

The Left's Role in the Hong Kong Uprising

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An interview with Avery Ng, chairman of the League of Social Democrats in Hong Kong.

Nearly six months of increasingly brutal state violence have failed to break the massive anti-government uprisings in Hong Kong. On Sunday, protesters mobilized a record-breaking turnout of pro-democracy voters in the city's elections for district council, winning a landslide victory and gaining control of seventeen of eighteen districts—a clear rebuke to the Beijing-backed establishment.

The movement owes much of its resilience to its leaderless structure: participants coordinate semi-anonymously over decentralized networks, pursuing a variety of protest methods from peaceful organizing to violent street confrontations with police. However, this tactical flexibility around advocating for the “Five Demands”—including police accountability, amnesty for protesters, and universal suffrage—has not accompanied critiques against other well-known [social](#) and [economic injustices](#) in Hong Kong. Some left-wing activists' efforts to broaden the movement by incorporating class critiques or involving labor unions have failed to gain popular traction.

At the same time, a share of the credit for the movement's mass mobilization must go to the city's progressives, whose under-acknowledged and persistent organizing efforts helped spur June's sudden eruption—and suggest the potential for a broader anti-capitalist politics in the former British colony. To understand the political energies at play, I spoke to Avery Ng, chairman of the [League of Social Democrats](#), one of Hong Kong's few openly left-wing political parties. Currently anticipating a return to jail this week for a [previous conviction](#) in leaking details of a corruption investigation into a top establishment politician, Ng describes the left's role in this year's movement, the challenges of linking street organizing to structural critiques, and how outside observers frequently misunderstand political dynamics in Hong Kong.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Wilfred Chan: What just happened in the district council elections?

Avery Ng: This is a landslide victory for the pro-democracy camp. We mobilized in force, and a lot of first-time and younger voters are finally using their votes to voice their anger toward the establishment. We see the result as a de facto referendum on the legitimacy of [Hong Kong Chief Executive] Carrie Lam's government, as well as a sign of our determination to achieve the Five Demands.

The election has also brought in a new wave of young, pro-democratic district councilors who will be instrumental in further organizing citizens on the district level. It shows why the Beijing government has always been afraid to even touch universal suffrage over the last few decades.

For voters, this election was purely about pro-democracy versus pro-Beijing; any discussion of left versus right was secondary, if not nonexistent. But there are still these root causes of inequality in Hong Kong that people can feel every single day and know need to be addressed. So there's

certainly great room for progressives to push our platforms.

Chan: You've been involved with progressive politics in Hong Kong for over a decade. Tell us about your work.

Ng: The League of Social Democrats (LSD) is a center-left political party in Hong Kong, established in 2006. Initially we were the only left-leaning party, and our tactics were based on relatively radical direct actions, whether in the street or within Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo).

Before I joined the LSD in 2009, I was a corporate strategy consultant and actually specialized in mergers and acquisitions. It was because of my education through my work that I really took notice of Hong Kong's fundamental issues.

Obviously over the last decade, a lot has changed: the whole city has become radicalized, which is good. We are still pushing radical direct action but also trying to educate the people of Hong Kong about the issues we are facing. Not simply the lack of democracy, or the "core values" of Hong Kong, but rather the underlying structural issues: namely, the wealth gap, income disparity, the lack of focus on policies that address anything from education to healthcare to housing—the list goes on. We try to make the people of Hong Kong realize the neoliberal policies that the Hong Kong government and even the majority of the pan-democratic camp have been relying on for years are at [the root of the problems](#).

Chan: Your activism has landed you in jail multiple times.

Ng: For many years we were sort of a core team protesting against any high-level Chinese government officials whenever they visited Hong Kong, using peaceful civil disobedience tactics. If the police try to stop us from marching, we just pushed on. As a result, over the years, many of our core members have been arrested, charged, and sent to jail. More recently, because of our [direct actions](#), especially against [former Chief Executive] CY Leung, we've experienced all sorts of political persecution. So we've spent most of the past two years dealing with these court cases and jail sentences.

But these were within my expectations. It's one of those processes that all of us, sooner or later, have to go through if we are fighting against an authoritarian regime. It's just that we were the first bunch. We also try to demonstrate that we have to fight the government within the current legal framework in whatever way we can—often up to the Court of Final Appeal. I'm not saying that the Hong Kong legal system is any good, but if the system cannot protect our basic human rights, we have to demonstrate that to the Hong Kong people.

Chan: Hong Kong's legal system is at the center of this year's anti-extradition protests. What has been your involvement in the movement?

Ng: There have been a few phases. At first, in early 2019, people did not take notice of the bill at all. We did street stands to raise awareness every single day and were able to gauge the sentiment of the people. By coincidence, Jimmy Sham, the convener of the Civil Human Rights Front [a coalition of pro-democracy organizations], is also an executive member of the LSD, so we coordinated and cooperated, pushing and organizing. The general feeling was pessimistic; in March or April, even the pan-democrats were not confident the bill could be stopped, but we kept pushing on. Slowly, Hong Kong people came to realize the urgency and severity of the bill. Then, in the weeks prior to the first million-person march on June 9, we sort of knew that something was going to explode.

On June 12, people tried to surround LegCo to stop the bill from passing. Many of our members were

active participants on the ground on that day; I was heavily involved. On that day, our role was relatively small. There were tens of thousands of people working together; we were just part of it. On the next day, I was sent to jail for a month because of previous charges. So I missed out on the two-million-person march, and the subsequent storming of the LegCo on July 1. After that month, I was released, and I tried to keep pushing for these massive marches together with Jimmy, while also helping out with sporadic smaller protests.

Sometime around August, some of the protests became more like clashes: not just civil disobedience, but violent clashes with police, and some vandalism as well. Purely regarding tactics and strategy, we do not agree with these actions, as we do not believe they will push the cause further. However, we are still trying to support arrested protesters and trying to minimize the damage on the ground.

Chan: You slammed Carrie Lam's economic policies in a [recent opinion piece](#). How do economic issues underlie the current political problems, and why is there a reluctance to talk about them?

Ng: There are fewer and fewer people who want to take notice of these fundamental issues because we are fighting a "bigger fight," which is understandable. But I wrote that piece because you've got to say something. Even without the extradition bill, even without democracy, the government inherently has the responsibility to solve these social issues. And we have the means to solve these social issues, but the government refuses to. It has to do with these dogmatic beliefs that by aiding corporations and business communities, the benefits will trickle down to the whole society. Even many right-wingers in the United States no longer believe this. But in Hong Kong, officials are clinging to the idea. Obviously, it has to do with the collusion between the business sector and government. The Hong Kong government does not believe in public spending directly on the people. They are still using the reserves to fund bigger infrastructure projects, to the tune of a trillion [HK] dollars (1). And these projects don't even try to hide that they're financially not feasible.

The majority of Hong Kong people do not agree with the infrastructure projects. People are angry about these issues, but because of the feeling of helplessness after the 2014 Umbrella Movement, people do not believe we can overturn those projects. Also, the effects of these projects are not felt immediately—it's just a trillion-dollar debit from the foreign reserve account, you don't feel it day to day. But with the extradition bill, you can feel your own personal freedom and safety taken away immediately.

Chan: It's all connected, though.

Ng: It is! And we've been saying that for many years. Many people sort of know. But in such a large movement—especially with today's focus on live news—people just do not have the capacity to link those together. Right now, people are focused on how to deal with police violence, how we can tactically force Carrie Lam's hands.

Chan: Is the movement an opportunity for Hong Kong's progressive left to grow?

Ng: The optimistic me will always believe it is a good opportunity. This fight against the government and police brutality will go on for years. But sooner or later—and I believe it will be sooner—people will still need to tackle these fundamental social and economic issues. That will be the arena for the left to put our case to the people. And our case will be much easier to understand than the right's. Next year, during the 2020 LegCo elections, we will have an opportunity.

Chan: Some protesters have called for a general strike. Could this also be a turning point?

Ng: Even though people have called for strikes, most recently after the death of the Hong Kong

University of Science and Technology student [Alex Chow Tsz-lok], the tactic was based on stopping others from going to work through obstruction of the transportation network. This tactic does not equate to a strike in the traditional sense and is difficult to scale and sustain. Much more effort is needed to organize a strike through worker's networks. It will require very hard work—coordination, persuasion, fundraising, and organization.

Chan: How strong is the right wing's influence in the movement?

Ng: We've got to look at it with some context. In Hong Kong over the past few years, an anti-migrant, right-wing, "Hong Kong first" sentiment and ideology has been rising. We have been actively rebutting those ideas, and as such, the LSD has also been a key target for those attacks. Meanwhile, most people do not know how to distinguish between right and left because of the historical context where the left is labeled as pro-Communism.

This time around, a massive movement has exploded not around a core ideology, but rather as a unified front against an authoritarian regime. So those right-wing ideologies, as well as the discussions and arguments around them, have been sort of set aside. But if you look at LIHKG [a popular online forum in Hong Kong] or general sentiment, a separatist ideology is still brewing. And honestly, it's difficult to address and it worries me, even today.

There are slogans like "No splitting" ("唔拆") and "Brothers climb a mountain in separate ways" ("兄弟上落山各走各路") that can help strengthen the solidarity within the protests. However, they also hinder a healthy discussion and a constructive criticism that is much needed for the movement. I believe that those conflicts, those criticisms, will sooner or later be surfaced. Probably next year or the year after; we don't know what's coming up next. But these discussions are critical, and people of a left-leaning view, whether activists or individual citizens or people in the international community, need to prepare and take notice.

Chan: What narrative have you seen in international media about Hong Kong's protests, and what are they missing?

Ng: It worries me that, even now, the international community has a superficial view of Hong Kong. They do not have a deeper context of the underlying issues. And even those who are more vocal like Joshua Wong or Alvin Yeung, when they speak in front of the U.S. Congress, they do not really touch upon those underlying, structural issues. Of course it's good if the international community takes notice or even helps out, but if they do not have the deeper context, that will hinder the effort sooner or later. It's good that U.S. politicians have offered nearly unanimous bipartisan support for the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, but at the same time, it is right-wingers like Marco Rubio who have been most vocal on the issue. It's time for the Democrats and left-leaning Americans to understand Hong Kong, understand the movement, and to know that they can play a critical role in this effort.

Chan: Is there a way to connect the struggle in Hong Kong to the larger global struggle against capitalism?

Ng: It is a big fight. But what makes Hong Kong such a unique place is its pure neoliberalism, capitalism to the extreme: a free flow of capital with almost no regulation or oversight and a complete lack of labor protections. We are sort of ground zero in terms of the damage neoliberalism can do. So I would like to link with the international left in the coming months or years, if we can, to try to strengthen the cause.

But really, anyone with common sense—I don't even want to call it the left or the right—should know

that Hong Kong's system is broken. Even many right-leaning people, they are not supporting a completely unregulated, rent-seeking system—I don't think so, at least? So I think it's much bigger than a purely leftist fight. We should welcome centrists and even right-leaning people who look at Hong Kong's system and say, this is not only damaging the people of Hong Kong and the city, but it is an important tool in aiding the Chinese state capitalists to extend to their reach globally.

Chan: Many Western observers don't understand that China is practicing capitalism.

Ng: To clarify: the Chinese Communist Party is not exercising communism at all. Rather, it's an ultra-right, state-capitalist regime. I understand the historical context, and the simplified view that they're communists and therefore they are bad. Republicans are very keen in pushing that view as they fight against the Chinese government. But I think the Democrats need to realize that they should be the ones who lead the fight, because Hong Kong and China are actually perpetuating the wrongs of neoliberalism.

People have to realize that Chinese state capitalism is not just exploiting the Chinese people or the Hong Kong people; they are exporting this exploitation to China-friendly countries in Africa and along the Belt and Road—all the countries within Chinese reach. They are extending this system beyond Asia, and I think the international community really needs to understand the actual situation and counter the Chinese government's efforts to export these inequalities overseas. International citizens need to push at the grassroots level, and push their respective political parties to fight this fight.

Chan: So is Western-style democracy the answer to Hong Kong's problems?

Ng: I'm not the first one to say that the U.S. democratic system is completely broken. What I try to push in Hong Kong, and one of the key reasons I try to participate in politics in Hong Kong at all, is the belief that we can achieve a democratic system, while at the same time easing conflict and tension within the society and putting our efforts and resources together to have more equality. Since I'm a social democrat, I look to Scandinavian countries as examples.

The reason I believe these multi-party systems can work in Hong Kong is that we are a developed city with huge financial reserves and a highly educated population. I believe that Hong Kong is a very special city that has the criteria to achieve a harmonious, prosperous social democratic society—if we want to. It is a matter of whether we've got the will to do it.

Note :

1. Roy Tam Hoi-pong, chief executive of the environmental group Green Sense, estimating it could cost up to HK\$1 trillion (US\$128.2 billion), almost all of Hong Kong's fiscal reserves.

<https://scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/2168185/hong-kong-throwing-money-sea-proposed-reclamation-project-new>

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