

What next for Hong Kong's extradition bill protesters?

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Weeks in, protesters feel they have little to show for their efforts, even after the storming of the Legislative Council

As despair sets in, will defiance fade like Occupy Central – or burn only brighter?

David Wong has spent more nights sleeping outside the Hong Kong legislature in recent weeks than he has in his soft, cosy bed at home.

Wong, 24, is among the more dedicated of protesters demanding the government abandon a bill that would allow for extraditions to mainland China and other places the city does not currently have agreements with.

He has spent days on end at the makeshift camps outside the legislature that are the protesters' de facto headquarters, handing out supplies like umbrellas, goggles, water and food, and discussing with fellow activists the next course of action.

"Last week, I went home to sleep on only three nights," he said. "But I must come forward to stop this bill."

His dedication comes at a cost. The freelance audio technician's monthly income has dropped to just HK\$2,000, a tenth of what he would normally expect to make, as his career takes a back seat to his new-found passion.

Wong is no veteran activist; indeed, until last month, he hadn't attended a single protest. Until he saw the police response to a march on June 9, when an estimated million people took to the streets to demand Chief Executive Carrie Lam [1] Cheng Yuet-ngor withdraw the bill. On that day, one of Wong's friends was hit with a police baton, and he decided he could stand by no longer.

Wong is among dozens of protesters to have spoken to This Week in Asia about the desperation that drove them to the streets in the largest mass protests to have hit the city. For many, this desperation has grown only worse as their actions have failed to move the government. While they have succeeded in getting the bill shelved, it has not been withdrawn – a key demand of protesters who also want police officers punished for using excessive force, and a guarantee that protesters won't be charged with rioting, an offence that carries a 10-year jail sentence.

Still, it is this desperation that continues to drive protesters, though in different directions. While some have given in to the emotion – even suicides are suspected of being linked to the protests – others have bottled their feelings and are using them as fuel. On Monday, the most diehard among them stormed the legislature and occupied the complex in scenes that were broadcast across the world. Elsewhere, earnest students distribute leaflets outside schools, and would-be politicians plan protests on social media [2].

For many among them, the protests have been a political awakening. Other, older, hands suggest the protests are not as sudden as they seem; that the bill was merely a lightning rod for frustrations that have built up over many years, prompted by the government's failure to listen. But however they see the unrest, the big question for most of them now is: where to go from here?

A LESSON FROM LEGCO

On July 1, hundreds of protesters stormed Hong Kong's Legislative Council [3] and occupied it for three hours. The complex was trashed and defaced with graffiti, including one slogan that read: "You taught us that peaceful demonstrations do not work".

Austin Lee, 25, was among the protesters inside. "We have done everything already, but the government still will not listen. Going in was the last resort," said Lee, who asked This Week in Asia to use a pseudonym.

Lee said he and many of his fellow protesters had wanted to stay in the legislature and were prepared to be arrested. Some had even suggested setting up a resource station there.

But every now and then, other protesters would enter the chamber and demand they leave, without explaining why. That hit morale as rumours began to spread that police action was imminent.

"I was struggling with whether to leave or stay. I had to consider not only my own safety, but other people's safety too," Lee said.

Shortly before midnight, the group inside the complex had been whittled down to a diehard group of four, who were labelled sei si - Cantonese for "martyrs". Their fellow protesters outside the complex feared police would storm the legislature at any moment, putting them in danger.

Lee ran outside, picked up a loudspeaker, and told the thousands gathered what was happening, his voice shaking with emotion.

"I told everyone to stay outside the Legislative Council, to support the four protesters inside. The next moment, everyone was chanting 'we leave together!'."

As Lee broke down in tears, what happened next can only be described as surreal.

About 30 protesters, mostly wearing yellow helmets, goggles and masks to protect themselves from police, stormed into the chamber and dragged the four out.

It was just in the nick of time. Soon afterwards, riot police arrived, firing tear gas and clearing the crowd. Within an hour, the sea of thousands had gone.

Looking back, Lee believes the storming of Legco achieved little. Not because he cares about condemnation from officials, or even members of the public, but because it failed to force the government to meet their demands.

Asked about the next move, he said: "We know that there is not much we can do now. But we must fight till the very end."

DISCONNECT

When Carrie Lam was campaigning for the city's top post in 2017, her election slogan was "We Connect". She pledged to reach out to young people and even renamed and restructured the Central Policy Unit, the government think tank, to include more youngsters as members.

But since she became the city's leader in July 2017, her approval rating has plummeted from 63.6 out of 100 points to just 32.8 last month. That is the lowest level experienced by any of the four chief executives who have held office since 1997, when Britain handed Hong Kong's sovereignty back to China.

Lam's election promise now stands as an object of mockery for protesters, who have perverted it to "We Disconnected".

Among the youth the administration has failed to reach are Kelly Chiu, 15, and her schoolmate, Chris Wong, 16. Neither had taken part in a protest before June 9; in 2014, when Occupy Central [4] protesters paralysed the city's streets for 79 days to call for universal suffrage, both were still too young for politics.

"I was politically apathetic before then," Chiu said. "I have always known there was a plan to pass an extradition bill but I didn't really know how it could affect me. But as I found out more, I realised the consequences could be serious."

Chiu learnt about the extradition bill in school, where teachers were careful to present both sides of

the argument. News reports prompted her to find out more.

Her main fear is that Hongkongers critical of the central government in Beijing could be extradited. It is a worry shared by many of the protesters. One of the movement's slogans is faan sung jung: a Cantonese phrase which carries a double meaning: faan means "anti" while sung jung can be interpreted either as "sending to China" or "sending to death".

While officials have repeatedly stressed the bill would target only criminals, protesters have no confidence in the rule of law on the mainland and fear Beijing will use the bill to crack down on dissent.

Chiu and some of her schoolmates are so devoted to the cause that last month they printed leaflets and handed them out on the streets to raise awareness. For four days, they stood outside their New Territories school in uniforms from 7am until their classes began an hour later. On two other days, they went to Central and Tuen Mun.

Chiu is driven not only by her anger over the extradition bill, but by her pent-up frustration with the government over issues including Hong Kong's sky-high cost of living and property prices.

"The Lantau Tomorrow Vision is going to cost so much money and I feel like I won't benefit from it," Chiu said, referring to the government's HK\$624 billion plan to build a new metropolis on a man-made island in waters to the west of Hong Kong's main island. "Property prices are so high and the government isn't really doing anything effective. I can't see what I will do when I grow up. I don't know if I can afford to buy a house."

Despite Chiu's activism, she has never considered resorting to violence. But last Sunday, violence found her. She was on her way to an event in Admiralty to mourn people whose deaths have been linked to the protests.

Workers clean up posters on the wall of the Legislative Council. The posters pay respect to protesters who have died. Photo: Nora Tam

Chiu, who was wearing black clothes and a mask - items that marked her out as an anti-extradition bill protester, was surrounded by about 30 people as she left the MTR station. The group began pushing Chiu around and a middle-aged man punched her in the face.

"I was bleeding and my hands were covered in blood. But all the police did was ask me not to provoke the others. I did not. I was just walking past them," she said of the group, whom she believes were headed to a pro-police rally held on the same day.

So upset was Chiu by the incident that she feared seeking treatment, having heard reports that police were hunting down protesters in hospitals. Eventually she found a private hospital doctor to treat her.

Chiu's actions speak volumes about the growing mistrust between protesters and police. Her mother has even quit her accounting job to watch over her daughter. "Summer vacation is coming and I want to make sure that she will be safe if she joins the protests again," Chiu's mother said.

For other families, the protests have acted as a wedge between them. Chiu's schoolmate Wong said his participation had led to bitter arguments with his father.

"After the June 9 protest, I went home and my father asked me how my protest experience was. He thought I had taken part just for fun."

WHAT NEXT?

Ventus Lau Wing-hong was on holiday in Japan on June 12 when he heard the news that police had fired tear gas at protesters in Admiralty. Any thoughts he had of relaxing evaporated swiftly.

Unlike Chiu and Wong, Lau, 25, is no stranger to activism. Last year, he was disqualified in his bid to run in a Legislative Council by-election because of pro-independence remarks he had made on Facebook.

On his return to Hong Kong, he immediately took to the social media [6] messaging service Telegram – a favourite with the extradition protesters – to ask how he could help. The group came up with a plan to petition foreign consulates ahead of the G20 [7] summit in Osaka. They translated their petition into languages including German and Arabic and handed the letters to consulate staff on the day of the march.

The campaign met a mixed response. While it captured the attention of the international media, the protests were not officially discussed at the summit, though Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe [8] did speak to Chinese President Xi Jinping [9] about the importance of a “free and open Hong Kong, prosperous under the one country, two systems” principle.

Lau might have been happy with his campaign, but he was frustrated that the Hong Kong government refused to listen to the protesters’ views – and saddened by the deaths that were linked to the protests.

“It was a big blow to me that, after the consulate protests and everything else we have done, the government still declined to make concessions,” he said. “Even if 7 million people took to the streets, I fear that might not work either. I don’t know what we can do any more for now, but we must fight till the end.”

Some critics suggest that if the government waits long enough, the determination of protesters like Lau will slowly fizzle out, much as it did when the Occupy Central movement was forced to pack up without any concession whatsoever from Beijing regarding its goal of universal suffrage.

The critics hope that, with proceedings turning violent, the general public will slowly lose patience with the protesters – much as happened in the later stages of Occupy.

But while government officials, business groups and pro-government politicians have indeed condemned outright violent behaviour such as the storming of Legco, the response of the wider public has been more nuanced. There may be a general opposition to the violence, but not many people have expressed outrage. Some even sympathise, saying the government’s intransigence is at least partly to blame.

That leaves the ball in the court of Chief Executive Lam and the Hong Kong government.

- Assistant Professor Sing Ming, from the University of Science and Technology, said Lam must show she was willing to make concessions if she wanted to resolve the crisis.

Otherwise, any dialogue risks being a repeat of the meeting between Lam and the leaders of Occupy in 2014. That meeting was widely criticised as a public relations exercise staged by the government that yielded no constructive results. Instead, in so far as it helped to undermine trust in the government, some argue it helped lead to the current stand-off.

The professor said that whether there was further violence depended largely on the police’s next move: if officers began arresting more people and charging them with rioting that could well dampen participation in the protests, he said.

- Others argue that a different approach by the government could defuse the situation. Lau Siu-kai, vice-chairman of The Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macau Studies, a semi-official think tank, said that to regain trust officials should adopt a more “inclusive” approach in governance, seeking the opinions of people from diverse backgrounds.

He also said the government should do more analysis before introducing policies in the future and instead of restarting political reform work, officials should improve people’s livelihoods first.

Regardless of political allegiance, what most people agree on is that now is a critical time for the protesters. After almost a month of unprecedented demonstrations, Lam is still in office, the extradition issue has not been definitively defeated, and the most concrete thing the protesters have to show for their troubles are bruises from rubber bullets and beanbag rounds.

But the signs are that, rather than despair, it is defiance that now fuels many of the protesters and that is likely to mean just one thing: further unrest.

In the week since the storming of Legco, an almost eerie calm has returned to the city centre, but some observers fear it is just a temporary reprieve.

As if to underline the point, several protesters gathered outside Sham Shui Po MTR station on Thursday to hand out fliers advertising a protest on Sunday in Tsim Sha Tsui. "Hongkongers, we have not retreated yet," the flier said. ■

Links

[1] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/carrie-lam>

[2] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/social-media>

[3] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/legislative-council-hong-kong>

[4] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/xi-jinping>

[5] <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3015492/hong-kongs-extradition-protests-one-count-ry-two-systems-and>

[6] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/social-media/Social%20media%20refers%20to%20the%20means%20of%20interaction%20amon>

[7] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/g20>

[8] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/shinzo-abe>

[9] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/xi-jinping>

[10] <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3015595/hong-kong-extradition-bill-no-singapore-liv-ing-fear-city-ripping>

[11] <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3014572/hong-kongs-extradition-law-mess-dont-bla-me-beijing-blame-naive>

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<https://www.scmp.com/print/week-asia/politics/article/3017501/what-next-hong-kongs-extradition-bil-l-protesters>