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Hong Kong

What future for Hong Kong?

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Radio Television Hong Kong reported in early November on the arrest of four people for "seditious intention" on a street in the district of Mong Kok on the Kowloon Peninsula. They allegedly had in their possession a yellow banner that read "We want genuine universal suffrage" and a display with the slogan "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times". All were aged between 61 and 85 and were members of a group that had been protesting regularly daily, according to one account since the end of the Umbrella movement in 2014.

It is indicative of the level of political repression that has engulfed the city since the Communist Party-imposed national security law became operational last year. More than 100,000 people have left the city, activists continue to be jailed, some independent media organisations have folded, and the main liberal opposition groups, along with many free trade unions, have disbanded as the crackdown on civil and democratic rights has intensified.

The contrast with the situation in 2019 could not be starker. At that time, the streets felt like an urban canvas upon which the slogans of the democratic movement were sprayed for mile after mile along the main roads, up side streets and on building frontages. Spaces devoid of demands often conveyed in other ways the depth of the radicalisation: burned signal boxes and trashed traffic lights, metal pedestrian barriers stripped bare for weaponry, smashed ATMs, formerly paved footpaths now resembling sandpits, the bricks having been given new lives as projectiles against police.

The street fighting was just a scrap compared to the battle for the universities. And of all of those occupied, the Polytechnic, in the heart of the city, stood out. Could more Molotov cocktails have been produced and stored in one spot by any student movement in history? Is there a record of college archery club members joining a political rebellion and shooting arrows into rows of cops to keep them at bay? Could more tear gas ever have been deployed by a city police force in the course of 48 hours?

The Polytechnic siege, two years ago this month, was as intense as it was exhausting, and it proved in some ways to be the movement's last stand. At the time, Au Loong Yu, author of the definitive *Hong Kong in Revolt* and one of the city's few veteran activists and one of its only Marxists was saying as much. It was a valiant fight, but the balance of forces had become all too clear. In retrospect, he was, unfortunately, all too right.

"To have a sense of proportion, the scale of repression is still far, far away from Tiananmen Square in 1989. And if you compare with Burma/Myanmar, we are still far from that", he says via Zoom from a London flat like others, he has fled the city as the authorities continue to turn the screws on the resistance movement to the ever encroaching dictatorship of Beijing.

"For Hong Kong people, they never imagined that it could be as bad as it is now. Never. But we need to have a sober mind. For the Chinese Communist Party, it is still very moderate repression. They have been targeting the potentially most dangerous players. There are not yet killings. There are of course very dirty tricks. They threaten people's families, threaten their life through middlemen. For now, the people targeted are the opposition parties, the trade unions with huge membership and so on. And there are also across the board purges targeting teachers, civil servants, academics, certain media. But as a whole, the whole of the civil society organisation has not been targeted yet. Maybe they don't need to because the fear has already gripped many people in Hong Kong."

One thing often missed in the coverage of the conflict is that it is not only a territorial dispute or a question of democracy and autonomy in the city. The Communist Party has an eye on resistance or potential resistance to its

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rule on the mainland as well. More than half a dozen groups based in Hong Kong have been dedicated to labour solidarity and educational work in China often in the crucial Pearl River Delta industrial zone, comprising the cities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Dongguan, Zhongshan and Jiangmen.

The region was a hotbed of industrial activity and solidarity work prior to the ultra-authoritarian Xi Jinping's ascent to the position of general secretary of the Communist Party. Most labour organisations historically kept a low profile, but have now either ceased operations or significantly reduced their work due to the increased repression, Au says.

By annihilating political liberties and the political opposition in Hong Kong, Beijing is also destroying the potential threat of Hong Kong and China labour solidarity. And beyond the labour organisations, there are hundreds more groups dedicated to campaigning and forging political links on the mainland: gender equality groups, human rights groups, environmental groups, community groups and so on. "They will all be wiped out maybe in a few years' time", Au says. "So this is a terrible loss for China's long march for freedom as well."

After the territory was handed back from British colonial rule in 1997 (it should be remembered that it was hardly a bastion of democracy at that time either), increasing numbers of mainlanders came to Hong Kong as tourists or for work and took note of the less restrictive political atmosphere: the bookshops selling literature otherwise prohibited in their own cities, the public events discussing political issues, the free trade unions and the street protests.

In particular, every year on 4 June the anniversary of Tiananmen Square mass demonstrations were held in the territory to commemorate the victims of the Communist Party's suppression of the democratic movement. "We never knew the numbers, but there were always mainlanders who came to Hong Kong to attend the memorial. Of course, this is gone now", Au says; as of this year, the memorial is banned.

It must be quite difficult for someone in their twilight years to make a new life in a foreign country, but staying put would have been even more difficult. For that reason, when Au speaks of the weaknesses and mistakes of the movement in the last period, he is not unduly critical, particularly of those who chose to stay in the city. But there are important evaluations and lessons that are relevant not only for those in Hong Kong but also for people in socialist, democratic or workers' movements elsewhere.

"I do not wish to be harsh", Au says, pausing for the right words. "I have long argued that we didn't do our best in 2019. But even if we'd made no mistakes, I don't think that we could win this battle. Now, we are definitely in a retreat. Some organisations have done better. But for some, it has been the worst kind of retreat. You may say a capitulation and very undemocratic."

He singles out the teachers' union, which dissolved itself after China's state-run People's Daily labelled it a "poisonous tumour" and the city Education Bureau said it would no longer be recognised. With a membership of nearly 100,000, it is one of at least 29 unions to have disbanded since the start of the year, according to a tally by Reuters. Even the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, the umbrella organisation for dozens of pro-democracy unions, disbanded after its members and leaders were threatened.

"I'm not going to condemn the teachers' union dissolving themselves as such, but the way they did it. The leadership, before turning to the membership for consent, already decided that the union must be disbanded. Their own charter says that they must go to the membership and let them vote on such a proposal. But they don't want that. They don't want the members to decide. So they manoeuvred to convene a convention with 'representatives' of members, I think less than 150, and revised the charter so that a very small congregation of representatives could decide whether to disband or not.

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"We know that when we retreat, we need damage control. Yes, when retreating you have to give up some of your operation. That I can understand. But the way they did it was to ensure the membership had no say on the matter. This gave no chance to those who opposed it. This is very shameful."

A different example, Au notes, was that of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China, which organised the 4 June memorials and was a crucial pillar of the Hong Kong democratic movement for a generation. According to the Hong Kong Free Press, the Alliance had 100 affiliate organisations and nearly 150,000 members. It was also disbanded after receiving threats and being branded "an agent of foreign influence" by the government. But there were differences of opinion within the leadership from the beginning, and at least there was an open fight.

"Most of the leaders have already been imprisoned. There were only something like seven left in the committee, and it was a four to three vote to disband. It still had to take the vote to the members as well, and the opposition lost", Au says.

One of the most strident oppositionists is the former vice-chair, Chow Hang-tung. She and some others refused to cooperate with the authorities, who demanded information about the group's membership and activities. In September, she publicly urged people to continue the resistance. "Don't surrender to the unreasonable power quickly and easily", she told a media scrum.

Chow, along with other Alliance leaders Lee Cheuk-yan and Albert Ho, has been charged with "incitement to subversion" under the national security law. "I greatly appreciate her courage", Au says. "I would say that she alone has saved the honour of the 2019 resistance. She almost alone stood up against this wave of capitulation."

Despite the best efforts of some, there is no serious organised resistance left in the city. Yet in Au's estimation, this is not all due to the repression. "There was already a fatal weakness. Because of the 'down with organisation' ideas [among the radicalised young people in 2019], we were always going to be left with atomisation. This is exactly what we are facing. Especially when the pan democrats, these mass organisations, disappeared. When they have gone, there is nothing really left."

This was certainly evident the last time I visited the city, in February 2020. Although the pandemic was then a significant factor generating caution among the democratic movement, it was also clear that the youth movement had retreated and that its general leaderlessness, now that it could muster only small numbers, was incapable of dealing with the new disorganisation tactics of the police. As the continuing arrests attest, there is still oppositional activity. But it appears to be discrete and shut down quickly.

"If we come from a historical perspective, Hong Kong has been lucky for several decades, but the luck has come to an end. We are only meeting the same fate of several waves of China democratic movements in the past 70 years. Every time that there is a democratic wave, it doesn't last; it is repressed and there is no memory left.

"Every generation has to restart everything from scratch; there is no continuity, no accumulations of cadres, no accumulation of experience. So every time it is 'new hands', new generations involved. If we do not do something, in five years' time perhaps all the memory will be lost again.

"I hope it's not that bad. But the Communist Party's moves are very clear. First, they change the electoral system. Then, they finish off the opposition parties. Then, sooner or later, even smaller organisations won't be spared if it goes on like that. There are still spaces that we can at least develop some networks, some new organisation it is still possible. But if we cannot do this in a few years' time, then the future will be very bleak."

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