved in to clear the main thoroughfares in Mong Kok, some protesters resisted and were arrested for contempt of court and obstructing police. By Wednesday afternoon, police had removed barricades and torn down tents but maintained a heavy presence to block further protests. Hundreds of people jostled with the police last night in an effort to reoccupy the area.

Among those arrested were two student leaders who have been prominent in the protests—Lester Shum, deputy secretary of the Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Joshua Wong, leader of Scholarism.

In a statement issued yesterday, the HKFS denounced the police as the “tool of suppression of an autocratic administration” and warned that if the crackdown continued “we will have no choice but to take our action to the next step.” Two protests sites remain, including the primary one at Admiralty, where the government's main administrative offices are located. The HKFS did not specify what further action it would take.

Support for the protests has dwindled, in large measure because of the limited political perspective advanced by the three main organisations involved—the HKFS, Scholarism and Occupy Central. Their demands have been narrowly focussed on pressuring Beijing to modify its decision in August to allow, for the first time, universal suffrage for the 2017 election for chief executive, but to vet candidates via a nomination committee. The protests have demanded the election be open to civic nominations.

Despite Hong Kong being one of the most socially polarised cities in the world, the protest groups make no appeal to the social concerns of the working class, either in Hong Kong or more broadly in mainland China. The HKFS, Scholarism and Occupy Central function politically as little more than the protest wing of Hong Kong's official opposition parties—the so-called pan-Democrats.

The pan-Democrats represent sections of the Hong Kong ruling elite worried that Beijing's involvement in the city will compromise its standing as China's main investment hub. Hong Kong became a special administration region of China after Britain handed back its former colony to Beijing in 1997. The city's relative autonomy under the “one country, two systems” formula, low taxes and well-established commercial law make it an attractive base for Chinese-owned corporations and foreign investors in China.

The pan-Democrats have already indicated their willingness to compromise on the 2017 election and their uneasiness about the protests, fearing they could draw in layers of the working class who would begin to raise their own demands. In line with the pan-Democrats, Occupy Central has from the outset declared that it would call off protests if they threatened to get out of hand. Last week, one of Occupy Central's co-founders, Chan Kin-man, called on protesters to narrow the scope of the protest sites, supposedly to

reduce inconvenience to the public.

While less open to compromise, the student organisations revealed their political orientation in their repeated appeals to Beijing for concessions. Neither the HKFS nor Scholarism challenges the legitimacy of the Chinese regime or the administrative bodies in Hong Kong.

Last week, a group of student representatives was prevented from boarding a plane for the Chinese capital where they planned to carry out a protest. Beijing has been terrified from the outset that the protests would trigger social and political unrest in the Chinese mainland.

A right-wing organisation, Civic Passion, has sought to capitalise on growing disaffection among protesters with the present leaders, branding them as too timid. Formed in 2012, Civic Passion seeks to divert social concerns through reactionary denunciations of Chinese mainlanders as “locusts” who come to Hong Kong, take jobs and educational opportunities from the city’s residents and drive up prices, especially for housing. The group is deeply hostile to socialism, which it identifies with the Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing.

An article on Monday in the *New York Times*, which was uncritical of Civic Passion’s right-wing politics, noted that the organisation had gained in influence at the protest sites, particularly at Mong Kok. It was linked to “a tangle of like-minded groups, Internet collectives and free-floating agitators [who] have grown impatient with the milder path supported by most protesters” and call for “stronger action.”

In his speech on November 15 during the G20 summit in Australia, President Barack Obama specifically pointed to the Hong Kong protests as he aggressively reaffirmed the US “pivot to Asia” directed against China. While US statements on the protests have remained relatively low-key, calling for Beijing to exercise restraint, Obama’s reference to the Chinese territory is an implicit threat that the US can use the issue of “human rights” to undermine China’s authority.

Clearly concerned that the US could exploit the protests, the Chinese government has sought to defuse the situation. According to a *Wall Street Journal* report, advisers and officials in Beijing have discussed a compromise on the composition of the nominating committee for the 2017 election candidates. Pro-Beijing

appointees dominate the present election committee, which selected Leung as chief executive. Beijing no doubt calculates that changes to the committee’s membership could gain the endorsement of the pan-Democrats and the protest leaders.



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