Hong Kong’s Legislative Elections: Implications for Democratization in Hong Kong and U.S.-China Relations

On September 15, 2004, Dr. Veron Hung and Dr. Michael Swaine analyzed the September 12 Legislative Council elections in Hong Kong and their implications for the future prospects of democratization in the territory and for cross-Strait relations. The following is a summary of their remarks.

Dr. Hung began her comments by suggesting that September 12 appeared to be a sad day for Hong Kong. Despite widespread hopes, democrats in Hong Kong were not able to secure a majority in the Legislative Council. This is due to three main reasons. The first, she argued, is that the democrats were less capable of implementing strategic voting in comparison to pro-Beijing politicians. For example, the democrats overreacted to poll results. When public opinion surveys indicated that a series of money and sex scandals had stained some pro-democracy candidates, the democrats rallied around several key candidates, including Mr. Martin Lee, founder of the Democratic Party, thereby drawing votes away from other pro-democracy candidates.

The second reason for the failure of democrats to secure a majority of legislative seats is that in the days leading up to the election, public confidence in Beijing and in the Hong Kong government bounced from the record low in May, when the population reacted very negatively to Beijing’s April decision to disallow universal suffrage from being implemented in 2007 and 2008. This greater level of comfort with respect to Beijing benefited pro-Beijing candidates in the elections and could perhaps be explained by a few factors, including the improvements in Hong Kong’s economy, Beijing’s offers of trade benefits to Hong Kong, Beijing’s efforts to heighten Hong Kong people’s nationalist sentiments by arranging a visit of China’s Olympic gold medalists to Hong Kong, and the restraint that the Tung Chee-hwa administration exercised in not putting forth controversial policies.

The third main reason for the democrats’ inability to secure a legislative majority is that the Democratic Party, the main force among democrats in Hong Kong, failed to adequately address livelihood issues, thereby driving voters, especially those at the grassroots level, to vote for pro-Beijing candidates who were better at tackling these concerns.

What, then, does all of this mean for Hong Kong’s democratization in the future? The fact that the democrats were unable to convert the momentum from the 530,000-strong demonstration in July into electoral success means foremost that their leverage with respect to Beijing has lessened. At the same time, however, the picture is not without hope.
knowing that direct elections cannot guarantee democrats’ landslide victory, may feel less threatened by the prospect of meeting with democrats to discuss electoral reform. Beijing must, in fact, understand that there is still a strong need for it to meet with the democrats. The record high turnout rate of 55.6 percent in the election indicates that the demand for full democracy in Hong Kong still exists and may grow if the government in Hong Kong blunders on key issues, such as the anti-subversion legislation and the territory’s economy. If the people of Hong Kong are indeed dissatisfied, it is possible that they will go onto the streets again on every July 1. Beijing does not want to turn its annual celebration of the transfer of sovereignty into an annual humiliation of its governance.

Even if Beijing is willing to meet with democrats, the remaining challenge is whether democrats in Hong Kong can stay united to speak with one voice to pursue a moderate negotiating strategy. Some more radical legislators continue to demand that Beijing should revoke its decision made in April and allow universal suffrage to be implemented in 2007-08. A moderate strategy is justified if one considers Beijing’s fundamental fears with regard to democratization in Hong Kong: first, that a democratic Hong Kong would “liberate” itself from Beijing, and second, that it would inspire people in the Mainland to challenge the Chinese Communist Party’s regime. Given that these concerns are at the foundation of Beijing’s reluctance to advance democracy in Hong Kong, democrats must work to dispel these fears. At the same time, democrats ought to understand that the harder they push, the more threatened Beijing will feel, and the more likely that it would use its trump card – the Basic Law – to forestall further movements toward full democracy. Altogether, then, a moderate strategy should be pursued: democrats should relinquish the demand for universal suffrage in 2007, but ask that direct elections be implemented in conjunction with universal suffrage in 2012.

The final issue that Dr. Hung addressed in her remarks consisted of the role of the United States. She noted that democracy in Hong Kong is good for the U.S. in many ways, including anchoring the rise of China as a peaceful one and perhaps providing a positive factor to help resolve the complicated Taiwan issue. In this regard, Dr. Hung argued that the U.S. should not change its policy as authorized under the U.S.-Hong Kong Policy Act. It should instead continue to express its concerns through low-profile diplomacy and make it clear to Beijing that lack of progress in Hong Kong could lead to greater international criticism that would overshadow the 2008 Olympic Games. Finally, U.S. non-governmental organizations can play a more pro-active role in Hong Kong, by continuing to provide technical assistance.

Dr. Hung concluded her remarks by noting that September 12 is therefore not necessarily a sad day. Beijing finally realized that direct elections do not guarantee a landslide victory for democrats. This relaxed attitude toward direct elections may bode well for future dialogues with Hong Kong’s democrats. The remaining crucial issue is that democrats themselves have to play their cards well.

Dr. Swaine began his remarks by noting that he agreed with Dr. Hung on numerous points. Democratization in Hong Kong is an issue that is deeply tied with other concerns in the territory, including socioeconomic welfare and its general relationship with the Mainland. One important reason why the democrats failed is that the people of Hong Kong want to maintain economic development and good relations with Beijing and are generally cautious about what can be achieved under this condition. Dr. Swaine also argued that the challenge
for the democrats is to soothe Beijing’s fears and make it clear that democratization will not hurt the interests of the central government. At the same time, in light of the election results, Beijing also has the opportunity to take a more moderate stance and negotiate with democrats in Hong Kong, thereby moving onto a specific roadmap without the pressure from demonstrations.

Dr. Swaine then addressed the implications of the elections for cross-Strait relations. To many, Hong Kong has served as a bellwether on the future of Taiwan, and some have pointed to the Legislative Council elections to argue that under “One Country, Two Systems,” Beijing will constrict liberties and absorb Taiwan. Such a simple comparison, Dr. Swaine argued, is misleading. In the first place, there are significant differences between Taiwan and Hong Kong. Unlike the latter, Taiwan has possessed self-autonomy since 1945 and has been a full-fledged democracy for more than a decade, and these are aspects that the Mainland could hardly touch on – with the exception of the exercise of international sovereignty in aspects such as diplomatic representation. Altogether, it is likely that the “One Country, Two Systems” structure that could be used with Taiwan – should Mainland China and Taiwan reunify under such a framework – would be vastly different from that of Hong Kong today.

The difference between the two situations does not mean, however, that Beijing should treat the two differently. There still exists a basic need for the central leadership to show sensitivity, especially because heavy-handedness on its part will affect the people’s perception of the degree to which the interests of both sides can be accommodated.

Finally, Dr. Swaine argued that it is important to note that Beijing has not backtracked from its commitment to Hong Kong’s autonomy. The central government has indeed resisted pressure to liberalize at a pace faster than it is comfortable with, but it has done so by not stepping out of the Basic Law. Indeed, Beijing has tackled the future implementation of universal suffrage as a question of interpreting the Basic Law and has refrained from outright discarding the key document. All of this, Dr. Swaine argued, suggests that the basic understanding is still largely there. Nevertheless, Beijing eventually needs to show convincingly that it supports the expansion of democracy in Hong Kong.

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