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Protests in Hong Kong: Roots in Old and New Social Movements

By Fengshi Wu

Synopsis

The eleven-day standoff in Hong Kong city central is not a single-issue triggered mass event. It is a result of two strands of social mobilisation: the pro-democracy movement with a history of over three decades, and the recent and increasingly radicalised youth activism.

Commentary

HEADLINES IN the mainstream media such as “Hong Kong’s gone crazy”, “Umbrella Revolution” and “Communist China’s worst nightmare” have attracted widespread attention. They depicted recent events in Hong Kong with spectacular images of riot police firing tear gas, protesters chanting and raising fists, and students camping on streets between Transformer-style skyscrapers and in the midst of sub-tropical thunder storms.

The crux of this mass social unrest in one of the world’s popular cosmopolitan cities is the exact procedures of the first general election of the Chief Executive in Hong Kong scheduled to take place in 2017. On the one side, the central authority in Beijing, accepting the principle of universal suffrage, is steadfast on maintaining a 1200-member Nomination Committee that will be in charge of the selection and approval of 2-3 candidates. On the other is a part of Hong Kong society that clearly resents such a top-down approach. The most vocal form of their disagreement is the latest wave of mass protests, or what is now known as the “Occupy Central with Love and Peace” movement.

What is old?

While it can be interpreted as an expected result of the highly political, yet practically inadequate design of “One Country, Two Systems” such as by HK scholars like Lui Tai-Lok and Ding Xueliang, the origin of the large-scale standoff since the night of 28 September 2014 can be traced back to the decade before the 1997 Handover and the broad context of political development in modern-day Hong Kong.

During the 1980s, Hong Kong’s economy took off, bringing in soaring wealth and propelling the city as one of the “Asian Tigers” while laying the foundation for the emergence of a vibrant civil society. Both the crackdown of the 1989 Tian’anmen movement and Chris Patten’s drastic measures of political

liberalisation caused a rapid rise of public awareness and ushered a pro-democracy alliance comprising social elites, activists, civil society leaders and public intellectuals.

The once existent ideological fault lines among social elites have since become less divisive. By July 2003 when 500,000 people marched against the revision of the Basic Law Article 23, Hong Kong had seen the maturing of a politically engaged critical mass and a society ready to be mobilised.

Comparable to the experiences in parts of Southeast Asia, the post-colonial Hong Kong has been accumulating tremendous political *energia* from bottom up without a proper outlet, such as a set of institutional channels for competitive democratic rule.

Local social elites rising from the grassroots who were ready to play a more prominent role became quickly marginalised by the new political set up mostly deliberated by the Beijing central authority. Thus, they have found no better alternatives but street politics. In their own words the leaders of the "Occupy Central" movement, most in their late 40s and early 50s "have been waiting".

What is new?

There is another side of the "Occupy Central" protests - the fresh influx, worthy of more attention. Youth, not just college students, but also high school or even middle school students, is highly visible in recent standoffs and has gradually become the face of the whole movement. Most clips one can watch via social media were submitted by them, and many brief interviews conducted on the spot by English-speaking journalists were with them.

Since the beginning of September 2014, student unions of all main universities in Hong Kong have called for boycotting of classes and initiated mass gatherings on campuses. Student activist Joshua Wong, who also played a central role in the anti-national education movement in the summer of 2012 and founded the Scholarism student activism group, is only 17.

In fact, it was Wong, accompanied by a few hundreds, who started breaking into the Civic Square outside the Hong Kong governmental complex on the night of September 26.

Calling them "betrayers", the Hong Kong Federation of Students, headed by Alex Chow, a senior of Hong Kong University, urged and exerted huge pressure on the three organisers of the so far moderate "Occupy Central" movement to join the protesters at the Civic Square.

After the first night of occupying major intersections from Causeway Bay, Admiralty, Central, to across the Victoria Harbour in Mongkok, students and young people protesting with mobile phones and gadgets, in addition to the symbolic umbrella, have already become the driving force of the continuing "occupy" actions.

The role of youths

Those young protesters, aged between 15 and 25, were born after 1989 or even 1997. They do not see themselves as bearers of "historic legacies and responsibilities" as their peers in the Mainland. Many of them have already tasted the sweetness of victory in the protests against the HK-Zhuhai-Macau ocean bridge, Guangzhou-Shenzhen-HK express railway, and the textbook for "national education" in previous years.

Tactics such as blocking traffic, sit-ins, or even hunger-strikes were repeatedly used in those protests. Free of memories of the "iron hand" (of government), they are prepared to escalate the ongoing standoffs. Except "begging in tears", local intellectuals and political activists, who in the first place encouraged students' political engagement, have failed to come up with a persuasive narrative to slow down any potential escalation.

Intellectuals in the mainland (and overseas) start to make historical analogies and worry about the consequences for overall political reforms in mainland China when they see signals of radicalisation of youth activism in Hong Kong and envisage potential responses from Beijing. While instinctively spotting some similarities, they miss the different local roots of the current protests in Hong Kong.

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