

What has gone wrong in Hong Kong?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify the underlying problems of the recent socio-political disturbance originated from the amendments of extradition law in Hong Kong.

Design/methodology/approach – The perspectives of politics and governance are adopted to analyze the current situation.

Findings – Three underlying problems are identified, including the existential crisis under “One Country, Two Systems”, the politics of “fear of losing” and the institutional weakness to reform and change under the current system of “Hong Kong people governing Hong Kong”.

Originality/value – The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government should take initiatives to address the above problems.

Keywords Hong Kong, Governance, One country two systems, Existential crisis

Paper type Viewpoint

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Whether the current political crisis in Hong Kong finally ends with reconciliation or by force, the Hong Kong people and China’s central government (hereinafter “central government”) will have to confront the same question: can “One Country, Two Systems” persist, and how?

At present, the “opposition” against the Government comes not only from a small group of “radical trouble makers” but also from a relatively large majority of the general public. The central government and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government should be well aware of this. Among those opposing government are people who object to the amendments of the extradition law, who are dissatisfied with the government’s administration, who criticize the unfairness of the system, who are skeptical about “One Country, Two Systems” and who are disappointed about or even feel despair of the political status quo. As anger, hatred, trauma and sorrow abound, it is necessary to untie big and small knots in order to help resolve the crisis. It takes time to heal and the government must take the initiative. Theoretically, there is a four-step approach: the “4R” – Response, Reconciliation, Review and Reform. However, it is difficult to proceed if the unrest is still on.

The radical protesters might think that they could force the SAR Government and central government to cave in by using extreme means riding on popular sentiments and international pressure. They are taking things too much for granted. No government authority would soften its stance against those who disrupt public order. There is always a “law and order majority” in any society. Once the bottom line of the ordinary people is crossed, their sentiments will change. In 1967, the leftist anti-British riots were eventually suppressed by the colonial government in Hong Kong through heavy-handed military and



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police actions. At that time, more of the general population were willing to stand on the side of the government in restoring public order. Also, international public opinion will not be sympathetic toward the escalation of violence (see, for example, Hartcher, 2019). If the current incidences turn into violent revolutionary uprisings, the central government will definitely intervene using military force.

However, government cannot rely solely on a “stop violence and control disturbances” strategy to regain the hearts and minds of the general public. Making reference to French President Emmanuel Macron’s experience in handling the “yellow vest” movement, while he took a hardline approach to deal with the riots, his focus as the leader was to submit himself to humble engagement with local communities, to regain mainstream support through policy and administrative reforms with a much softer touch. Ultimately the manifestation of public power must hinge on the support from the people.

What major problems have emerged since the reunification of Hong Kong with China in 1997? Let’s put economic and livelihood issues aside for the time being. It is not because they are unimportant, but the main contradiction presently lies with politics and governance. This can be seen in three aspects.

The existential crisis under “One Country, Two Systems”

First, the “uneasiness” under “One Country, Two Systems” has led to an existential crisis. It is only natural that tensions exist between the “two systems”. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain a balance between the high degree of autonomy of the Hong Kong SAR and the authority of the central government. The critical factors are respect, compatibility and mutual benefits. Without special features and splendor, Hong Kong will not be beneficial to China. Yet, a SAR that only emphasizes itself but ignores its connection with the rest of the country will not make the Mainland authorities and people feel that it “adds values” to the nation. Since reunification, the contradictions and tensions between the “Two Systems” have been increasing, and the balance between “divergence” and “convergence” has not been dealt with properly. Due to historical and institutional factors, the different ways of “existence” between the Mainland and Hong Kong have created gaps and cognitive differences. As a result, both sides are easily prone to feelings of “being threatened”.

Successive Chief Executives have been politically trapped or defeated over issues concerning the Mainland and central authorities. The first Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa was defeated in trying to enact national security legislation under Article 23 of the Basic Law. His successor, Donald Tsang’s first political reform was defeated and, in 2010, his second political reform was almost derailed. The third Chief Executive, Leung Chun-ying was frustrated by the anti-national education movement and “Occupy Central” protests. The current Chief Executive, Carrie Lam was defeated over extradition law amendments. In addition, major infrastructure projects and economic cooperation involving the “Mainland” have been negated as “red” projects by the opposition parties (who referred to them as “being planned” by the central authorities) because they know that many local people are still wary of the Mainland system and that criticizing the Mainland has political appeal.

Therefore, if people’s hearts are not soothed and the focus is only on the reaffirmation of constitutional order and the central government’s “comprehensive jurisdiction” over the SAR, this would not achieve positive effect. The practice of “One Country, Two Systems” and the related question about the future of Hong Kong have to be rethought.

The politics of “fear of losing”

Second, the ambiguity of Hong Kong’s identity has caused the perplexity of Hong Kong people. Since reunification, there has been a problem of identity orientation which first appeared in the fields of culture and values as seen, for example, in the early controversies of mother-tongue medium of instruction in schools (perceived by some locals as no longer

emphasizing English) and using Putonghua in teaching Chinese (perceived as sidelining Cantonese). Some cultural activists and the intellectual community have advocated the heritage of Hong Kong, historical preservation and the safeguarding of core values, because they are afraid of “losing” the original Hong Kong system and way of life. In 2003, half a million people took to the street to oppose Article 23 legislation, marking how the deep-seated “fear of losing” (freedom) first entered mass politics. The recent large-scale anti-extradition protests represent a continuation of the politics of “fear of losing”.

In the early 1980s, central government officials responsible for the reunification of Hong Kong were very clear about the mentality of Hong Kong people. They made the promise of “horse racing will continue, the dancing parties will go on, and everything will remain the same.” Deng Xiaoping even considered that supporting the Communist Party was not a criterion in defining patriots. The Basic Law contains multiple articulations in favor of continuing the pre-existing system, policies and way of life. Therefore, there is no doubt that the central government respects the reality of Hong Kong and has, from the outset, striven to win the hearts of Hong Kong people. The Basic Law has prescribed “Hong Kong permanent residents” as the identity of the locals thus delineating the related legal rights and the right of citizenship. It clearly differentiates Hong Kong from the Mainland and provides for a unique system of SAR governance.

The Hong Kong identity and national identity do not have to be mutually exclusive. The key is how to balance the two identities. Hong Kong people can love Hong Kong and be patriotic at the same time. According to The University of Hong Kong’s public opinion polls, in 1997 the proportion of those who considered themselves as “Hongkonger” and “Hongkonger in China” was 36 percent and nearly 24 percent, respectively, making a total of some 60 percent. This should not come as a surprise. Over the past 20 years, the former proportion had fluctuated between 30 and 40 percent, reaching the highest at 45 percent in 2012. However, due to the anti-extradition saga, it rose sharply to 53 percent by mid-2019, while the latter was 23.3 percent, adding up to more than three-quarters. It is expected to go further upwards as stimulated by endless protests.

The rise of “localism” can be seen everywhere. However, when localism evolves into separatism that negates the Mainland and even seeks to cut off from the Mainland, it would certainly lead to the anxiety of the central government and its strong reactions. If the confrontations and violence escalate, it would also attract more extreme interpretations by the central government. In this way, the original sense of mutual accommodation that should have accompanied reunification would inevitably become distorted. What kind of “Hong Kong” should be maintained in order to reflect its significance of this time?

The system of “Hong Kong people governing Hong Kong” lacks the momentum of seeking reform and changes

Third, the current “Hong Kong people governing Hong Kong” system has been unable to bring the society into cohesion and also lacks the momentum for reform and changes. When formulating the Basic Law in the 1980s, in order to achieve a smooth transition, the drafters were inclined to extend the original governance system and logic, under-estimating the unavoidable changes of people’s sentiments and the socio-political environment. The Basic Law has entrenched the structure of administrative government and bureaucratic policy thinking inherited from the British colonial regime, and at the same time institutionalized the distribution of powers and benefits of existing capitalists and elites. Mainstream political parties (whether pro-establishment or pan-democrat) based on direct elections in the districts are given no role to play in government, let alone to cultivate political talent in Hong Kong.

As a result, there are multiple structural disparities: using a traditional administrative regime to govern a society with pluralist politics and interests; appointing a Chief Executive and ruling team without baptism by popular mandate to exercise “executive-led”

authority over legislative politics that are backed by district public opinion and functional constituencies' interests; and adapting an administrative mindset that take continuity and risk aversion as priorities to cope with the rapidly changing socio-economic environment. The government is inherently weak. It is dragged by executive-legislative gridlock amidst a politics of diminishing order and ethos, frequently resulting in lengthy deliberations and debates but limited decisions and actions. Crippled by vested and short-term interests on the one hand, the government is unable to command the majority support of parties on the other. Hence, policies often lag behind the needs of the times thus giving people an impression of not being proactive. As such, it makes some people to reminisce about the good old days of reforms under the former colonial government.

After more than 20 years of reunification, Hong Kong has been haunted by democratic deficit and political reform disputes. Although the central government has the "8.31" bottom line for political reform [Note 1], if it does not face up to the institutional shortcomings of the existing system of "Hong Kong people governing Hong Kong" but blindly believes that competent bureaucrats will make capable leaders to govern Hong Kong ("If the British colonial government can, why can't we?"), it has obviously under-estimated the complexity of Hong Kong's local politics. If the system is not reformed, it will be difficult for the Hong Kong SAR government to get out from the dead ends of governance. Internal frictions will persist, depleting energies on all sides and wasting an advanced metropolis which used to be daring and innovative. The loss of Hong Kong is also the loss of the nation.

Note

1. A decision of the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) on August 31, 2015, dubbed as the "8.31 Decision", requires the Chief Executive to be a person "who loves the country and loves Hong Kong" and the method for selecting the Chief Executive by universal suffrage "to provide corresponding institutional safeguards for this purpose". A nominating committee similar to the present Election Committee composition would nominate 2-3 candidates, each supported by more than half of the members of the nominating committee. The process of forming the 2016 Legislative Council would remain unchanged. See: NPCSC (2014) Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on Issues Relating to the Selection of the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region by Universal Suffrage and on the Method for Forming the Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in the Year 2016, August 31, Beijing.

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