

Hong Kong protests: three months on, and the anti-government activists want their enemies to burn with them. Is there any end in sight?

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In a series of in-depth articles on the unrest rocking Hong Kong, the Post goes behind the headlines to look at the underlying issues, current state of affairs, and where it is all heading.

In this final instalment, we talk to frontline protesters as they question whether they are prepared for long jail sentences and why they are making wills for their family.

South China Morning Post (SCMP)

Frontliners

They are strangers in a crowd. They do not know each other's real names and have little clue how the other looks under the gas masks they call snouts, the 3M goggles and hard hats. But they regard each other as sau zuk, which means "hands and feet", a Cantonese idiom to refer to how close they are that losing the other is like having a limb amputated.

For the past 14 weeks, 24-year-old designer Kelvin has been with his sau zuk on the frontline taking on the riot police.

"There are three segments in the frontline - the forefront, middle and the back," he says.

"Those on the forefront would have to hold the so-called shields while people in the back would have to source for projectiles which could be thrown beforehand to back up the forefront."

Some days, if they are lucky, they can take over a nearby footbridge with another team of comrades stationed there to hurl objects at the charging officers.

For Kelvin, the image of a fellow protester whom he had just met on the frontline being hauled away by police and leaving a trail of blood stains in his wake left him feeling helpless. He says: *"I keep awake thinking of it, and I blame myself."*

Over in Central's Edinburgh Place **on September 2 as thousands of secondary school pupils** gather for a school boycott rally, a 15-year-old student surnamed Pang laments: *"I can't sleep and can't eat, my heart is tired."*

His face is covered by a full mask and he is dressed in black with protective shoulder, arm and shin pads above his grey Nike trainers. On his arm is a shield made from a road sign he had taken down and etched with the word 'revolution'.

He and another protester say many among their like-minded peers have written, or plan to write, a will detailing their participation in the frontline protests. He says: *"If you haven't written one then you shouldn't be on the front lines."*

Secondary school pupils

In Wong Tai Sin, a sixth former, who only gives her name as Katie, is bracing for the new school year with a heavy heart.

Her classmates are planning a school boycott to pressure the government to meet the protesters' demands, including an independent probe into police's alleged brutality.

Her father is a policeman. The disciplined service quarters in the working-class district - where police families such as hers live - have been besieged several times by angry protesters [2] throughout the summer holiday. A window in her flat was struck and cracked by one of the many projectiles hurled at the quarter. Her parents shrugged off the attacks. Her younger brother, in Primary Two, cried. Katie put up a brave front but admits she could not sleep until she knew the troublemakers downstairs had left and all was quiet again.

"Although my teachers have said they will stay neutral and not talk about these things in class, they sometimes say the police officers or the government shouldn't have done this and that," Katie says. *"I do feel hurt."*

No answer to when and how it will all end

The gamut of emotions felt by Katie, Pang and Kelvin reflects what the wider society is reeling from as Hongkongers try to comprehend how their city has changed from one renowned for its stability and orderliness to a place that has almost nightly protests in one corner or another. As Hong Kong this week marked the third month of an anti-government movement that **shows little sign of abating, many admit they have no answer to when and how it will all end.**

Last Wednesday 4, in a bid for a breakthrough, Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, finally acceded to one of the five demands of the protesters as she pledged to formally withdraw the extradition bill [4] that sparked the protests.

But the protesters were unimpressed, dismissing it as **too little, too late** [5]. **"Five key demands, not one less,"** is now a new slogan in the camp. Lam has refused to entertain the remaining four demands, which are for the independent probe, amnesty for arrested protesters, a halt to categorising the protests as riots and genuine universal suffrage.

The summer of dissent that was supposed to have faded with the new school year has continued, as **university students and secondary school** pupils turn their campuses into new battlefields, organising school **boycotts and human chains** [6] running through parts of the city.

Three months on, the young protesters have come to believe the movement offers them

- **a now-or-never chance to fight for genuine democracy,**
- or, for the extreme radicals, **even breaking away from the control of the Chinese Communist Party.**

"If we burn, you burn with us," they say. Many believe this is the denouement of their demand for democracy and appear prepared to risk everything.

The government has come under heavy criticism for at first, its seeming indifference to the protests, letting police be the focal point of anger and not acting decisively.

Only lately has it been seen to be taking steps, from the withdrawal announcement and the attempt at dialogue and condoning stronger countermeasures by agencies targeted by the protesters.

But with every passing day of indecision, it is perceived to be taking all its cues from Beijing.

The impasse looks set to harden, with further concessions unlikely from both sides.

But if the government's strategy is to wear the protesters down, it is not working. The numbers may be thinning at some protests but Baptist University political scientist Dr Edmund Cheng Wai, who has been doing fieldwork on the protests, says **the longevity of the movement is historic**.

The **psychological support** offered to the protesters by the vast swathe of society, the moderate and middle-class ranks, is the political vitamin keeping the momentum going.

Those who object to the violence and are tired of the disruptions mostly keep their sentiments in check in public, for fear of recriminations.

What explains this seeming unity and where is the protest movement headed?

At its core, it is more than just the five demands. Both sides know this even if they will not articulate it as eloquently as Cheng does when he says: *"It is a call to restore 'one country, two systems' and to defend their civil liberties and the way of life."*

The execution of the guiding principle which distinguishes Hong Kong from China before it expires in 2047 is the root cause of the anxieties, he believes.

"Such grievances are easily understandable without the need of much articulation."

The burning call for 'laam caau' = "taking you down with me"

On weekdays, Kelvin is the archetypal Hong Kong guy, of average height with neatly coiffed hair, the kind who would blend into a crowd easily. On weekends, he puts on his cushioned body armour and stands at the front lines of the confrontations with the riot police, collecting and hurling projectiles at them.

"I am actually frightened - very frightened - every time I leave home for the protests. I may have a fuller meal the night before and give my family members a heads-up that I may be gone for two days, just in case I'm arrested," the 24-year-old says.

Kelvin's father despises the protesters and calls them cockroaches, the label some police officers have used on them. Protesters call police dogs or triads. Kelvin's mother and sister used to be politically indifferent, but now they constantly monitor live broadcasts of the clashes. They know the drill if Kelvin disappears: trash all his belongings that could be linked to the protests and hide his laptop at a secret place no one can reach.

Over the three months, police have fired more than 2,382 canisters of tear gas, more than 776 rubber bullets, beanbag rounds and sponge grenades as of September 10 and **arrested 1,359 people. At least 70 of them have been charged with rioting**, an offence carrying a penalty of 10 years in prison.

Kelvin says he has checked with friends working in the correctional services to find out about life behind bars.

"I would miss a lot of things in 10 years - my family members might no longer be here and I would lose touch with society."

"It is very hard to judge whether it is worthwhile," he says, pausing. Then he adds: *"I think I would still insist on doing it. I would rather be in jail for 10 years if this could really bring a change to Hong*

Kong.”

As the protests have continued, demonstrators and police have clashed in pitched battles, each weekend encounter more bitter and seemingly surpassing the level of violence seen the weekend before. Police have been accused of using excessive force while protesters have now not just used bricks but also petrol bombs, some 100 of them a fortnight ago.

The thought of scaling back, however, is far from the minds of protesters like Kelvin.

For him, a turning point came when he was out on the sloped roads of Sai Ying Pun last month and had to flee even when the bleeding fellow protester whom he had just befriended an hour earlier was taken away.

“He left behind blood stains on the ground. This scene has popped up in my mind almost every night,” he says.

“This is why surrender is not an option for us. If we give up now, such scenes will only happen more and more.”

Vincent Lo, a recent university graduate in visual arts, has only taken part in the peaceful protests but agrees with Kelvin.

“People have been saying we should save our energy for the next fight. But can you guarantee there will be a better chance than this in future?” he asks.

Lo, now a freelancer, fears reprisals in the form of mass arrests and revenge from the authorities if the protesters back down now. Lo proceeds to quote from the Harry Potter novels when a key character, Snape, warns the protagonist wizard of being disciplined and fighting on. *“Snape said, ‘the Dark Lord isn’t resting’. So we can’t rest.”*

Protesters point to what they see as acts of wrath by Beijing and the central government, notably the pressure on companies such as Cathay Pacific to keep their staff in line and not support the movement or risk being punished.

The idea of continuing the protests is also tethered to another belief taking hold in the movement: going for *laam caau*, a Cantonese phrase for “burning together”, or in English “taking you down with me”.

Search interest in *laam caau* in Cantonese has been slowly rising, according to Google Trends, since the first mass protest on June 9 but it recorded a sudden spike in the week of **August 11** – a dark day for the movement.

- Protesters discovered police had **undercover officers infiltrating their ranks** that day when they began making arrests in Causeway Bay.

- A female protester was also allegedly **shot in the eye** by a beanbag round but police have insisted the cause of injury is unknown and an investigation is underway.

On LIHKG, the Reddit-like site which acts as a virtual command centre for the movement, users have begun responding to recent talk the government might invoke emergency powers to end the unrest with slogans that they are ready to do battle and “want to perish together”.

Lo doubts, however, if their actions will leave a lasting impact. *“I fear that Beijing would only suffer short-term pain if we indeed perish,”* he says.

But for now, he is nothing if not happy to see the city’s streets growing quieter with fewer tourists [11] and the economy softening in the face of the crisis. He longs for a Hong Kong his parents had, where there were more locals than mainlanders. The city should cater more to its locals and have fewer shops that only care about mainland tourists, he says.

“I am so looking forward to witnessing the closure of all those pharmacies,” Lo said.

“So what if you are an ‘international financial city’ but you have no substance inside? Hong Kong has

been losing its character. I care about its substance, not titles."

Kelvin says the present turmoil is no different from the previous peace: *"We have not benefited even when the economy was robust."*

That sentiment can be jarring when most protesters, according to an academic survey, consider themselves to be from middle-class backgrounds. The ratio falls to half middle-class and the other half from lower middle-class when it comes to those on the front lines.

But Kelvin explains why they feel so apart from the elites. **Most of the protesters, he says, unlike the establishment and the rich in the city, do not have a foreign passport.**

So, whether it is shiny and bright, or burned and scarred, Hong Kong will be their home, they say.

Dr Christian Chan, an associate professor at the University of Hong Kong's department of psychology, says such sentiments reflect the total breakdown in trust between those in power and those on the streets.

He points to several manifestations of this yawning trust gap. One is the persistent rumours of three people dying inside Prince Edward MTR station during a police clearance operation on August 31 [12], despite the authorities coming out at least seven times trying to quash them.

"When there is no trust, what you say or promise will not bring the effect you hoped for," he said.

The other example, Chan says, was Carrie Lam's failure to pacify the public despite claiming "the bill is dead [13]" in July.

A new normal?

In a pre-recorded video broadcast last Wednesday fyi, Carrie Lam announced she would formally withdraw the much-despised extradition bill, which could have allowed the transfer of fugitives to mainland China or other jurisdictions with which the city has no arrangement.

She would also set up a study panel to look into the fundamental causes of the social unrest and suggest solutions, and pledged to hold dialogues with people from all walks of life.

Snubbing the olive branch, thousands returned to the streets last Sunday 8, calling on Washington to pass an act in support of Hong Kong's democratic development and human rights while smaller groups of frontline protesters clashed with officers again.

Government insiders say it is almost a "mission impossible" for the administration to offer further concessions, especially after Beijing has spelt out some clear bottom lines [14].

The State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office has held four press conferences to explain the central government's priorities. Chief among these is the need to end the violence and restore order. The office which oversees the city for Beijing also said China is firmly opposed to any threat to the "one country, two systems" model, that it stood behind Lam's administration and supported firm police action to enforce law and order in the city.

A government source says: *"The last thing we should do is to hurt the morale of the police."*

Another source admits the government is struggling to find solutions to the unrest and expects it to go on "for a very long time".

A survey of ordinary residents by Chinese University's Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies between August 21 and 27 found that

- **68.3 per cent of 716 respondents expected the clashes to continue** or become even more serious in the coming month.

- While **nearly half agreed both protesters and the government should make concessions** to seek common ground, **almost two-fifths** of the respondents thought the opposite and argued the protesters should **stick to their five key demands and not compromise**.

In recent weeks, the police appear to have changed their strategy by going after mass arrests, apparently targeting hard core protesters and prominent pro-democracy activists. But Dr Victoria Hui Tin-bor, a political scientist at the University of Notre Dame who has written extensively on the city's 2014 Occupy movement, believes the **crackdown will galvanise rather than gut the movement.**

"Blanket repression will only unite the movement," she warns.

Furthermore, **the failure of the Occupy protesters** (2014) to extract any changes to the system and led to a tightening up has only **made the current movement more determined** not to give up lest it loses even more in the end, she says.

"Hongkongers see that the other four demands are critical to defending [the city's] freedoms," she says.

Even with no further concessions such as an independent probe, Dr David Zweig, Professor Emeritus at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's division of social science, says the government should admit to the misconduct of some officers and get the security chief to step down. It has to appear more even-handed.

To break the impasse, one needs to understand the defining spirit behind the movement, he believes. And to him, like Baptist University's Cheng, it is about Hongkongers' anxieties if not anger at what they perceive as the local government's bid to push the city towards being "one country" and eroding the city's own identity.

"I think it is necessary somehow to convince young people that China is not going to continue to try to impose more aspects of 'one country' on Hong Kong," he says. *"The violence [in the clashes] is really the effort by the more radical segment of the society to draw a line: 'if you cross this line, we will throw petrol bombs'."*

In an audio recording at a private meeting with business leaders recently that was leaked [15], Lam said she had two masters to serve: both Beijing and the people of Hong Kong and that she had "very, very, very limited" room to manoeuvre as such.

Zweig says the predicament is the inevitable outcome of the "one country, two systems" model and that dilemma will always exist even if the crisis is defused.

"The 'one country, two systems' problem is never going to go away. It can only be somewhat resolved if the effort to impose more control stops or is put on hold," he says.

Beijing, he says, should learn from how the tightening up post-Occupy through various actions, including the disqualification of six pro-democracy lawmakers, would only cause grievances to fester and grow again.

Li Xiaobing, an associate professor of the law school at Nankai University in Tianjin, also agrees the discourse on "one country, two systems" needs to be *"enriched and updated"* in the wake of the impasse.

"Conflicts will remain if it is not updated. A lot of people still miss the old days of 'the well water does not mix with the river water,'" he says, referring to a Chinese idiom once quoted by former Chinese president Jiang Zemin to suggest Hong Kong should not interfere in the affairs of mainland China and vice versa.

The model was a product of another era, when China was weak and Hong Kong strong. A review is in order *"in light of the significant progress the country has made in terms of economical and legal development over the years,"* Li said.

The nativist sentiments that the protests have stirred, despite the injuries, the risks to their jobs and the hours lost to just being on the streets, have reawakened Kelvin and Lo's own love for the city they call home. This explains too how **a song like Glory to Hong Kong could become an anthem of the movement almost overnight.**

"I was let down by Hongkongers in the past. I found them selfish people who had no goals and future, like the walking dead," Lo says.

But on June 12, when police first used tear gas against the protesters and they quickly improvised means to communicate on the ground, using unique hand signals to gesture for more masks, first aid and cable ties or umbrellas, he found himself feeling moved.

"From that day on, I have felt very proud to be a Hongkonger," Lo says.

Strangers in a crowd, united by a common cause then, they have remained united three months on.

Additional reporting by Yujing Liu and Gigi Choy

Links

- [1]
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3022057/two-months-and-nearly-2000-rounds-tear-gas-later-what-do>
- [2]
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3021538/anti-government-protesters-unleash-chaos-across-hong-kong>
- [3]
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3022342/hong-kongs-anti-government-protesters-versus-police>
- [4]
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3025641/hong-kong-leader-carrie-lam-announce-formal-withdrawal>
- [5]
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3025753/embattled-hong-kong-leader-carrie-lam-bombshell-withdrawal>
- [6]
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3025416/tens-thousands-hong-kong-students-kick-unconventional>
- [7]
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3023324/police-story-how-hong-kongs-embattled-law-enforcers-are>
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<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3025948/hong-kong-protests-carrie-lam-has-ruled-out-commission>
- [11]
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/hong-kong-economy/article/3026428/hong-kong-tourism-suffers-worst-downturn-sars>
- [12]
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/transport/article/3026510/hong-kong-rail-operator-mtr-corp-releases-images-station>

[13]

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3025723/hong-kong-protests-what-difference-between-carrie-lam>

[14]

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3022970/blindsided-why-does-beijing-keep-getting-hong-kong-wrong>

[15]

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3025579/hong-kong-protests-read-full-transcript-carrie-lams-leaked>

[16]

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3026589/world-watches-will-it-stand-hong-kong-protesters>

Other parts of this series have examined :

- whether the world will stand with Hong Kong protesters,
<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3026589/world-watches-will-it-stand-hong-kong-protesters>
- if Hong Kong can resist China's push to turn Shenzhen into a financial hub,
<https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3025600/can-hong-kong-maintain-its-status-amid-protests-despite>
- what protesters really want,
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3022057/two-months-and-nearly-2000-rounds-tear-gas-later-what-do>
- why protesters view the police as the enemy,
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3022342/hong-kongs-anti-government-protesters-versus-police>
- how police are holding the city back from the brink,
<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3023324/police-story-how-hong-kongs-embattled-law-enforcers-are>
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<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3022657/extradition-bill-crisis-case-study-how-hong-kong-government>
- how Beijing keeps getting Hong Kong wrong,
<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3022970/blindsided-why-does-beijing-keep-getting-hong-kong-wrong>
- the trouble with trying to turn Hong Kong's young people into 'patriotic youth'
<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3023606/trouble-trying-turn-hong-kongs-young-people-patriotic-youth>
- China's internet warriors going to battle over the protests.
<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3024223/emergence-and-evolution-chinas-internet-warriors>

P.S.

<https://www.scmp.com/print/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3027001/hong-kong-protests-three-months-and-anti-government>