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Hong Kong

Bye-election returns Pan-Democrat Council Members.

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The by-election which took place in Hong Kong on the 16th May saw the return of all five pan-democrat councillors who had resigned earlier this year.

The by-election, which saw a very low turn out of only 17.1%, was triggered after the resignation of five pan-democrat Legislative Council (LegCo) members in January. The councillors resigned as part of a plan to call a de-facto referendum on the question of universal suffrage. One council member resigned from each of Hong Kong's five constituencies meaning that an election was triggered in which it was hoped that all of Hong Kong's citizens could participate and vote. This was supposed to resemble the effect of a referendum. The idea was that if these council members were then re-elected, it would reflect the fact that the people of Hong Kong are not content with the current undemocratic electoral system and want to see the implementation of full universal suffrage by 2012.

Under the current electoral system, of the 60 LegCo seats, 30 are directly elected seats while the other 30 are elected by functional constituencies made up of a much smaller pool of voters including a number corporate bodies and group tickets. Hong Kong's Chief Executive is elected by a committee made up of only 800 people who are all appointees. Overall this means that some (generally businesses) have control of more than one vote, while ordinary people are only entitled to vote for 30 of the council members. The councillors who resigned from the LegCo did so in an attempt to challenge this inequality. They have rejected the reform package the government proposed last month, which would see the number on the election committee for the Chief Executive expanded to 1,200 and add a further ten members to the legislature, only five of whom would be elected by universal suffrage, as insulting. They also reject the position of the moderate pan-democrats Alliance for Universal Suffrage who are prepared to compromise and accept direct elections of the Chief Executive by 2017 and full universal suffrage in LegCo elections by 2020.

The question of political reform has seen numerous protests by Hong Kong residents as China's central government has continued to oppose universal suffrage in LegCo elections before 2020. Earlier this month more than 3,000 people marched from Victoria Park to the government headquarters to call for universal suffrage and the abolition of functional constituencies.

The plan for LegCo members to resign was first proposed by the League of Social Democrats (LSD) in July 2009. Initially the Democratic Party had also expressed support but they later retreated and withdrew from the plan. In the end it was two councillors from the Civic Party, Alan Leong and Tanya Chan, and three from the LSD, Albert Chan, Leung Kwok-hung (Long Hair) and Raymond Wong who went ahead and submitted their resignations, putting the plan into action.

Despite a boycott by pro-Beijing parties due to heavy condemnation of the election by Beijing, twenty-four candidates contested the five seats. The most heavily contested was in Kowloon West where Raymond Wong was standing for re-election. In this seat conservative candidate Pamela Pak posed a serious threat to Wong. Pro-Beijing candidate Wilson Shea also stood, despite a boycott by pro-Beijing parties, although he has insisted that he was standing to represent the voice of Small and Medium Enterprises.

Students have also helped to support the referendum plan. In order to ensure the start of the referendum after the announcement of the boycott by pro-Beijing parties, students from Hong Kong universities formed the group Tertiary 2012 to stand one candidate for each vacant seat thereby ensuring a contested election. They managed to raise the money for their deposits through online donations.

The LSD, who initiated the referendum plan, is seen in Hong Kong as something of a controversial organisation.

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Founded in 2006, and relying heavily on the image of its leading figures, most notably Long Hair, who is reported to have a Trotskyist background, and Raymond Wong, a former member of the KMT, it has gained popularity, particularly among young people for its radical language and appearance. It was first successful in winning three seats in the September 2008 Legislative Council elections. While criticizing Beijing for its refusal to implement universal suffrage before 2020, the LSD supports China's development and opening to the world. The LSD's programme stresses the importance of social policy. They advocate social welfare, progressive taxation, a minimum wage, collective bargaining and opposition to full scale privatisation. They also call for more attention to be paid to primary and manufacturing industries, while at the same time recommend the promotion of accounting, insurance, finance and legal advice industries as they "in turn will enhance China's development, so as to make Hong Kong a hub for China's advance to the world. [1]

The LSD's Raymond Wong, said in an interview with Mingpao on September 26th 2006, shortly after the LSD's founding, that they wanted to pursue a peaceful coexistence with the bourgeoisie. "Kennedy once said that if we save a minority who are rich, it is to save the majority poor. Let's be clear, we would not annihilate the bourgeoisie through revolution.....We pursue a kind of welfare state like Sweden."

Critics have expressed their concerns over the contradictory nature of the alliance of forces involved in the LSD. The Civic Party's Fernando Chueng, for instance, in 2008 raised the question concerning the LSD, "which claims to be on the left, or even Trotskyist if we are talking about Long Hair, how is it possible for them to raise the banner of the blue which represents the KMT and appeal to their followers to vote for them?"

The Civic Party a liberal democratic party, which joined the LSD in the resignation plan, was also founded in 2006 by pro-democracy advocates who mostly come from a legal background. They advocate a society based on rule of law, protection of individual rights, the introduction of a statutory minimum wage, as well as universal suffrage.

In an article published in December 2009 the LSD's Raymond Wong explained why he thought fighting for universal suffrage is not something which people should be afraid of:

"some charged that fighting for universal suffrage is too radical, and disrupting HK... (We argue that) HK today is different from the past when the CP seized power from the KMT. HK is a society of pluralism, of openness and prosperity, a society constituted by the middle class. To allow universal suffrage will not end up in mob politics, and will not bring substantial changes to the social structure." [2]

While using radical language to demand universal suffrage, along with their calls for a welfare state, the LSD does not identify the capitalist system as the cause of poverty and unemployment. Rather its programme suggests that it sees the origins of social inequality lying in the lack of democracy and the occasional failure of the market, and that universal suffrage and occasional government intervention will be enough to check the unequal distribution of wealth and balance off market failures.

In contrast to this, Left21, a left organization which was recently formed by young people in Hong Kong, argues in its position paper on political reform that the roots of social inequality have a much deeper cause and that "bourgeois representative democracy alone is unable to deal with the curses of capitalist market economy". [3] It has therefore called for moving beyond capitalism and formal democracy, and for a kind of democracy which simultaneously incorporates political and economic democracy so as to enable working people to have control over their lives. Left21, nevertheless, called for support of the LSD and Civic Party's initiative in creating a de-facto referendum, to defy Beijing's continuing denial of universal suffrage to the people of Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong media has made much of the disappointingly low turn out. In parts of the New Territories, the boycott

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by pro-Beijing parties meant that many schools and rural assemblies, which are often used as polling stations, were not allowed to open. Some voters had to travel for as much as 30 minutes in order to vote. It is thought that this may have put some voters off. Hong Kong's Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen and his ministers had also previously declared that they would not vote. Speaking to the South China Morning Post, however, Civic Party leader Audrey Eu Tuet-mee has said she is satisfied with the turnout declaring it "the biggest mobilization since the July 1 demonstration in 2003, when 500,000 took to the streets." [4] Nevertheless such a comparison between an active mass movement on the streets is somewhat misleading in terms of the practical message it displays. A low turnout at a ballot tends to be seen as reflecting apathy and the lack of belief that the ballot itself will lead to anything which makes a difference to the lives of the people involved.

17th May 2010

From [China Labor Net](#)

[1] [reference](#)

[2] [reference](#)

[3] [Left21 Self-Introduction](#)

[4] "Low turnout deals blow to pan-democrats" South China Morning Post, May 17 2010