

CLEAVAGES AND CHALLENGES IN HONG KONG'S PRO-DEMOCRACY CAMP

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For government officials in Hong Kong, June is often a time of sleepless nights. Any scandal, unpopular policy or even inappropriate remarks by top leaders at this time of year may trigger an outpouring of crowds in the annual July 1 rally, the date supposed to commemorate the glorious return of Hong Kong to China. In recent months, the people of Hong Kong have been complaining about skyrocketing housing costs, confusion over the newly-implemented minimum-wage policy and the illegal reconstruction of personal flats by senior government officials. The QOL Index, created by the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, shows that the quality of life in Hong Kong has been decreasing since 2008. In 2007, the score was 108.78, declining to 104.83 in 2008 and 102.19 in 2009. Among all the indicators, it is particularly alarming that the score on “performance of government” dropped from 8.73 in 2007 to 6.21 in 2008 and 6.91 in 2009. In a poll conducted in April 2011, the same institute found that only 17% of Hong Kong people were satisfied with their government, whereas 36% were dissatisfied.

The Hong Kong SAR Government, however, is not alone in worrying about the rally. The Democratic Party (DP), a leading party in the pro-democracy camp of Hong Kong, was verbally attacked by participants at last year's rally. It was accused of being a traitor to democracy following its “pact” with Beijing regarding the constitutional reform of 2012, and the party is now eager to find out how civil society groups and post-1980s youngsters will treat them this year. However, as the divisions within the democratic camp have yet to be mended, more conflict of this kind seems inevitable.

The split within the democratic camp of Hong Kong was made public in early 2010 when another pro-democracy party, the League of Social Democrats (LSD), initiated a “de facto referendum” triggered by the simultaneous resignation of one Legislative

Council (Legco) member in each of Hong Kong's five geographical constituencies. The resulting by-election gave people a chance to express their views on issues such as the abolition of functional elections—by which votes within special interest groups fill half the seats in Legco. After some twists and turns, the Civic Party (CP) finally joined this “New Democratic Movement” and began to adopt provocative slogans such as “people’s insurgency” and “liberate Hong Kong” to stir up anti-Beijing sentiment in the community. Some civil society groups and youngsters were particularly excited by this innovative, if not subversive, attempt. The central government, as expected, reacted strongly by deeming it unconstitutional while local pro-Beijing parties ordered a boycott by not fielding any candidates in the by-elections. It was believed that the top leaders in Beijing were deeply concerned that the referendum would be used as a means for instigating separatist sentiment in Hong Kong, as the Democratic Progress Party had attempted to do in Taiwan.

The Democratic Party Stands Aside

Faced with such controversy, the DP chose to stand aside from the referendum, although not just because of its confrontational nature. According to its chairman, Albert Ho Chun-yan, the idea of a de facto referendum was considered a rash move because the loss of any pro-democracy seats in the resulting by-elections might make it difficult for the camp to maintain its legislative veto power (1/3 of all Legco seats) during the constitutional reform process. Moreover, Ho found it unacceptable that the CP-LSD alliance planned to seek a mass resignation of all pro-democracy Legco members should authorities fail to respond to the demands raised in the referendum. Ho regarded this as a self-defeating tactic, as previous experience in Singapore had shown when a similar resignation only led to a weaker opposition.

As a result, the DP put together a group of scholars, traditional democratic groups and pro-democracy lawmakers to form the Alliance for Universal Suffrage (AUS) to negotiate with authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing for a vigorous reform package, without challenging the National People’s Congress earlier decision not to implement universal suffrage in 2012 (as had once seemed possible). Beijing seized this opportunity to marginalize the CP-LSD alliance by branding the DP-AUS as “moderate democrats,” despite the fact that many members had been involved in an organization supporting the 1989 democracy movement in Beijing. Eventually, to the surprise of many, Beijing accepted the DP’s proposal to expand the franchise for the functional election of five new Legco members who would represent the 400 members of District Councils—local government bodies—so that all Hong Kong

voters (some three million) who did not qualify for a vote in some other functional constituency could vote in this one. The concept of enlarging the voting rolls while restricting nominations to District Council members in this “super-DC election” originated from the last British governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten. His political reform package was condemned by Beijing at the time as violating the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, and was not allowed to ride on the political “through train” he had proposed for the years beyond 1997. However, the present regime in Beijing was pragmatic enough to accept the DP’s similar proposal, both to avoid accelerating conflicts in Hong Kong and to explore a new relationship with the opposition for the sake of improving the governance of Hong Kong SAR.

Popping the “Balloon of Rage”

Although the Democratic Party may have appeared successful in achieving such an unprecedented compromise from Beijing, it paid dearly for this political deal. The CP-LSD alliance accused it of popping the “balloon of rage” before it had inflated. The DP was blamed for the poor voter turn-out in the de facto referendum, and the compromise with Beijing was seen as discouraging people from joining the July 1 Rally in 2010. One Legco member quit the DP immediately, proclaiming that loyalty to the party would violate his political integrity. A group of District Councilors also broke away from the DP and formed a new political body, the Neo Democrats. Nevertheless, even faced with such setbacks, DP leaders stood firmly behind the decision to engage in dialogue with Beijing without compromising their democratic beliefs.

Taking a longer-range perspective, we can trace the roots of this split within the pro-democracy camp back to the 1990s. The DP was founded in 1994, mainly by a group of pressure-group leaders deeply involved in the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s. They began to participate in elections when the British-Hong Kong administration initiated the decolonization process in the early 1980s, through the establishment of local government bodies called District Boards (since renamed the District Councils). Some DP founders were from Meeting Point, a political group supporting the return of Hong Kong to China. They were prepared to take up positions in Legco and other public institutions as a way of realizing the spirit of “Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong”. Other pressure group leaders also recognized the limitations of relying solely on social actions. By actively participating in all levels of elections, they gradually developed a theory of “war of positions” by “sabotaging the system from within”. Although the DP succeeded in returning

candidates to the District Board Urban Council and Legco in the 1990s, the strategy soon backfired. Some pressure groups complained that it had absorbed a lot of talent from civil society, become too moderate in its claims and too bureaucratic in its work style. The tension between adopting “street politics” or “parliamentary politics” as the party’s primary approach finally tore the DP apart when a group of Young Turks decided to leave the DP for a political group named Frontier in 2000. Following this turbulent period, the “mainstream” members of the DP saw themselves as working mainly in the domain of “political society” while maintaining a friendly relationship with civil society.

The Civic Party has a different history. Many founding members are barristers, scholars and professionals who had made remarkable achievements in their own careers before joining together as a formidable political force. Most of them had no experience in organizing social movements and their links with the grassroots were weak. However, their professional image and discursive skills have ensured them enormous success in shaping the public agenda. This elite group, who once proclaimed the aim of becoming the ruling party in Hong Kong, found itself immediately sidelined by the authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing after opposing pending national security legislation (Article 23 of the Basic Law) in 2003 and a government constitutional reform plan in 2005. They also found it hard to solicit donations from business and to expand their membership in the professional sector.

The Civic Party experienced a further setback when most of the candidates it fielded for the 2007 District Council elections were defeated by pro-establishment candidates. It increasingly realized the constraints within the system and the importance of partnering with civil society. Party leaders ceased to talk about becoming the “ruling party” and moved left to join forces with the radical LSD party and newly-established civic groups filled with post-80s youngsters. The CP-LSD alliance was able to breathe life into the social movement sector, for instance by serving as a bridge between political society and civil society in supporting the youths’ opposition of the construction of the Express Rail Link. It is believed that the Civic Party leaders decided to join the de facto referendum mainly due to pressure from their young members. These youngsters were hugely disappointed with the slow pace of constitutional reform and were deeply frustrated by the results of the previous DC election. They found the government’s reform proposal (and the DP’s) particularly unacceptable as it gave too much power to the District Councils.¹ The CP became increasingly immersed in developing an “ethical civil society”, criticizing the regime as a puppet controlled by Beijing and big tycoons in Hong Kong.

Philosophical Differences

The notion of an “ethical civil society”, according to Yale political sociologist Juan Linz, refers to an ideological orientation that emphasizes the “ethics of truth” and denounces political compromise and routine institutions. It operates outside the state and claims to represent the people or nation against an estranged state. In contrast, political society (the government and political parties) in a consolidated democracy recognizes the interests of divergent groups and attempts to organize, aggregate and represent them. Compromise is seen positively and political parties strive to direct the state and other normal institutions.² Looking at the paths of development of the CP and DP as discussed above, the former is clearly tilting toward an ethical civil society and the latter toward a regular political society. However, Hong Kong is not comparable to the former communist states of Eastern Europe, nor is it a consolidated democracy such as those in the U.S. and Western Europe. Vaclav Havel’s “ethics of truth” is irrelevant here, yet it is also too soon for the opposition to settle into an institutional form of politics.

Hong Kong is a semi-democracy in which people enjoy extensive civil rights, but have truncated political rights. The opposition finds it difficult to mobilize continuous mass movements, as corruption in Hong Kong is basically under control and human rights violations are infrequent. The number of participants attending the annual July 1 Rally has dropped from half a million in 2003 to only tens of thousands in recent years. Although 55% to 60% of the population expresses support for democracy through surveys and the ballot box, they are also pragmatic about accepting gradual reform. After Legco passed the political reform package in 2010, a survey conducted by Community Development Initiatives found that 52% of respondents supported the Democratic Party’s “super-DC election” proposal and only 25% disagreed. Some 54% also agreed that the dialogue between the DP and the authorities would lead to full democracy in Hong Kong, while only 25% disagreed. These results apparently support the approach adopted by the DP, although any careful observer would agree that the de facto referendum was significant in creating an opportunity for the DP to negotiate with Beijing. Both the CP-LSD alliance and the DP-AUS should have appreciated the synergy between the two sides of the pro-democracy camp. Unfortunately, they have shown no sign of goodwill when it comes to resolving the conflicts.

Long Hair Not Acceptable

Many DP members have expressed in private that they would never again work with the LSD after its leader Leung Kwok-hung, popularly known as “Long Hair”, teased the veteran DP leader Szeto Wah for having brain cancer which may have caused him to make unsound judgments on the referendum issue. They found it even more unacceptable when Raymond Wong Yuk-man of the LSD attacked his own party for not being prepared to run against the DP in the upcoming 2011 DC elections. Together with Albert Chan Wai-yip, Raymond Wong resigned from the LSD to form the new “People Power” party, claiming it to be the genuine radical wing in the political spectrum. As both the CP and LSD have failed to establish strong links within grassroots communities, they are not expected to gain a significant number of seats in these district elections. Although the new People Power group does not have a strong foothold in the community either, its negative campaign against the DP and vote-splitting strategy may nevertheless bring down some DP incumbents. In a nutshell, the pro-democratic camp will be facing a tough battle in the forthcoming DC election if it fails to take steps to stop this infighting.

Although many political observers are pessimistic that the conflicts between the DP and LSD, not to mention the others, can be reconciled in the near future, they are nevertheless hopeful that the Civic and Democratic Parties can at least mend their relationship. The two parties see themselves as representing the mainstream of Hong Kong society and their respective strengths could be complementary: the DP has solid networks in the community and a strong electioneering machine, while the CP has a group of top-notch lawyers and scholars and good links with young activists in civil society. Though it is rational for both parties to consider merging, the upcoming 2012 Chief Executive election has clouded their relationship further. Alan Leong of the CP has never ceased expressing his interest in joining that election ever since standing for the position during the last one, in 2007. However, the DP has recently challenged the assumption that he should be the designated candidate of the entire pro-democracy camp. Some DP members have privately expressed the view that the Civic Party has moved too far to the left. They also do not want the public to assume that Alan Leong should automatically represent the pro-democracy camp should there be universal suffrage in the CE election to be held in 2017, as now seems possible.

It is estimated that the number of endorsements available from pro-democracy Election Committee members will be barely sufficient to nominate one candidate for the Chief Executive contest, thus the pro-democracy camp is now contemplating a “primary” to select its candidate in an open and fair manner. Though “Long Hair” of

the LSD and Frederick Fung of the Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood (ADPL) have expressed interest in running, the real contestants will be Alan Leong and the Democratic Party's Albert Ho. It is uncertain whether this primary will become an opportunity for the CP and DP to resolve their internal conflicts through procedural design, or whether the DP's challenge will arouse further antagonism between them.

What we do know is that China has emerged as the second largest economy in the world and its leadership has reason to become more confident, if not arrogant, in its dealings with Hong Kong affairs. At the top of Beijing's agenda are global political and trade issues, followed by Taiwanese affairs. Internally, the Chinese Communist Party has to deal with the change in its top leadership, increasing social unrest and the growing separatism among minority groups. The leadership would love to see a divided pro-democracy camp in Hong Kong so that it will not be forced to speed up constitutional reform in the SAR, a process that might also destabilize the political equilibrium in the mainland. However, if Hong Kong loses the momentum of democratization, people will remain exasperated and baffled by the tensions embedded in a semi-, if not completely, perverted democratic system. It will inevitably deepen the prevailing cynicism in society and encourage the radicalism of the young. Who will be the losers in the end?

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¹ Please consult the article criticizing the DC system written by the CP Vice Chairman Albert Lai, published in Mingpao on June 21, 2010.

² "Authoritarian Communism, Ethical Civil Society, and Ambivalent Political Society: Poland," in Juan J. Linz & Alfred Stephan (1996) *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press) pp. 255-292.