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Hong Kong Votes, Beijing Fumes

By Dylan Loh Ming Hui

Synopsis

An unofficial referendum conducted in Hong Kong, sponsored by the 'Occupy Central' movement, drew a surprising 800,000 votes cast – drawing fire from China. What are the implications of the vote for Beijing?

Commentary

ALMOST 800,000 ballots were cast online and physically at polling stations in Hong Kong, in an unofficial referendum on Hong Kong's electoral reform. The turnout is a sizeable proportion of the 3.5 million registered voters in the 2012 elections – representing about one in five registered voters.

The poll gave voters three options all of which would allow voters to directly nominate and elect their Chief Executive, although there is an option to abstain. The results are not tallied yet but the significance of the huge support in voter turnout is not lost on Beijing. Despite the fact that there would be no legal effect of this unofficial referendum, it will have potentially wide ranging ramifications for Beijing.

Election of Chief Executive

The key point of contention of this 'referendum' lies in how Hong Kong's Chief Executive is selected. While China has promised direct elections in 2017, the candidates can only be selected by a pro-Beijing 1,200 strong, nominating committee.

Anson Chan, a former top civil servant in Hong Kong, summarised the sentiments many Hong Kongers felt: "What is the point of one man, one vote if at the end of the day we have to vote from three puppets or four puppets anointed by Beijing?"

The unexpectedly large voter turnout was precipitated by a recent white paper by Beijing on the "one country, two systems" model, emphasising its "complete jurisdiction" over Hong Kong. The vote drew swift condemnation by China. *Global Times*, a staunchly nationalistic paper, called it an "illegal farce" and a "joke".

More pointedly, it stressed that pro-democracy groups should "...refrain from a gambling mentality by believing that they could create overwhelming pressure on Beijing."

Implications for Beijing

There are four key implications from this unofficial referendum for China's internal governance. Firstly, the large

turnout is an indicator of the general unhappiness over perceived curbs on civil liberties such as universal suffrage and freedom of speech and over the increased assertiveness of Beijing as articulated in its white paper.

As the 2017 deadline looms ever closer, Beijing would have to contend with more agitation by the 'Occupy Central' movement and other pro-democracy groups. And as the movement gains momentum, these groups will take increasingly bold and innovative steps (such as the unofficial referendum) to put pressure on China for reforms to the Hong Kong election system.

Secondly, there remains a fear and the danger from the Chinese perspective that the upwardly mobile and educated mainlanders who work and play in Hong Kong would be increasingly socialised and attracted to the form of liberal democracy the 'Occupy Central' movement is pushing for. Because of the deep people and trade exchanges between mainland China and Hong Kong, there is very little to limit the slow but sure influence of ideational interactions.

Thirdly, pro-democracy activists in China, seeing the impact and global media attention of the unofficial referendum (and the larger 'Occupy Central' movement), can further leverage on Hong Kong as a platform to develop their own institutional capabilities, expand their protest repertoire and, potentially, import and diffuse certain aspects of the pro-democracy movement in the mainland. That is, indeed, already happening for example with the annual commemorative vigils for the Tiananmen incident.

On 4 June 2014, the largest and the only commemorative vigil marking the 25th anniversary of Tiananmen Incident drew over 150,000 people – a good number of them from mainland China. Human rights lawyer Teng Biao, from the mainland, was amongst the speakers; he used the platform to enunciate his wish for Chinese citizens to have the freedom to protest and paid homage to the many activists who have lost their lives in the fight for democratic reforms.

Finally, Beijing may find it harder to manage and deal with the Hong Kong government as it finds itself under increasing popular pressure – even if the government established by Beijing.

In a rare show of defiance, Hong Kong's Chief Executive publicly expressed disagreement to the Global Time's editorial stating that it was wrong to put "the people of Hong Kong and China on confronting sides" and that the citizens were only expressing their wish to elect the city's leader by universal suffrage in 2017. The Hong Kong government also released a statement later saying that it is "the right of the people to express their views and we also understand that there are different views in society".

Caught between a rock and hard place

The impact and significance of the annual vigil coupled with the recent 'referendum' must be causing some worry for the Chinese leaders. Beijing cannot foreseeably quell the movement in Hong Kong with the sort of heavy handedness that it could if it were in the mainland. Doing so would most definitely galvanize the pro-democracy movement even further and draw international criticism.

However, not taking any action or giving a 'slap on the wrist' response would embolden activists and campaigners even more and might inspire domestic activists to undertake similar activities. Indeed, there are early signs of a prolonged, entrenched campaign. For instance, on 2 July 2014, more than 500,000 people turned up for a pro-democracy rally in Hong Kong's central business district – the largest turnout since the city was handed over to China in 1997.

As Beijing devotes greater resources and attention to the restive Xinjiang region in a bid to crush the violent separatist movement there, an arguably more powerful but outwardly benign ideological movement is taking place in Hong Kong. How China manages and deal with the democratic expressions and expectations of the Hong Kong people would have important implications for its domestic governance.

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