

Protests, clashes and lack of trust: the new normal for Hong Kong

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One of the world's busiest cities has grown unusually quiet as more and more people stay at home

It was the third night in a row that Biyanca Chu's neighbourhood, Wong Tai Sin, a working-class residential district in [Hong Kong](#), had been taken over by police and protesters. The ground was littered with plastic bottles, broken umbrellas and teargas canisters as the two sides faced off.

Chu, 22, slight in an all-black outfit, climbed over a road barrier, took off her baseball cap and slipped a gas mask on. "Are you ready to go to the frontline?" she asked her companions and they disappeared. Within half an hour, the police began firing rounds of teargas and rubber bullets, charging and making arrests, until the group dispersed.

Later Chu reappeared, wearing a patterned tank top and jeans, a disguise to look like an ordinary university student out for a stroll. She scanned her phone for news of the next protest and set off.

Protests and clashes are the new normal for Hong Kong. Home to 7 million people, it was once considered one of the safest cities in the region, but [demonstrations triggered in June](#) by an [extradition bill](#) that would send suspects to mainland China have turned into a broader anti-government movement.

For residents, the protests have not only changed their way of life but also how they see their government and the people charged with protecting the city – a loss of trust so complete, say experts, that it calls into question whether the Hong Kong government will ever be able to govern effectively again.

"The government has lost the trust of a whole generation," said Ma Ngok, an associate professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

"There is a possibility the movement may die down because of the amount of force or prosecution, but that doesn't mean the government is winning over these people, especially the young people. They will be angry at both the government and police for years to come."

Marches and rallies have long been a part of Hong Kong civic life, but the past two months have represented a major departure. The protests have also taken a darker turn in recent weeks as clashes have [become more violent](#). Both protesters and police have grown more exhausted and angry, and neither show signs of backing down.

Police have fired teargas in 14 of Hong Kong's 18 districts, and protesters have set fires, thrown petrol bombs and vandalised police stations and other government buildings. Residents caught in the crossfire or witnessing the clashes have begun to come out to condemn the police.

One of the busiest and most densely populated cities in the world, Hong Kong has grown quiet as more and more people stay in. Rumours consistently circulate that suspected gangsters are gathering to attack protesters and bystanders – as was the case in a train station in July and at later protests.

Residents describe small ways that their lives have changed. Gary Wong, 36, who owns a cafe in the Western district near where several confrontations between protesters and police have taken place, has noticed that he now says “be safe” to his customers when they leave.

Dinners with his parents, who support the government and police but know that Wong supports the protesters, are awkwardly quiet as everyone tries to avoid discussing the latest news. Two friends of his, a couple who had been together for at least three years, split up after too many arguments over the protests.

Wong and his girlfriend are trying to take a break from the protests. They meet after work, sometimes crying out of anger after reading the news of the latest clashes, but also stay at home more.

“You feel weird going to a movie now. It’s like, what are you doing? Why aren’t you out supporting them? People are out there getting teargassed. You feel guilty,” he said.

For the protesters, life has changed in more dramatic ways. Relationships with their families have frayed. Some have quit their jobs to focus on the protests full time. Chu, who recently had to skip a university exam because she was so exhausted, says it is hard for her to relate to friends who are not as committed to the cause.

“I felt like I was living in a different world from them,” she said, recalling when the protests began in June and she spent the entire day scrolling through updates while her friends were out shopping.

Many now carry gas masks with them whenever they go out at night. Almost every day, notices are sent out through the Telegram messaging app alerting protesters that certain users have been detained and probably compromised, and all conversations with them should be deleted.

“You are always on high alert. This is not a game,” said one protester and organiser of media campaigns directed at international audiences, who asked to only give his name as Chris.

Few locals pause these days at the sight of groups of protesters, dressed in all black, their faces covered by duct-taped goggles and face masks, sitting in groups at public transport stations. Commuters with iPhones are regularly airdropped fliers on the latest demonstration.

Rallies and marches are now taking place regularly during the week as well as weekends in locations throughout the city. Protesters are also thinking of new ways to demonstrate that don’t involve direct conflict with the police or risk arrest.

“What can we do in the future? Keep going to police stations and yelling? This isn’t going to do anything except help us express our feelings,” said Chu. She hopes soon the protesters won’t have to hide their faces out of fear of arrest because they have won.

She quotes a saying that has been circulating on the online forums where the demonstrators organise: “I hope for the day when we can gather outside the legislative building, take off our masks, face each other and celebrate.”

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