

Pro-Beijing parties suffer heavy defeat in Hong Kong district elections

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The elections in Hong Kong on November 24 for the territory's district or local councils resulted in a decisive victory for what is broadly described as the pro-democracy camp, which won around 390 out of 452 seats and took control of 17 out of the 18 councils. Prior to the election, it controlled none of the councils.

Amid the continuing mass protest movement, the elections, which usually focus on local matters, became a de-facto referendum on the anti-democratic policies of Beijing and its stooges in the Hong Kong administration. The turnout was a record 2.94 million voters or 71.2 percent of registered voters, up from 47 percent in the previous district elections in 2015.

Many young voters were among the 390,000 newly registered voters who took the total to 4.12 million. Moreover, the election was a tightly contested one, with the pro-democracy camp ensuring they stood a candidate in every seat. In 2015, 68 candidates were elected unopposed.

The establishment media around the world seized on the results to declare overwhelming backing for the demands of the protests. The Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* declared that a “tsunami of disaffection” had washed over the city. The *New York Times* declared that the vote demonstrated “a stunning sign of support for the protests,” while a comment in the *Washington Post* proclaimed that the election had “sent a significant message to China’s rulers.”

While the vote certainly revealed broad popular democratic aspirations, it also exposed a sharply politically polarised city. The overall vote for the pro-democracy camp was 55 percent, versus 41 percent for the pro-Beijing parties, but the first-past-the-post voting system ensured a landslide in the number of seats won. The remaining 4 percent went to unaffiliated independents.

For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime in

Beijing, the vote is undoubtedly a blow as it has sought to portray the mass protest movement as the work of a few agitators, or the “black hand” of Washington. The largest pro-Beijing party—the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Prosperity of Hong Kong (DAB)—retained only 21 of the 119 seats that it won in 2015. The Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (FTU), which is closely aligned with Beijing, lost all but five of its 27 seats.

The total number of seats held by the pro-Beijing camp fell from about 300 to 60. Prominent anti-protest figures such as Junius Ho, who expressed support for an attack by triad gangsters on protesters, were ousted. The New People’s Party formed by Regina Ip, a member of the top-level Executive Council and also the Legislative Council, failed to win a seat.

While the opposition won control of the district councils, a closer examination of the results reveals a broad disparate political grouping in which nominally pro-democrat “independents” and small parties and associations won the overwhelming majority of seats.

Figures vary slightly depending on who is counted in which camp. But, according to Wikipedia’s detailed breakdown, 134 “democrat independents and others” won a seat, as compared to 91 for the Democratic Party and 32 for the Civic Party—the two largest parties in the pro-democracy grouping. In all, 39 parties won seats under the pro-democratic banner, including 17 that gained just one seat, and another 15 which won between two and five seats.

While district loyalties likely contributed to the fragmented character of the pro-democracy camp, it also reflects popular alienation, particularly among young people, with the established opposition parties. The Democratic Party only stood in 99 of the 452 seats and the Civic Party in 36. While this was undoubtedly part of no-contest arrangements prior to elections, both parties have lost support and suffered splits in their relatively short

existence.

Despite attempts to portray Hong Kong as a flourishing democracy prior to its hand-over to China in 1997, the British colony was ruled by an appointed colonial governor with few democratic trappings. It was only after the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed in 1984 that London injected an element of democracy into the Legislative Council and district councils, which were previously appointed.

The Legislative Council remains an unrepresentative body in which only half of the 70 seats are directly elected. The remaining 35 are drawn from a plethora of functional constituencies—an array of professional groups, economic sectors and trade unions along with the district councils that ensure the dominance of city’s ruling elites. The first direct election to the Legislative Council only took place in 1991.

The district councils, which were only established in 1999, have a similar anti-democratic history. Their immediate precursors were district boards set up in 1982 as administrative bodies, comprised initially of only appointed members and government officials. Although most district council seats are directly elected, some are still appointed.

The Hong Kong administration is run by the chief executive, currently Carrie Lam, who, like the previous colonial governor, has sweeping powers. While not appointed directly by Beijing—as the governor was by Britain—the chief executive is “elected” by an election committee dominated by members appointed by Beijing. The chief executive appoints the executive committee which functions as a cabinet controlling the organs of the state and putting forward legislation.

The central demand of the 2014 protests, the so-called “occupy” or Umbrella movement, was the call for the direct election of the chief executive—a demand that Beijing flatly rejected. In the aftermath of the protests, a key figure in the “occupy” movement, Benny Tai, called for a concerted pro-democracy campaign for the 2019 election for the district councils, which have 117 seats on the 1,200-member election committee for the chief executive.

The five demands of the current protests include direct elections by universal suffrage. The others include the withdrawal of legislation allowing extradition to the Chinese mainland, an independent investigation into police violence, the end to the branding of protests on June 12 as “riots” and an amnesty for those arrested then. These demands were drawn up by the conservative Civil

Human Rights Front—a group of 48 NGOs, pro-democracy parties, student organisations and trade unions.

The limited character of these demands reflects the politics of the main pro-democracy parties—above all the Democratic Party and the Civic Party—along with their allies, including student organisations and parties that emerged from the 2014 protests. The Democratic Party, formed in 1994, and the Civic Party, established by a group of lawyers in 2006, represent layers of the business and the middle classes concerned that their interests are threatened by Beijing’s growing intrusion into Hong Kong.

At the same time, these sections of the Hong Kong elite are deeply fearful that the protests could trigger a broader movement of the working class. As a result, their political representatives seek to restrict the protest demands, pressure the pro-Beijing parties and the chief executive for concessions, and look to the “international community”, above all US imperialism, for support.

A genuine struggle for democracy in Hong Kong inevitably means the mobilisation of the working class in the territory and throughout China—the only social force that is capable of overturning the oppressive CCP regime in Beijing as part of the fight for socialism internationally. But in the absence of a political party fighting for such a socialist and internationalist perspective, the protest movement is being corralled into pro-capitalist parties that are orienting increasingly to Washington.

The district elections revealed the broad disaffection, not only with Hong Kong’s pro-Beijing administration, but with the entire political establishment. However, the protest movement is being driven into a dangerous dead-end, as the protests last weekend waving the American flag and hailing the American president Trump once again demonstrate. It is not to the far-right Trump that protesters should be orienting, but to the working class, in the first place in China, on the basis of a socialist alternative.



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