

# Covid 19 and Hong Kong

Saturday 18 April 2020, by [LEONG Apo](#) (Date first published: 7 April 2020).

Last Thursday (2 Apr 2020) inflicted Covid 19 people throughout the world exceeded the threshold of one million with more than 50,000 lives perished, and worst of all, it seems there is no sight of stabilizing or decreasing.

For Hong Kong (HK), as of 6 Apr, the confirmed case stood at 890, with 4 deaths.

HK has become a very quiet place instead of a routine busy, noisy and crowded city as before.

Occasionally the protest movement in support of last year's Anti-extradition law and against the police undeterred violence continues to occur despite the imposed measures by the government forbidding public assembly of more than three persons. As a result, more arrests were made, and the trust between the government and the pro-democracy HK people cannot be improved.

So far, the government said that more than 10,000 demonstrations were held last year to illustrate that *'fundamental rights and freedoms of HK residents are fully protected by the Basic Law'*.

From 9 June 2019 to 19 Mar 2020, police had arrested 7,854 persons and prosecuted 1,300 persons. In addition, more than 16,000 rounds of tear gas cannisters were fired to disperse the crowd.

This has drawn an ire from the observation of UN special rapporteurs, who said, *'(We) have reasons to believe that tear gas, pepper spray and other chemical agents have been used indiscriminately, unnecessarily and disproportionately.'*

The public authorities are now using new coercive measures under the pretext of epidemic prevention such as social distancing rules, quarantine orders selectively by targeting the dissidents. For example, they intimidated customers in shops whose owners were labelled in support of the democratic movement.

The early closing time of fast food stores instead of round the clock business hour had driven the *'Mc-refugees'* (homeless people who sleep overnight at McDonalds restaurants) into a more desperate situation.

Frequent street and open space cleaning takes place without prior warning to drive out street sleepers and no provision of alternative shelter.

The chair of the Central and Western District Council, Cheng was arrested in the middle of night in March under an outdated anti-sedition ordinance (1938) for an alleged crime of *'doxing a policeman'*.

All these moves would create a chilling effect to an ordinary citizen not to confront the HK government.

One irony story is the banning of facial mask wearing as a result in last year's protest movement has no effect at all as vast majority of the HK people do defy such a measure and do wear a mask when going outside, at the strong advice of the Medical and Health authority. Dr. Ho from the University of HK, a respected medical professor even proposed compulsory enforcement of mask wearing. This is a slap in Carrie Law's (Chief Executive) face who had repeatedly denied wearing a mask in public appearance.

Another indicator is the shortage of medical PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) issue. As a dogmatic practice, HK government upholds laissez-faire by refusing to interfere the 'free market' which was treated as a sacred cow. In the early days of the outbreak, the hoarding and rising price of PPE and daily commodities such as toilet paper became visible making HK people upset.

HK people formed long queues for or hunted for these PPE just like mad ants.

It was the spontaneous emerge of self-help and mutual help by civil society to remediate the urgent situation to ease the supply of masks and sanitary products, particularly for the medical workers, cleaners, elderlies and handicap people. Their timely and solidarity action deserves more applauses than the government.

In one SCMP (South China Morning Post) survey, an overwhelming majority of HK people was convinced that they would have only themselves to thank rather than their embattled government.

Time and again, it is evident that the government reacted either too slow or retarded by piece meal approach without a coherent overall or a forward-looking policy which made HK people very angry. The arrogance and indecision of Carrie Lam and her team further disappointed many people. The rating indicated that her popularity has dropped from the peak days of her appointment in July 2017 from 61.1 to 22.2 (March 2020), much worse than her predecessors - Tung (47.9), Tsang (39.3) and Leung (38.1).

The rating for the rule of law also dropped from 6.2 to 7.2 (10 =full mark) between July 1997 to May 2019 to 4.4 (Sept 2019) under her administration.

In contrast to 2013 when SARS attacked HK, causing 299 deaths and 1,755 confirmed cases (fatality 16%), the people of Hong Kong were united unanimously to fight the virus and suffered hardship together, this time the people are deeply divided into two camps - pro-democracy (yellow) vs pro-establishment (blue) camps. Instead of burying the hatchet, the recent government moves will further divide people.

On the one hand, ordinary workers bear the brunt most in the midst of Covid 19 storm, as many workers are forced to work from home, many of them are asked to take no pay leave, to have wage reduction, or to face redundancy ultimately as their workplaces were closing down incessantly. The worst affected industries are catering, tourist, airline, entertainment, retail and others. According to a report by the HK Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU, March) it was found that 85% workers suffered a reduction of working time or day; 70% lost ½ of the original income, and 70% were worried about the uncertain future.

On the other hand, the frontline workers such as cleaners, medical workers and other precarious workers are facing OSH problems because the lack of PPE and more harsh management.

The February medical workers' strike is a clear example when 9,000 of them joined a one week's industrial action.

While they win the support from the general public the government was reluctant to heed to their demands to close the borders and to provide sufficient protective gears.

They were accused of being '*unethical*' and '*too selfish*' and labelled as 'desertors'.

In fact, labour activists have always been victimized during the protest movement. There are cases of unfair dismissal, suspension and intimidation for their political participation.

- Civil servants and teachers were told to remain '*neutral*' in political issues.
- 42 HK civil servants were suspended over protest arrests, even with 'no guilt presumed' and legal proceedings underway.

- Similar cases occurred in Cathay Pacific/Dragon Airline and other companies.

In response, workers are becoming more awakened.

More and more new unions are being formed. So far, 29 new unions are registered with 13 are in the process.

For example, the insurance, white collar, educational, medical, civil service, hotel, nursery workers are flocking to form or to join trade unions of their own, denouncing the conservative ones.

These democratic unions are predominately run by the young generation of activists, who aspire for more open society and social justice.

They are very assertive and articulate in defending their rights, not only for economic interests but also for political rights in the coming Legislative Council September election. Their aim is to generate majority seats (35) in the coming election because the present set up is being dominated by the pro-establishment camps.

With the existing majority rule, the conservatives can pass or endorse unwelcome policies and laws are passed with a qualm.

The positive outcome of last year's district council election is a solid proof that the public opinion can defeat the government and the conservatives. Out of 18 councils, the yellow camp won 17, with 398 seats outnumbering 60 seats by the blue camp.

The bailout package by the government does not benefit workers directly. Unions criticized most of the items only subsidize the business and relieve their hardships.

HK is well known for its prosperity and richness in GDP, but the high Gini ratio and poor redistribution of wealth is deliberately ignored or sacrificed under the name of '*free market*' and '*keen competition*'.

There is no unemployment insurance, old age pension and collective bargaining system. The government has repeatedly rejected calls for progressive social welfare system. It is time again to revitalize our fight for social justice in the midst of Covid 19.

To conclude, there are high hopes that the HK people shall win.

According to the most recent HK Public Opinion Survey (Mar 17-20), demands for the resignation of Carrie Lam were supported by 63%. The poll showed a significant increase in the levels of support for key demands of the protest movement, and 54% of the respondents expressed distrust in government's measures.

Support for universal suffrage rose to 68%, as compared to 60% in Dec 2019.

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