

Mature Enough For Democracy, And Sensible Too By Tsang Yok Sing

The Debate: Tsang

Hong Kong people are mature enough for universal suffrage.

THOSE WHO TAKE THIS ASSERTION to mean that Hong Kong's next chief executive and legislative council should be elected by universal suffrage often support the statement by pointing to Hong Kong's high literacy rate, the diversity of its mass media, and the frequent occurrence of peaceful demonstrations, in which "not a single piece of glass has been broken." They seem to believe that these are indicators of a high level of "political maturity," and once a community has attained this, universal suffrage should be introduced without delay.

This line of reasoning, that the "maturity" of the people determines whether and when a democratic system of government should be established, is itself anti-democratic. To say that the government should be elected by universal suffrage as soon as the people are "mature," is another way of making the erroneous claim that democratic elections should not be held when the people are "immature." Is there any place in the world, where one can say the people are not mature enough for democracy? In places where democracy is still absent, or where it has failed, it is hardly the people's lack of maturity that is the problem.

Hong Kong did not have a democratic system of government in the past, and it was not because the people were not mature. A process of democratization, which is still going on, began in the early 1980s, but again it was not because Hong Kong people only started to become mature then. The people's "maturity" is an important factor in determining the mode and pace of democratization, in Hong Kong as elsewhere. But it is a mistake to argue for or against a particular date for implementing universal suffrage on the basis of the people's maturity level.

In fact, in the constitutional development debates that took place in the period when the Ba-

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Basic Law was drafted (1985 to 1989), Hong Kong people demonstrated a high level of political maturity by supporting a moderate pace of democratization. The community arrived at two points of consensus. First, full democracy should be the ultimate goal of Hong Kong's constitutional development; and second, progress toward that goal should take place step by step, "in the light of the actual situation in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress," as laid down in the Basic Law.

Hong Kong people had good reasons for supporting the principle of "gradual and orderly progress." Hong Kong, as one of Asia's "Four Little Dragons" in the 1980s, had made spectacular success in sustaining a long period of economic prosperity and social stability — something it achieved without a democratic government. The governor of Hong Kong, who was appointed by the British prime minister, in turn appointed all legislative councilors. There were no elections (apart from those for the municipal

councils, institutions with very limited powers), no political parties and no career politicians.

As many people saw it, the absence of a democratically elected government had not hampered Hong Kong's success in any way. On the contrary, it allowed Hong Kong to have a strong, executive-led government that was unaffected by party politics, never had to worry about periodic elections, and was able to take efficient and consistent policy decisions that served to optimize the conditions for economic growth. So when Hong Kong people started to think about moving towards democracy, many would say, "Let's do it carefully, so as not to lose the advantages of the existing system of government as constitutional changes are introduced."

Not that there were never any demands for a faster pace of political reform. There were impatient "pro-democracy" politicians who wanted the government to be popularly elected as soon as the SAR was established. But their radical demands, like the very conservative proposals at the other extreme, have had little support

from the public for the better part of the past two decades.

There were two periods in which public opinion on the pace of democratization swung overwhelmingly towards the radical side. In both cases, however, efforts to accelerate political reform did not pay off. Attempts to pressure the central government in Beijing backfired.

The first swing in public sentiment about democracy came after the June 4 incident in 1989, which happened barely 8 years before Hong Kong's scheduled return to China. As their initial shock and anger gave way to fear of losing their rights and freedoms after the handover, Hong Kong people looked frantically for ways to protect themselves from a potentially oppressive sovereign power. A large proportion of the population, including conservative business people, wanted to speed up the process of democratization, believing that an elected government could stave off interference from Beijing.

But just as Hong Kong people became more impatient for democracy, the Chinese government saw a greater need to be cautious. The first direct elections for a portion of the legislative council took place in 1991. With memories of June 4 fresh in voters' minds, all candidates with a pro-Beijing background were defeated, while some of those campaigning on very anti-Beijing platforms won with a large number of votes. This sent a clear message to the Chinese government: it was not going to find any friends among popularly elected politicians in Hong Kong. Accordingly, Beijing was not eager to agree to a more rapid expansion of the proportion of directly elected seats.

Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong, tried to speed up the democratization process by forging ahead with a constitutional reform program of his own design, which China

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did not support. But his unilateral venture could not survive the transfer of government. The legislative council constituted under the Patten reform was dismantled at the time of the handover, and constitutional development returned to the "gradual and orderly" track called for in the Basic Law. The earlier proposals for a faster pace of democratization, as well as the short-lived Patten reform, were soon forgotten.

The other instance where public opinion swung towards the radical side occurred in 2003. The government was trying to pass a controversial bill for the protection of national security, something that is required under article 23 of the Basic Law. The legislation was controversial because many people feared the government would abuse it and deprive the people of their civil liberties. Suspicions about the bill came at a time when Hong Kong was experiencing an outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that claimed sev-

eral hundred lives, and added to the resentment of a public who were also tormented by a protracted economic recession. On July 1, 2003, the sixth anniversary of the handover, half a million people took to the streets, protesting against article 23 legislation and demanding universal suffrage.

Politicians in the “pro-democracy” camp saw the mass demonstration as a sign of popular support for universal suffrage at the earliest possible date, which would be the years 2007 and 2008, when new elections were due to be held for the chief executive and the legislative council, respectively. But again, the central government in Beijing saw a different message. As a Beijing official put it, “If Hong Kong people cannot be trusted to pass a law to protect national security, how can they be trusted to elect a government that will safeguard the interests of the nation?” Nine months after the march, the standing committee of the Chinese National People’s Congress exercised its right under the Basic Law and decided that the 2007 and 2008 elections should not be by universal suffrage.

Since 2003, the July 1 march for democracy has become an annual event, but the size of the procession has dwindled over the years to less than a tenth of that seen in 2003. The economic situation has improved and people are more satisfied with the government than before. They no longer see an urgent need for democratic elections as a means of getting rid of an unpopular government. The latest opinion polls show that at least as many people are happy to see universal suffrage begin in 2017 or later as in the earliest possible year, 2012.

Hong Kong people are certainly mature enough for democracy, no less so than people in any other part of the world. But more important, many Hong Kong people are mature enough to

understand that there is much more to democracy than a particular date for implementing universal suffrage. They have considered the impact of democracy on the government’s size and efficiency, on the consistency of public policies, on the amount of public expenditure, and on taxation. They have also thought about its impact on Hong Kong’s relationship with the central government. Hong Kong people started to debate these issues two decades ago, and the debate is still going on. And the majority’s consensus on the development of Hong Kong’s political system still consists in the key phrases “in the light of the actual situation” and “in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress.”

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