

Separatist candidates win seats in Hong Kong election

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The outcome of last Sunday's election for Hong Kong's legislature has been a political blow to the Chinese regime with wins by six political activists who were prominent in the protracted protests in 2014 against Beijing's anti-democratic strictures.

The demonstrations in 2014 erupted in opposition to Beijing's decision to allow universal suffrage in the 2017 election for Hong Kong's powerful chief executive, but only for candidates selected by a stacked nomination committee. The protests, which occupied key areas of the city for months and at times swelled to around 100,000, eventually dwindled and were finally dispersed by police.

The organisations which dominated the protests—the Hong Kong Federation of Students, the young organisation Scholarism, and Occupy Central—had no orientation to the working class and made no broader appeal to workers and youth over unemployment, social inequality and the lack of public services.

These groups had no fundamental differences with the so-called pan-democrats who represent layers of Hong Kong's elite which seek greater autonomy for the former British colony that was handed back to China in 1997. They fear that Beijing's greater involvement in Hong Kong's political and economic life will undermine their business interests.

The new parties that were formed following the protests reflected the deep frustration among layers of youth in particular that nothing had changed. Their demands, including in some cases for full independence from China, go much further than the conservative pan-democrats and are combined with parochial and xenophobic attitudes to Chinese mainlanders.

The Chinese government's refusal to make any, even cosmetic, concessions to the protestors has fuelled a marked increase in separatist sentiment in Hong Kong

that was reflected in Sunday's election. A university poll in July found that 17 percent of respondents supported independence from China with the figure rising to 40 percent among those aged 15 to 24.

The turnout, while still relatively low at 58 percent, was the highest of any election since 1997, up from 53 percent in 2012.

The six protest figures who won in Sunday's election for the Legislative Council or Legco were Sixtus Leung, 30; Nathan Law, 23; Lau Siu-lai, 40; Eddie Chu, 38; Yau Wai-ching, 25; and Cheng Chung-tai, 33.

Nathan Law, the youngest person ever elected to the Legco, founded the new political party Demosisto in April along with another Scholarism leader, Joshua Wong, who at 19 was too young to stand as a candidate. Demosisto's manifesto stopped short of calling for full independence from China, instead advocating "self-determination" and a referendum in 10 years' time to allow voters to decide Hong Kong's future after 2047.

Hong Kong was returned to China on the basis of "one country, two systems" to ensure that the territory remained a major Asian financial centre. Underpinning its legal system is the Basic Law, which stipulated that Hong Kong was part of China and that the Legco and chief executive would eventually be elected by universal suffrage. The Basic Law is due to expire in 2047.

Prior to last weekend's election, Hong Kong authorities insisted that all candidates sign a statement declaring that the territory was "an inalienable part of China." Six candidates were excluded, even though all but one had signed the declaration. In rejecting them, the government said it did not believe their signatures were sincere.

Sixtus Leung and Yau Wai-ching both stood as

candidates for Youngspiration, a party formed in 2015 that is explicitly hostile to immigrants and tourists from the Chinese mainland. In July last year, the grouping organised a protest on the reactionary demand that Hong Kong authorities deport a 12-year-old boy who had overstayed a visa and lived with his grandparents for nine years.

Speaking after Sunday's election, Leung declared that his vision was for an independent Hong Kong. "We think that Hong Kong people are somehow different from other nations, like [the] Chinese. We have different cultures, we have different languages, we have different currencies, and our economic system is different from theirs," he said.

These parochial sentiments take a particularly vile form with the emergence of the xenophobic Civic Passion which is deeply hostile to socialism, falsely equating it with the Stalinist regime in Beijing. Formed in 2012, it has branded Chinese mainlanders as "locusts" who come to Hong Kong to take jobs and educational opportunities from the city's residents and drive up prices, especially for housing.

Cheng Chung-tai, a teaching fellow at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, led Civic Passion protests last year against so-called parallel traders—that is, those who buy goods in Hong Kong to take back to China. Civic Passion has clashed with police and aggressively confronted Chinese shoppers claiming they are driving up prices in Hong Kong.

Civic Passion is bitterly opposed to any suggestion of a joint struggle in Hong Kong and China against the government in Beijing, criticising the pan-democrats for their limited calls for democratic rights in China. "For many years, we have seen that many political parties used the slogan of 'Serve Hong Kong: create a democratic China.' But we have had enough of it," Cheng said after the election. "This is our last chance to take an aggressive strategy [against the Hong Kong government]."

The six new legislators will have limited voting clout in the 70-seat legislature. This so-called "localist" group, together with the pan-democrats, holds about a third of the seats as only 40 are directly elected and the remaining 30 are selected from "functional constituencies" representing professions, trades and other interest groups. These associations tend to choose pro-Beijing legislators.

The Chinese government has responded to the election result with threats. As reported by the state-owned Xinhua news agency, a Chinese official declared on Monday: "We resolutely oppose any form of 'Hong Kong independence' activity either inside or outside the Legislative Council, and strongly support the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's punishing it under the law."

Beijing fears that any moves towards independence in Hong Kong could encourage similar separatist movements in other parts of China, including Tibet and Xinjiang, to more aggressively pursue their demands. It is already under intense pressure from the US, which is engaged in a diplomatic offensive and military build-up throughout the Asia Pacific aimed against China.

Washington will be following the political development in Hong Kong closely to see if the "localist" movement can be exploited to weaken Beijing. The CIA has longstanding connections with Tibetan and Uighur exile communities that are pressing for greater autonomy or independence for Tibet and Xinjiang.

None of these movements represents the interests of the working class. Rather they speak for layers of the local bourgeoisie and upper middle class who regard Beijing's dominance as an impediment to their own business interests and careers but are deeply hostile to the struggles of workers.

The working class in Hong Kong can only fight for its democratic and social rights by turning to workers in China, throughout Asia and the world in a joint struggle against capitalism on the basis of socialist internationalism.



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