The Hong Kong Protests: The Right Road to Democracy?

By Peter Gordon

Any election is better than no election, and with the street protests over pro-democratic campaigners must now work towards ensuring that some kind of chief executive election does take place in 2017. Once the first one happens, there will be an unstoppable momentum for democracy to flourish.

By Claudia Mo Man-ching

Hongkongers were promised self-rule, and when denied it in an insulting ruling from Beijing they replied with the legitimate tactic of civil disobedience to highlight their anger. The issues haven’t gone away, and without change, there will be more protests in the future.
The Debate: Hong Kong Protests: The Right Road to Democracy?

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CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE is a tactic that is confined to societies in which the rule of law, not that of individuals or single political parties, prevails. That may seem a paradox. It is not. It is a respected and proven means by which majorities can seek to obtain rights denied to them by laws, as in the case of Hong Kong or, until quite recently, South Africa, or minorities can fight oppressive, discriminatory laws enacted by majorities, as has long been the case for blacks in the US and, currently, the case in countries such as Israel and Malaysia. Public breaching of laws is not a rejection of the rule of law, but a plea for more just laws.

In most of these cases, there is a direct link between denial of rights and equal status and other problems in society — income distribution, deprivation, public health, educational opportunities, etc. Thus, civil disobedience is a way of bringing attention to deep-seated problems that have been swept under the carpet by legislatures, whether or not democratically elected.

The scale and duration of disobedience in Hong Kong surprised most people in the city and brought the issues to international attention. This was not simply the work of a small anti-establishment pressure group but a large-scale movement, people, students most overtly, were incensed at the cavalier manner in which their hopes for representative government, and the protection of Hong Kong’s autonomous status under the “One Country, Two Systems” principle, were dismissed.

First, Beijing published a White Paper on Hong Kong that went out of its way to emphasize that such autonomy was not a given but was always subject to Beijing’s oversight and interpretation. It also laid heavy stress on what it called “patriotism.” This word is used by the Communist Party to define love of the nation as agreeing with the party, which since 1949 has brought about a succession of disasters such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and more recently, the make-money-at-any-cost mentality and a Big Brother nationalism that is causing tensions with our neighbors.

Then, following a phony “consultation” exercise by the Hong Kong government, the National People’s Congress came out with a formula for the 2017 election that paid lip service to universal suffrage, but required that the two or three candidates to be permitted to stand for election would need the backing of 50 percent of a narrowly-based nominating committee. This was insulting to Hong Kong people who have shown through many opinion polls that they want genuine choice. The formula was decreed by the National People’s Congress in Beijing when, according to the Basic Law, legislation for the conduct of elections is the responsibility of the local legislature. There was no way that pro-democracy members of the legislature could help provide the two-thirds legislative majority for it to be enacted.

The promised universal suffrage was a sham. Meanwhile, other routes to more representative government remain blocked by the composition of the legislature — half of its members represent “functional constituencies” in which business groups with tiny electorates are heavily represented. The parties, principally the Democratic and Civic parties, which have long been pressing for electoral reform, were proving powerless to achieve it. From that frustration with the system sprang the Occupy movement. Mass student involvement took the lead with a passion that all pro-democracy groups saw as worthy of support. Police brutality, use of tear gas and a statement by chief executive C.Y. Leung criticizing “One Man, One Vote” systems only encouraged broader participation.

The blocking of roads by the Occupy movement eventually led to a decline in public support, with the students at last recognizing that a change of tactics would be needed in the future. But the underlying issues remain. These are not simply electoral laws. They are the resulting system of government that has given Hong Kong by far the worst wealth and income disparities, the worst air pollution, the highest housing costs and lowest spending on welfare among developed Asian societies such as Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore. They are also a cry for the maintenance of autonomy as a territory with its own history and commitments to important aspects of Chinese civilization, including the Cantonese language and traditional Chinese characters. Commitment to a liberal international free trading outlook should be the goal of a wise and self-confident China. Now it is Hong Kong’s system itself that needs to be updated for an educated and aware society, which was promised self-rule. Civil disobedience has helped bring that home to those sitting all too comfortably in power in Hong Kong.

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