

Sober minds are needed to understand what is going on in Hong Kong

Sober minds

Yok-sing Tsang
Hong Kong Policy Research Institute

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore some sober minds of better reordering of the relationships among the Central People's Government of China (CPG), Hong Kong SAR Government (HKSARG) and the people of Hong Kong.

Design/methodology/approach – It attempts to analyse and explain varying challenges faced by all stakeholders in the recent social and political unrest in Hong Kong.

Findings – As a result of HKSARG's failure to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance, the feelings of resentment at both social inequality and political stagnation in Hong Kong turn into hostility towards the HKSARG, CPG and the Mainland people.

Originality/value – Performance and procedural legitimacy are equally critical to help HKSARG overcome its governance crisis. This viewpoint hopes to put "One Country, Two Systems" back on the right track.

Keywords Hong Kong, Governance, Democracy, Social inequality, "One Country, Two Systems", Fugitive Offenders Ordinance (FOO)

Paper type Viewpoint

The political storm that has ravaged the Hong Kong society for more than three months and is still going on, the worst governance crisis the Hong Kong SAR has experienced since its establishment was triggered by the Government's attempt to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance (FOO) to enable transfer of fugitive criminals between Hong Kong and other parts of China. Chief Executive Mrs Carrie Lam has admitted that the legislative exercise, despite having the best of intentions, was an unwise move, arousing in Hong Kong people a huge degree of fear and anxiety which the government had failed to reckon with. Many have criticised the government for its lack of sensitiveness in responding to protesters' demands, which has kept the crisis escalating.

But the political storm would not have exploded to such an enormous scale if there had not been a vast amount of pent-up resentment towards both the local government and the sovereign power. The piece of legislation at issue is only about fugitives, and it caught the attention of only very few until public fear was aroused by exaggerating allegations from the opposition. Many people have chosen to believe in these allegations regardless of the validity of their grounds, because they have little trust in the government in defending their rights and interests. The public consultation period for the bill was too brief, official explanations were inadequate and the government was seen trying to rush the bill through Legislative Council. Nevertheless, the huge number of people who have joined the protests would not have done so if they had not been angry with the government for a long time, for reasons other than the controversial amendment bill.



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People, especially young people, are angry with the worsening social inequality. Hong Kong has been doing reasonably well in its economic growth in the last two decades, but fruits of the growth have not been shared by the majority of the people. Grass-roots families have seen little improvement in their livelihood. As the government takes pride in Hong Kong consistently remaining the “freest economy” in the world, the wealth gap keeps widening, and today Hong Kong’s Gini coefficient is the highest among comparable economies, with a per capita GDP over three times the world’s average. The cruelty of our social inequality manifests itself most strikingly in the disgraceful housing conditions of many poor families. Many say that young people are rebellious because they cannot buy their own home. This is untrue and unfair. Young people are righteously indignant because they see many people cannot afford a decent home.

Another reason for many Hong Kong people to feel frustrated and angry is the standstill in our constitutional development. The Basic Law says there should be “gradual and orderly progress” in our move towards full democracy, the ultimate aim being the Chief Executive and all legislators shall be elected by universal suffrage. In 2007, the Central Government gave a timetable for our democratisation, by which the Chief Executive could be elected by universal suffrage in 2017. But in 2015 we failed to pass a resolution on how to elect the Chief Executive in 2017. Not only did we lose the chance to have the Chief Executive elected by all people in 2017; we lost the timetable as well. Now no one can tell when we can attain the final goal of democracy, if ever at all.

And many believe that our social inequality problems are largely due to the undemocratic way our government is formed. The Chief Executive is chosen by the Election Committee, which is seen to be dominated by big businesses. Whenever conflicts arise between ordinary people and the big businesses, the Chief Executive will always stand on the side of the latter, for they are her bosses, not the people. The government is colluding with the big businesses, in particular the land developers, to rob the ordinary people. That is why private housing is so expensive and public housing is in short supply.

The feelings of resentment at both social inequality and political stagnation easily turn into hostility towards the Central Government and the Mainland. Beijing is seen by many to be the main factor holding back democratic development in Hong Kong. At the same time, social and economic integration of Hong Kong with the Mainland has led to increasingly frequent conflicts and bred ill feelings between people from the two sides. The staggeringly large number of visitors and immigrants flooding in from the Mainland are blamed for over-stretching Hong Kong’s resources and aggravating the SAR’s social problems.

This explains why the proposed FOO amendment, once interpreted as an attempt to take away the fire-wall between the Hong Kong and Mainland judiciary systems, would drive so many angry protesters into the streets. It also explains actions taken by the most radical protesters aimed at challenging China’s sovereignty over Hong Kong and deliberately provoking the Central Government.

Demands of the protesters have gone far beyond withdrawal of the bill, which the government has done already. They want an independent commission to be appointed to investigate into police abuse of powers, unconditional release of everyone arrested in clashes with the police, and universal suffrage. The government cannot accede to all these demands. Nor can the government negotiate for a compromise, for no one can represent the protesters in negotiation. Moreover, it is quite obvious the government is incapable of handling political crises, let alone a crisis of such enormous scale as the present one. All this adds up to mean that the disturbances will not die down for some time to come. Hong Kong people have to learn to live with haphazard road blocks, sudden

closing-down of MTR stations following wanton vandalism, and violent scenes in streets as shown on TV.

No one can tell when the troubles are going to end. But when troubles do subside, it is hope that there will be enough sober minds in Hong Kong and Beijing who have a clear idea of what went wrong, and are able to put “One Country, Two Systems” back on the right track.

About the author

Yok-sing Tsang, GBM, GBS, JP, is Honorary Professor at Faculty of Social Science, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Convenor at Hong Kong Vision Research Programme; Vice Chairman at Hong Kong Policy Research Institute Limited; and Advisor at Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB). He has been active in public and community service holding senior positions. From 2008 to 2016, he was the President of Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). From 2002 to 2008, he was Member of Executive Council of the HKSAR. He was Member of National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference from 1993 to 2013, and Chairman of DAB from 1992 to 2003. He holds MEd, Cert. Ed and BA Degrees of The University of Hong Kong. Yok-sing Tsang can be contacted at: tsangyoksing@gmail.com