

Changes in Hong Kong's political landscape - Hong Kong's Democratic Movement after the Umbrella Movement

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In 2014, Hong Kong was rocked by the “Umbrella Movement” — an ongoing series of mass protests featuring sit-ins against a series of attacks on democratic rights.

Robin Lee, an editor of the Borderless Movement, was interviewed by *Green Left Weekly's* Alex Bainbridge about the current situation.

Alex Bainbridge - Can you make some comments on the current political situation in Hong Kong since the 2014 democracy uprising?

Robin Lee - Hong Kong has been facing an increasingly challenging political situation since the end of the Umbrella Movement. It has been continuing to experience an erosion of its autonomy as Beijing appears to have adopted a more hardline stance towards it.

The movement just over two years ago failed to achieve its aim of genuine universal suffrage. But it did result in the politicisation of large sections of Hong Kong society, which had not been so active in politics before.



This, along with the intervention by Beijing, has led to changes in Hong Kong's political landscape. Most notably, it has contributed to a rise in localist politics and the emergence of a number of new political groups. These groups do not all share the same positions and there has been a shift to the right associated with this.

In some senses, as we have been witnessing in many parts of the world, we have seen some decline in support for the liberal centre. In this case, this has partially been in reaction to the past failures of the pro-democracy camp, which has been too conciliatory towards Beijing and not done enough to address issues affecting ordinary working people.

Nevertheless, it is the right that has gained the most ground as a result, and this is a worrying development.

What has been the role of China in relation to Hong Kong politics?

China has a huge impact on Hong Kong politics. Officially since the handover from British rule in 1997, Hong Kong has been ruled under the principle of “one country, two systems”.

This means that while the country was reunified with China, Hong Kong was supposed to retain its own economic and political system.

In practice, China has continued to exert an increasing degree of control over Hong Kong and any illusions of autonomy have become more and more diminished. This has intensified since 2012, when Leung Chun-ying was selected as Hong Kong Chief Executive and President Xi Jinping came to power nationally.

One example of the disregard for Hong Kong’s relative autonomy was the incident last year when five Hong Kong booksellers, who had published books critical of Beijing, were abducted and detained by Chinese authorities.

More recently, after Legislative Council elections in September and protests by some of the lawmakers during the oath swearing-in ceremony, China intervened directly with the National People’s Congress, issuing an interpretation of Hong Kong’s Basic Law. This interpretation has already been used to disqualify two newly elected right-wing localist lawmakers, and is now being used to challenge four of the more progressive democratically elected representatives.

How important are the issues surrounding, and relative merits of, independence, autonomous and self rule?

The increasing intervention by Beijing, in recent years has angered many Hong Kong people who support democracy in Hong Kong and the right for Hong Kong people to decide their own fate. In this context, the demand for independence has surfaced and gained a degree of support.

The call for total independence from China has most strongly been advocated by groups politically on the right, and has often been accompanied by xenophobia towards people from the Chinese mainland. Some have also previously expressed support for the idea of a return to British rule. It has not been uncommon to see the British colonial flag being carried by some individuals and groups at demonstrations.



On the other hand, there are some more progressive groups that have also been advocating for “democratic self determination”. This has chiefly involved the League of Social Democrats (LSD) along with three other new groups, which formed around individuals involved in the Umbrella Movement and earlier campaigns. They were elected for the first time to the legislature in September at the expense of Hong Kong’s small Labour Party.

With the exception of the LSD, these groups are more to the centre-left and are still in the early stages of their political development. This means that it is still hard to say which direction they might go eventually. For instance, the Demosisto group, founded by Joshua Wong, has sometimes

adapted to the far right localists and even marched with them.

What has been the response from civil society to increased intervention by China into Hong Kong politics?

Hong Kong civil society feels increasingly threatened by the greater intervention by China and the decline in freedom of expression, but the responses have been mixed and contradictory.

The liberal centre right is still clinging to its position of demanding universal suffrage within the confines of the Basic Law, although the decision in 2014 by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress has already shown that this is a dead end.

Some of the far right localists have gone to the other extreme, and not only demanded independence but have also previously agitated for armed resistance. During the last Chinese New Year holiday, during an incident which has been dubbed the "fishball revolution", they incited young people to throw bricks at police, resulting in a lot of arrests while some of their leaders ran away.

As for the new forces advocating "democratic self-determination", they have no previous political experience, and what is more worrying is that they have no clear understanding of the far right and are not sensitive to what it represents.

What is the current situation regarding left-wing organising in Hong Kong?

Partly due to the way that socialism and left-wing ideas are still associated with China, the situation for forming genuine left currents in Hong Kong is very difficult and left-wing voices remain largely very marginalised. This doesn't mean that left-wing and progressive ideas are not starting to gain some ground, especially among young people in Hong Kong. Many reject the xenophobia of some of the right-wing localist groups, and who have become concerned not only about the political situation and the lack of democracy, but also issues related to Hong Kong's rising social inequality.

Nevertheless, the problem is that while the remnants of the old leftists from the 1970s have been so weakened to the extent that they do not have much public visibility, the younger leftists are still too inexperienced to respond adequately to new opportunities.

P.S.

* "Hong Kong's Democratic Movement after the Umbrella Movement". Green Left Weekly. Monday, January 16, 2017:

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/after-umbrella-movement-%E2%80%94hong-kong%E2%80%99s-democratic-movement-faces-new-challenges>