



'The Revolution of Our Times': Protests in Hong Kong

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What began with a murder in Taiwan, the Hong Kong protests, ran strong for months before it took a backseat due to the pandemic. What is the relevance of pro-democracy protests in China's autonomous regions? What are issues, causes and major trends in the Hong Kong protests? What can be expected from the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement in the future?

Background

The extradition bill was introduced in February 2019, called the 'Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation 2019,' and covers China and other jurisdictions that do not have an extradition agreement with Hong Kong. The need for this bill came when a man killed his girlfriend in a hotel room, on their trip to Taiwan, and returned to Hong Kong. He could not be tried for this murder due to the lack of a formal agreement on extradition between the autonomous regions and China. In this context, the bill was introduced to establish transfer of fugitives for Macau, Taiwan and the mainland.

The existing extradition law in Hong Kong allows transfer of fugitives with approximately 18 countries but, specifically mentions that extradition does not apply to "the Central People's Government or the government of any other part of the People's Republic of China." The proposed amendment would have allowed any country to request for extradition of criminal suspects, even with countries it does not have an extradition treaty with, the Hong Kong government would have to consider such requests. However, the amendment mentioned that it would consider requests on a case-by-case basis by the Chief.

Critics to the amendment felt that this would give undue advantage to the Chinese Government to subject people to unfair trial, detention and torture, arbitrarily. Immediately, from lawyers to church groups, hundreds of petitions were raised against the amendment, criticizing its credibility. Another concern to the critics were the poor state of protection norms for defendants under Chinese Law.

With this as the background. the protests began in Hong Kong. They were peaceful and well organised for the first few months. Many observers lauded the attempts in Hong Kong, and named the protests as an ideal attempt for challenging authority. However,

after the first few weeks, the protesters were seen indirectly attacking the attempts of the police forces that were active around them.

The first wave of visible violence in Hong Kong were observed when the protesters walked into the legislative building and damaged the building. Through the weeks the situation has gotten worse. Protesters began to directly attack the police. These police were stationed in areas, with clear orders to not engage with the protesters.

After the CCP and Carrie Lam expressed their intentions to not engage directly with the protests on the streets, their approach changed. The protesters were seen using provocative means to irk the government, by publicly burning the Chinese flag, or damaging surveillance for example. Meanwhile, in June it was announced that the bill would be delayed, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protests demanding that it be revoked entirely. To this, Carrie Lam announced that the bill was 'dead,' and the same would be announced when the Legislative Council's term ends. This however, failed to calm the protests.

In October when the Legislative Council convened after the summer break, the bill was formally scrapped. But by then, the protests had spiraled beyond the amendment bill and had developed into aggression against the government. In mid-October 2019, a serious split was observed in the groups of protesters. A faction of the protesters began to display obvious hatred to the police and direct confrontation with the police was observed. While a large group among the protesters were fixed on not wanting to use violence as a means to get the attention of the government. These differences were observed when one group began to say that the violent methods are counter-productive to the cause and they would refrain from helping this approach to the protests. This is seen as the first set of divides among the groups of protesters.

The protesters were well organised from the start. They had the support of the media, and the first few weeks, they had strong public support. Throughout, the protests remained leaderless. The end goal of the protests was never seen. When the demand to scrap the bill was met, they had a list of 4 other demands against the government, each of the demand, challenging the core of the structure in Hong Kong. While the protests initially erupted from frustrations and anger, very soon evolved into a youth-led movement for democracy against the Chinese Communist Government. From "Be water" as their rallying cry, the protests have moved to "If we burn, you burn with us."

Multiple rounds of interactions were arranged between Carrie Lam and select protesters, but they refuse to compromise on their demands. But protesters vowed, "the protests would not stop until every demand is met." Other than declaring the death of the extradition bill, the attempts by the Lam government to contain the protests were sparse

for the longest time. The CCP too made a conscious decision to not involve directly with the protesters. In a legislative meeting that happened in Hong Kong after months, Carrie Lam addressed the issues of expensive real-estate but did not mention the protesters. Instead, Carrie Lam announced that “there would be no further negotiations till the protests stop.”

The next set of frustrations can be observed among the groups of people who are on neither side of the protests. They include daily wagers, the middle-aged workers and old people who initially supported the protests but now would like it to stop, so that they can go ahead with their regular lives. The argument that this is a protest for ‘democracy,’ no longer seems convincing to them.

Hence, for the longest time, the anti-government protests went on with no end in sight. The intention to keep in mind that the failures of Umbrella Movement. During the umbrella movement, the protesters sat down and watched each of them being taken away while protesting on the streets; this time during the protests they do not want to get stuck in a static situation, hence, 2019 Protests show a sense of urgency right from the demand to scrap the extradition bill to accountability of police actions extending to asking for full democracy. Each time one of their demands were close to being met, it would embrace new forms: “Be Water.”

First sense of slowdown in the protests were observed after the council elections in Hong Kong. A drastic slowdown was seen with COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak, however, when China announced that it would use the infrastructure on the border towns of Hong Kong, there was strong objection to it. Protests began against the proposal to set up quarantines in Hong Kong, they demanded that the border to China close completely.

Causes, Concerns and Fallouts

One country, two systems

Hong Kong became region of China in 1997, the ‘one country, two systems,’ is a constitutional principle where Hong Kong would remain a special administration region of China till 2047. The people of Hong Kong believe that when the UK signed the deal with China, the opinions of the people living in Hong Kong were not considered. After the handover, in multiple occasions, the people of Hong Kong have accused the mainland of overstepping their authority. Three large-spread protests have taken part in Hong Kong, against the Chinese authority on Hong Kong since the handover in 1997.

The first protest since the handover was regarding the national security reform in 2003, where the mainland attempted to introduce anti-subversion legislation. This received strong criticism from the people of Hong Kong saying, the reform would impinge on their

freedoms. Popularly referred as the Article 23, the legislation prohibited treason, sedition, secession and subversion against the Chinese government and it also outlawed the theft of state secrets. More than 500,000 people stood for protest against this article, which ended in the resignation of the then Chairman and the bill was shelved indefinitely.

The second was the Umbrella Movement in 2014, which was sparked by the demands for the reformation of the electoral system of Hong Kong. Young protesters, mostly students took to the streets and tried to reclaim a public square, they occupied the streets around the government building and the financial center, including the office towers around it. This was against the Beijing's role in allowing only voters to select from a list of candidates chosen by them for the elections, the demand was to grant universal suffrage in elections for the leader of the city. In between the two, in 2012, there was an attempt to amend the curriculum of the Hong Kong education system and include China's history, national identity and culture. A 15-year-old student Joshua Wong became the important figure in this protest, which saw students and parents stand against the idea of curriculum change. There was some sense of success in both the cases.

The protests of 2019 could be easily considered as the most organized of them and the one that has made a huge impact on how the world saw Hong Kong. Along with it, the protests in Hong Kong became an inspiration that led to protests in various places across the world, in Europe, West Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Murder in Taiwan

Chang Tong-kai and his girlfriend Poon Hiu Wing went on a holiday to Taiwan. In his statement at the court, he said that the pair got into a fight after Ms Poon said she was carrying a baby of another man. Chan was made to serve 29-months sentence in Hong Kong for money laundering, stealing and using Miss Poon's credit card. He was to be surrendered to be tried in Taiwan, due to which the extradition bill was created. However, on 23 October 2019, Chan was released from the Hong Kong prison. During this time, there have been a significant number of possibilities discussed by the administration of both Hong Kong and Taiwan on the method in which Chan can be put to trial but without any success.

The first few months of the protests in Hong Kong were strictly against the extradition bill that was introduced against the murder case. When the bill was announced dead, the protesters pushed for democratic reforms after the confrontation with the police. The confrontation with the police and reports of police brutality, the protests began to take a new turn, where the focus shifted to accountability of police actions.

For a brief moment after Carrie Lam called for a meeting with some of the protesters, the protesters rallied stating that they have, “Five Demands, not one less!” The first demand was met, to withdraw the extradition bill which was formally withdrawn on 23 October 2019, the second to ensure that the protesters are not labelled as ‘rioters,’ as the punishment for it would be heavy, the third, to drop charges against the protesters that were identified, fourth, to conduct an independent inquiry into police behavior and last, to implement genuine universal suffrage for both the Legislative Council and the Chief Executive. In the council elections end of 2019, a whole 17 of 18 councils won by pro-democracy candidates, which showed the true reflection of the frustrations and divide in the society. The Poly U seize can be seen as the peak of the protests where the anger and frustrations of both the sides could have broken into a full-blown confrontation.

7,165 people have been arrested for the protests since June 2019, two deaths were reported caused during the protests and over 2600 people including protesters and police were injured during the protests.

Leaderless and organized

The Hong Kong protests have sustained itself without a visible leadership or any known organization. Social media platforms facilitate the exchange of information that becomes vital to the coordination of protests. This could include legal support, medical services, police presence, information about transportation and the like. The platforms become the base for expressing anger, provoke the population and the promotion of emotional contents. However, the structural characteristics of these social media platforms and the attitudes of the population are the main driving factors of either the success or failure of a protest.

The efficiency and sustenance tactics of the protests in Hong Kong has took the world by surprise. They have set new standards and thoroughly adapted to the changes as they came. The protests managed to get millions of citizens in Hong Kong to the streets. In the backdrop however, there were thousands of computer experts, journalists, college students, lawyers constantly providing support to the cause. Companies allowed people to take paid leave and in some cases during the early weeks, police were known to have shown significant restraint in following the orders of the authorities in some places.

Media platforms like WhatsApp and telegram, popularly known to have secure encryption protocols and have become very important in spreading information without being traced. Telegram is exceptionally safe because it does not collect metadata even. Telegram has been the target of various political challenges in the past years, in 2018 it was banned in Iran and Russia because it stops the government from accessing the communications of their citizens and other users within their countries. This platform was extensively used in the protests in Hong Kong.

Besides this, the protests in Hong Kong are known to have received support from the news agencies and journalists. They played an important role in sustaining the protests for such a long time, by providing access to funds and more importantly: high-power support. Large amounts of money were donated by people both, from within Hong Kong and abroad to keep the movement going. What is also interesting is that multiple grassroots initiatives have popped up across the city who have been providing everything, right from the water, food, and equipment to the protesters, these without the need to know their identity. Simultaneously, people have been raising funds for lawyers to represent arrested protesters while also paying for medical bills or even to fund research and publicity of the happenings around them.

“There are a lot of creative ways to support the movement,” said one of the supporters and co-founders of HKProtect, a company which sold protective gears to protesters who did not want to be identified. Everyone is using their profession or parts of their expertise to be part of the process. Graphic designers, helped create countless posters, website and internet experts worked round-the-clock to provide people with updates on safety and upcoming plans, architects helped draw floor plans of protest sites with escape routes. These coordination methods assumed the leadership and the donation/funds, coupled with the support of media agencies, became the driving factors of the protests.

Use of online forum for mobilisation and support

LIHKG is a forum created for the cause, popularly dubbed as the ‘Hong Kong Reddit’, it emerged as one of the virtual command centres. Much of the essential commands and plans were discussed on this forum. Formed in 2016, LIHKG is a news forum, site-based in Hong Kong which was formed by the creators of the now-defunct forum HKG+, which was formerly affiliated as a third-party application with another local forum site HKGolden. After HKGolden banned HKG+, LIHKG surged in popularity, in the same year. It replaced HKGolden as the go-to site for Hongkongers to discuss political content. LIHKG is often compared to Reddit, which is an American forum where users create threads and submit content of various interests through relevant subreddits that categorize the posts into different categories.

The portal consists of over 90,000 subscribers which mainly included expatriates, tourists or locals comfortable in English and since the extradition bill crisis, the subreddit has been actively reposting translated information from LIHKG for non-Chinese speakers. Protesters have been able to use LIHKG to call more people to the streets and request supplies to aid those on the front lines. The forum is known to be actively used for crowdfunding; one example is the backing of a bid for world leaders to address the extradition bill crisis during the G20 Summit. In the meantime, the forum lets the users

remain relatively anonymous despite its demand for an email address by any prominent provider. Their goal is to ensure preparedness for what comes. #Be_Water.

Mainland versus Hong Kong Government

The worst position to be on during the protests would undoubtedly have been that of Carrie Lam. She is the first woman to lead Hong Kong, but has become one of the most hated persons in Hong Kong since the 1997 handover. She pushed for the extradition bill which sparked a domino of protests in Hong Kong. However, she was caught in between the politics of having to deal with her people and having to deal with mainland China.

Mainland China could not directly involve itself with the protests in Hong Kong unlike that of any other region in China, merely because of the political lines that China could never cross without being seen as an aggressor. The protesters knew of this and in a sense, the protests can be seen as a subtle provocation against the Chinese government after the extradition bill was scrapped.

There were no options with the governments on how to deal with the situation. The fact that the protests were leaderless, made it that much more challenging. Carrie Lam was a social activist before she took the leadership path. As someone who sided with the powerless in the past, her legacy would leave her approach to the protests as one of her failures. Mainland China, in the early weeks of the protests announced that it would 'trust' Carrie Lam to take care of the situation. When the protests began to turn violent, Xi Jinping issued a public warning against Separatism, the Chinese government stationed its soldiers on the borders of Hong Kong.

The strategy of both the mainland and the Carrie Lam government was to wait it out. That became the only option after the negotiation attempts with the protesters failed. However, the frequency and ferocity of street protests eased after a landslide victory in district council elections. The protesters ensured that their movement continued, where a small group of them would gather, on say, 21st and 31st of every month, 'till every demand was met.' Demonstrations continued in 2020, in the early weeks of the virus outbreak they said, "Fight the virus, but don't forget our cause," this however, stopped with the outbreak of corona virus. The ongoing protests were able to keep the mainland from setting up makeshift medical centres in the borders and within Hong Kong.

Major Trends

The protests put the lessons learned from the Umbrella Movement to good use. Every time their plan was compromised, a new one would emerge. If the police stood against blocking the metro stations, they would go to the airport, for example. The biggest strength to the protests were the support of the pro-democracy media and businesses to

the cause, both from within Hong Kong and outside of Hong Kong; specifically, the support of the US media.

The strong resistance to the actions of the government, through well-coordinated unions and groups ensured that the five demands made were never compromised.

When violence became a part of the movement, one can observe the damage that were caused was largely to Chinese infrastructure and systems, the surveillance camera poles were broken, for example; sending the signal that they do not want mainland China watching over them. Reports emerged in February and March of 2020 that soldiers from PLA were part of the police during the protests, some reports suggested that there were soldiers even among the protesters, watching over their movement.

Forecast in 2020

The protests have halted due to the ongoing pandemic but months before the outbreak, the protests were sustained by very few people. The protests would resume once the threat from the pandemic reduces, but it might remain symbolic. This means, it may fail to get public approval because the priority and the immediate pressure would be to get back to normalcy.

A sense of fatigue among the population was felt when there was a split among the groups in terms of using violence as a means. The second sense of fatigue was seen after the elections, a good amount of support for the protests ended because it was seen as a pro-democracy victory. The third sense of fatigue can be seen with the inaction of the government. The waiting-it-out strategy of the government left both sides with no sense of achievement on either side. Hence, if the protests were to renew it would need to have evolved into something much more challenging. Economy will return to stability after minor slump. With the impact of the protests alone, there were positive signs that the economy is entirely capable of weathering the outcomes of the months' long protests, however with the onset of the pandemic, this may not be the case. The tourism sector is highly impacted by the protests, from the rest of the world, but most importantly tourism from the mainland dropped drastically due to the protests. A technical sense of recession was announced by a few experts in October of 2019, however the main markers of the Hong Kong economy, the financial and professional services remain strong even in March 2020. This could be because, after the initial months of the protests, people went back to their work places and remained protesting during the weekends.

GDP rates shrank as an impact of the protests, in the fourth quarter alone the GDP shrank by 2.9 per cent and the annual shrink of GDP in 2019 was at 1.2 per cent. A slowdown in the economy can be expected throughout 2020 despite the important sectors remaining

strong. Protests emerged in Hong Kong in the context of lack of confidence on the government's ability to deal with the pandemic. The measures taken by the Hong Kong government drew a lot of people to the streets when attempts were made to convert the local medical centers and local clinics into specialized coronavirus treatment centers. Protests erupted in the later weeks of February when mainland China refused to close the borders when the numbers began to peak in China. Clashes were seen between the protesters and the police one again in February 2020. Thus, coronavirus outbreak became another reason for contention between the protesters and the administration.

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