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Hong Kong Pro-Democracy Protests: No End Game in Sight?

By Dylan Loh Ming Hui

Synopsis

As the demonstrations in Hong Kong continue, how will the impasse between the pro-democracy protests and the government end?

Commentary

PRO-DEMOCRACY protests in Hong Kong look set to continue, with neither the government nor the protesters willing to budge. The Hong Kong government and the Government of China's patient strategy of waiting for the protests to 'die a slow death' is being severely tested: while the movement's momentum have slowed and the number of protesters have dwindled, the movement is not at risk of dying anytime soon.

Indications of a rethink in the 'slow death' strategy have surfaced in recent days. For example, despite the public backlash against the use of teargas against unarmed protesters at the onset of the protests, Hong Kong's police force has, in recent days, been increasingly liberal with their use of force as the protests become increasingly entrenched. Footage of police officers taking turns to beat an unarmed protester, in a secluded spot, with the protester's arms tied up behind his back on 15th October is one of the most troubling examples of the new violence employed.

Why the impasse?

There are three main factors accounting for the current stalemate. The first is the political immaturity of the student-protesters. Fuelled by bleak economic life prospects coupled with over-enthusiastic attraction to liberal democratic ideals, their failure to consolidate their gains and their unrealistic expectation of political change are contributing to the deadlock. The amorphousness of the movement, once their strength, is becoming their weakness with a fracturing of groups with different motives and goals.

According to the South China Morning Post, some protesters are calling for "self-determination" and even "independence", a dramatic escalation from calls for 'true' universal suffrage. Such disorderliness parallels the general fractiousness of the movement – making it very difficult for the

pro-democracy protest movement to reach any consensus on the future of the movement which in turn makes it difficult for protests to end.

Secondly, China's President Xi Jinping does not want to dent his strong decisive image by giving in to the protests through offering any sort of (or be perceived to be offering) concession. This carefully-cultivated posture of an immovable leader restricts any compromise, even if a compromise is called for to head off a calamity. This binds Beijing's options and, as a result, sees them placing the onus of solving the problem on the Hong Kong government.

This leads to the third factor – the ineffectual leadership of Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying. Indeed, his indecisiveness and huge unpopularity is working against him and against the prospect of resolving the deadlock. The sudden cancellation of talks, the equally surprising re-opening of talks coupled and the initially restrained use of force - after criticisms on the use of tear gas – as well as the recent renewed vigour in the show of force paints an image of government that does not know entirely what to do to.

What is the possible end game?

One possible scenario that would defuse tensions and take protesters off the streets would be the resignation of the Chief Executive. His position seems untenable and the recent leak of a questionable US \$6.5 million payment received in a deal with an Australian company is taken by some analysts as evidence of Beijing's weariness with Leung although Beijing has denied these claims.

Leung himself has stressed repeatedly that he will not resign. So this scenario is highly unlikely unless Beijing consciously decides to remove him, which is also unlikely given that the Chinese government has given him its support several times.

The second possible scenario would be a crackdown sponsored by the Central government in Beijing on the protesters. There are already signs that Beijing's forbearance is waning. The People's Daily newspaper, warned of "unimaginable consequences" if the protests are not stopped. More recently, in a departure from its previous restraint, a Chinese official did not rule out force and said that there is no need to activate the army "so far" and that they hoped "such a scenario will not unfold".

This scenario, though, appears unlikely (at least for now) as several important events in the Chinese leadership's calendar such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing and the Party's 4th Plenum on 'the rule of law' – both in October – is set to take up most of the leadership's attention.

The third and most likely scenario is for the continued gridlock between the protesters and the Hong Kong government and for both sides to wait for the other to 'blink first'. That said, pro-democracy protesters should start being realistic in their expectation of change; otherwise they risk alienating the general Hong Kong population further or worse still, giving Beijing a reason to take action if the protests degenerate further.

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