

# CHINA'S SPECIAL DEMOCRATIC ZONE

BY PAUL LIN

Hong Kong's mass protest on July 1 resulted in government concessions that look like a triumph of the people's will. Under fears that the Beijing government might take measures to ensure that Hong Kong's modest success does not inspire similar action on the mainland, Paul Lin suggests instead that the government should use Hong Kong as a laboratory of political reform for all of China.

Official figures estimate the number of participants in Hong Kong's mass protest on July 1 at 500,000, but local media place the number closer to 1 million. Many of the participants felt this demonstration was in no way inferior to the last large-scale protest in Hong Kong at the time of the June 4th crackdown, and believe that official estimates were purposely lowered in order to avoid panic in Beijing. But with many plainclothes agents deployed to mingle with the crowd on that day, Beijing must have been well aware of the actual scale. Within a month after the protest, developments within the Hong Kong government, Beijing's gradual emergence from reticence to action, and the response of mainland residents as they gradually became aware of the actual events, all reveal a number of effects this event has had across the border:

1) An encouragement to Hong Kong's democratic movement, and also to the mainland's democratic movement  
Ever since Hong Kong reverted to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, its pro-democracy camp has been given gradually less room to maneuver, and the general populace has descended to new depths of political apathy, all to the benefit of the Hong Kong SAR government. But Hong Kong people's patience had its limits, and the small concessions forced upon Tung Chee-hwa by the mass protests at first looked like a victory for "people power," instilling some hope into a previously dispirited populace. If Tung Chee-hwa had obstinately continued on his erroneous course, it is likely that

Hong Kong people would have staged even more protests to demand their rights, leading to his complete political obliteration.

Since it is almost certain that Tung Chee-hwa's compromise resulted from the acquiescence of the Beijing government, it would appear that Beijing has yielded in an unprecedented fashion to public pressure, a development that should serve as a huge encouragement to China's future democracy movement. The crux of the matter is how China's democracy movement can accumulate and gather the enormous strength needed to put pressure on the Chinese government. On July 18 Beijing faced the prospect of its largest demonstration this year as several hundred people applied for a permit to protest persecution, apparently encouraged by the demonstrations in Hong Kong. While the authorities have so far responded with restraint, it is obvious why the Chinese government has felt the need to censor news of the Hong Kong protest in China, and there are sure to be further similar reactions as the news gradually circulates within China. The lack of any violent incident in connection with such a massive protest is virtually unheard of in the West, and Hong Kong's public-spirited and law-abiding display should serve as an example to the predominant mainland mentalities of either abject submission or mobbism.

2) An impression that Hong Kong was taking unfair advantage  
As a result of the Chinese government's censorship and distortion of news, many people on the mainland gained an erroneous impression of Hong Kong. With access only to China's official Phoenix Satellite Television and other Party mouthpieces, many mainlanders believed that Hong Kong people were protesting over economic grievances and in opposition to China's State Security Law. In addition, the Chinese authorities emphasized that Hong Kong's prosperity was the result of China's support. There was no mention of Hong Kong's contribution to China's economic development, for instance in finance, technology and management, or the fact that it is because of Hong Kong's important contributions that the SAR and its residents do not have to pay tax to the central government and that Hong Kong and the mainland recently signed the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA), which grants Hong Kong a number of privileges, such as duty-free

arrangements for 273 kinds of goods. But some people felt Hong Kong had overstepped its bounds. To make matters worse, during the SARS crisis the Chinese government distributed a large quantity of protective equipment to Hong Kong (Hong Kong in fact did not need this equipment, and sent most of it to storage) while depriving impoverished mainland provinces of these same supplies, raising even more ill feeling toward Hong Kong among mainland residents. There was not even much sympathy from those few mainlanders who were aware that the Hong Kong demonstration was a call for democracy and freedom; in their eyes, Hong Kong was demanding more than its fair share of privileges on both the economic and political fronts.

— and in extreme cases a burning hatred — toward Hong Kong people. Some of the Web site postings were vicious or bullying, for example, “My suggestion: immediately liberate Hong Kong, it’s time to implement ‘one country one system.’”

This kind of anti-Hong Kong sentiment could lead to some of the same Boxer Rebellion-style irrational acts that anti-American sentiment has inspired. It is not at all conducive to the improvement of Hong Kong-mainland relations, and could be an impediment to reunification with Taiwan.

3) A raising of international concern and pressure on Beijing. The international community had already expressed a fairly routine level of concern regarding Article 23 prior to July 1;



Protesters carry placards ridiculing chief executive Tung Chee-hwa and other unpopular public figures. Photo: Reuters.

Mainland dissident Liu Xiaobo inspected a number of major mainland Web sites to monitor public opinion regarding Hong Kong’s Article 23 controversy. He found that a majority of postings not only criticized Hong Kong people, but also largely conformed with the official line: 1) national interests are more important than individual rights; 2) social stability is more important than protecting freedom; 3) economic recovery is more important than political demands; 4) “one country” is more important than “two systems;” 5) Hong Kong people are selfish and ungrateful; 6) criticism of Hong Kong’s privileged position and Hong Kong people’s privileged mentality; 7) Hong Kong people were being manipulated by a small number of radicals and hostile foreign elements; 8) without the Chinese motherland, Hong Kong has no future. Liu Xiaobo believes these opinions are deep-seated, and that the average mainland resident feels a strong prejudice

for example the passing of a non-binding resolution by the U.S. Congress. But after July 1, Western media issued a string of reports and editorials, sometimes even cover stories with titles such as “Revolt” and “Uprising.” This gave Western countries a better understanding of the difficulties Hong Kong had encountered since the handover, and that the “one country two systems” policy that foreign governments had supported had not been realized, but rather that Hong Kong’s six million residents had been delivered to Communist China like lambs to the slaughter. This raised a feeling of moral responsibility and concern on the part of foreign governments, and led them to put additional pressure on the Beijing government.

The Chinese government was quick to accuse foreign countries of “interference in China’s internal affairs,” but in its “international compliance” mode, and with the Sino-British Joint Declaration registered with the United Nations, China

had to be very careful in its handling of the Hong Kong situation, and was obliged to make some concessions to demonstrate the continued existence of “one country two systems.”

Apart from international concern, there was also very great concern over the Hong Kong situation in Taiwan, with many Taiwanese citing the failure of “one country two systems” as a reason to repudiate “one China.” In order to ease cross-strait tensions the Chinese government had no choice but to repair its model of “one country two systems,” and for that reason was obliged to put on a show of lenience toward Hong Kong in order to deceive Taiwan.

4) Exacerbating power struggles in Beijing’s top leadership  
There are clearly two very different attitudes toward Hong Kong predominating in Beijing at present. Former President Jiang Zemin had made a point of wholeheartedly supporting Tung Chee-hwa, as Tung had been appointed not once, but twice to serve as Hong Kong’s chief executive during Jiang’s tenure. In order to save face, Jiang was obliged to consistently take Tung’s side against the Hong Kong people. But Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, assuming leadership after the 16th Party Congress, had no such personal investment in Tung Chee-hwa; they had more to gain by currying favor with the Hong Kong masses and showing only restrained support for Tung. That is why Tung was forced to make concessions after the July 1 mass demonstration; in fact, these were the Beijing government’s concessions.

At the same time, the Chinese authorities were not prepared to give Hong Kong people an inch and let them take a mile, nor did they wish this incident to fan internal conflicts. For that reason it was necessary to stitch up the rift. On July 19 two different groups of senior Chinese officials met with Tung Chee-hwa and openly expressed their support for him, while intimating that it was time for Hong Kong people to settle down. At the same time, Chinese officials’ expression was more measured than before. In particular, premier Wen Jiabao said that even though problems had arisen with Tung Chee-hwa and Hong Kong, Beijing still supported both; this was a departure from Jiang Zemin’s previous lavish praise of Tung’s leadership abilities.

Especially worth noting was the news that one of the officials who met with Tung, Vice-President and Politburo Standing Committee member Zeng Qinghong, had just been appointed Beijing’s top official in charge of Hong Kong affairs. Zeng Qinghong is a close confederate of Jiang Zemin, but he is much smarter. For that reason, although he is unlikely to follow Jiang’s practice of treating Hong Kong as the enemy, there is little hope that he will grant Hong Kong any great political favors. Zeng Qinghong is adept in power politics, and is likely to use a “carrot and stick” approach. On the one hand he will win people over with minor concessions and in that way cause divisions within the “dump Tung” camp. On the other hand he will rally his troops to intimidate the anti-Tung forces.

Recently the Beijing government announced some more economic initiatives to win the hearts and minds of Hong Kong people, and promised to strengthen communications in all sectors, even mentioning the word “reform.” But there is

little reason to hope for direct elections as a result. In the eyes of the Beijing government, listening to the people’s views is already a form of “democracy;” whether or not the government accepts these views is another matter altogether. Recent examples of Beijing’s political tactics regarding Hong Kong include the high-profile reception given to Hong Kong’s Secretary for Security, Regina Ip, shortly after she resigned under public pressure; allowing Ip to publicly vilify Hong Kong people’s inability to “distinguish black from white;” passing on threats through the Hong Kong-based Party mouthpiece, *People’s Daily*, against the “subversive” activities of Hong Kong residents and against members of the religious community who took part in the protests against Article 23; and even floating a trial balloon regarding “someone’s” suggestion that the People’s Liberation Army should be called in to suppress the “rebellion” in Hong Kong.

These political tactics do little to improve Hong Kong’s political environment and solve the core problems in the economic structure. If Beijing really wants what is best for Hong Kong, it should focus on the question of Hong Kong’s existence. As Hong Kong loses its previous position as the main entrepot to China, it should evolve from its current status as a Special Administrative Region to become a Special Democratic Region, serving as a laboratory of political development for China. This is the best way to lead to a new “Hong Kong Spring,” and will protect Hong Kong’s freedom and its environment of rule of law and clean government, thereby also preserving its position as a finance and service center. There should also be a canvassing of public opinion over how to implement a gradual economic turnaround, including reform of the pegged currency system that has become a liability to the Hong Kong economy. Reform of any magnitude will be hard to carry out by a government unacceptable to the people, in particular the consistently inept and ineffectual administration under Tung Chee-hwa.

If Hong Kong can become a Special Democratic Region of China, this will add a new element to the “new government” under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. Deng Xiaoping once said he would like to make several more Hong Kongs. China is in fact in the process of producing several economic Hong Kongs, but while they mimic the SAR’s superficial features such as skyscrapers, they lack Hong Kong’s freedom of information and rule of law, and corruption and economic disparity remain serious sources of social instability. Only the development of a democratic political system can give any hope of solving these problems and contributing to normal economic development. In such a context, Hong Kong people’s mature sense of civic spirit, law-abiding mentality and reasonable political demands can make a new contribution to China’s development.

Translated by Stacy Mosher