

Reports

Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement

Raymond Lee

11 November 2014





A pro-Democracy protester holds an umbrella outside the venue of the China National Day flag-raising on day four of the mass civil disobedience campaign Occupy Central, Hong Kong [EPA]

Abstract

Hong Kong's "Umbrella Movement" is a spontaneous civic protest. It stands for a genuine democratic election of Hong Kong Chief Executive in 2017. It defies the political framework that Beijing legally imposed on Hong Kong, under which the future Chief Executive election becomes a "small-circle" election: all eligible candidates need approval by half of the 1200 members in the People's Republic of China (PRC)-controlled nomination committee. With this rule, Beijing would secure a pro-PRC Chief Executive elected all the time, thus rendering the popular poll virtually non-democratic. The Umbrella Movement, led by student organizations, has been active since September 26, 2014 and draws global attention from human rights and democracy advocates. The movement's activism has implications for Hong Kong's future as well as tests China's commitment to its political promise of "One Country, Two Systems". What are the issues and actors that have thus far driven Hong Kong's protest movement?

Introduction

In what context did the "Umbrella Movement" come about? What are its key political demands? What strategies do its key actors use in the pursuit of such demands? The article attempts to answer these questions.

Hong Kong's "Umbrella Movement", also called "Occupy Central", is a recent civic protest group action. It has some features found in social movements. It is a reform movement, relatively large, and has informally and spontaneously emerged from students' group action rallied around a key political demand: democratic election of Hong

Kong's Chief Executive in 2017. Thus the movement is driven by socio-political change.
(1)

The movement's focus is on a single issue political agenda. Its quest for the democratic election of Hong Kong Chief Executive in 2017(2) defies the political framework that Beijing legally imposed on Hong Kong at China's Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) on August 31, 2014.(3) Leaders of the protest announced that this is a civil disobedience campaign against Beijing's deliberate distortion of Deng Xiao-ping's promise on "One Country, Two Systems".(4) Under the newly-passed NPCSC's political scheme, the Chief Executive election becomes a "small-circle" election, in which all of the eligible candidates need approval by at least 50 percent of the 1200 members in the nomination committee, mostly generated from pro-PRC functional and occupational groups. (5) If this electoral system were implemented, Beijing would secure a pro-PRC candidate elected all the time given its control of the majority members in the nomination committee. (6)

The original movement started on September 26, 2014, when the student-organized protest escalated into a conflict with the police force in the Civic Square outside the Central Government Offices. The protest then spread over to the vicinity of Admiralty, the eastern extension of the central business district.(7) It was shortly commingled with the other mass protest called "Occupy Central", (8) spreading further afield to the flourishing business areas, including Central District, Causeway Bay, and Mong Kok.(9) The protest featured a large number of occupiers calling upon the HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) government for an electoral reform which allows future Chief Executive and Legislative Council members democratically elected in a genuine fashion.(10) The name of "Umbrella Movement" came from the fact that many protesters used their umbrellas to defend themselves from pepper spray and tear gas during sporadic scuffles with police.(11)

Key Actors and the Latest Development

There are three key actors in the Umbrella Movement: Beijing, HKSAR government, and the protest movement's leaders. From Beijing's perspective, there is nothing undemocratic in the NPCSC's ratified political framework since all the "democratic" elections (e.g. village-level elections) in the PRC context use a similar mechanism to vet candidates' loyalty to the communist party.(12) This design is especially important to secure PRC's sovereignty over Hong Kong because the Chief Executive, if not handpicked, might serve not only a political surrogate, but also a substantial power holder out of Beijing's control.(13) In fact, imposing a communist-led process of

candidate selection might be the only way for Beijing to secure its reign over Hong Kong if universal suffrage is granted.(14) In view of the current HKSAR administration under the leadership of Leung Chun Ying, the urgent task is how to resolve the conflict without making unauthorized concession deviate from Beijing's policy.(15) However, there is little room for the HKSAR government to play a capable negotiator if Beijing is unwilling to accept any other proposal. In terms of the Umbrella Movement's leadership, while the social base covers the full spectrum of the people, the leaders are mainly composed of three groups: the opposition, the students, and the intellectuals. Among them, student leaders play the most important role in movement initiation, mobilization, steadfastness, and finally political conversation with the HKSAR government regarding the potential resolution.(16) Up to now there is no sign of compromise from the student leaders. In the future, the momentum might be more difficult to sustain as outside pressure gradually accumulates along with the increasing social cost brought by the occupying campaign. (17)

The idea of occupying the Central District has been planned and publicized since March 2013, well before the movement started.(18) The three originators, Benny Tai Yiu-ting, Chan Kin Man, Chu Yiu-ming, are college professors (the former two) and reverend (the third) who have already prepared for the mass protest by holding a series of events.(19) However, when the conflict broke out in Civic Square, the student leaders took the spotlight and marginalized the three originators in leading the movement. The energy and momentum quickly switched from social elites and the opposition to student organizations, such as Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarships, which play a vital role to sustain and prolong the campaign even facing multiple waves of forced expulsion by the police.(20) On October 21, the political dialogue was formally held for the first time between the student leaders and HKSAR officials, but no agreement was reached.(21) The latest development showed that disagreement started to surface among the Umbrella Movement's supporters. There were voices suggesting that the movement should retreat from the street protest and turn into a sustainable campaign pushing for greater political reform.(22) However, student leaders dismissed this idea and insisted that the movement will not end without securing positive responses from the HKSAR government. (23)

Demands and Responses of Various Actors

The real players who have bargaining power are specifically Beijing and student leaders, but it is the HKSAR administration, which deals with the protest and political negotiation on a day-to-day basis. Beijing remained quiet about the movement officially, but revealed its determination to keep the future political framework intact. This conveys a

clear message to the HKSAR government that there is no room for political concession regarding the nomination rule, which essentially makes the election undemocratic. Hong Kong Chief Executive Leung responded to the Umbrella Movement by denouncing any illegal act to campaign for a particular electoral proposal and reiterated that the HKSAR will not make any concession when facing similar political challenges.(24) Nonetheless, he welcomes continuous dialogue and hopes that the students can end the protest for the sake of law and order.(25) Apparently, the HKSAR administration did not make any substantial offer but simply a token gesture in negotiation with the student leaders.

There seems to be a lack of clarity for various actors in the movement. While they do share a common goal in fighting for a true democratic election for Chief Executive and Legislative Council members, the intensification of the movement and the rise of student leaders obviously have shaken the original political dynamism within the opposition camp, complicating their future strategic plans. For those leading student organizations, they are facing growing complaint about the utility of bringing so much inconvenience to people's life and dwindling social support given the heterogeneous ideas about how to fight for the goal.(26) Particularly, disagreement has sprung lately from the three originators, who consider that the movement might bow out to mounting pressure in order to prevent unnecessary harm to the original cause, especially if the government adopts repressive measures to end the protest.(27) This could potentially cause the movement's civil disobedience campaigning to lose control and deepen disagreements within its leadership. Today many social elites have some doubts about the movement and might have their own ideas about how to proceed next. The opposition, especially for politicians or social activists in Pan-democracy Camp, has not only lost their political saliency during the campaign, but has also suffered a drop in their political support. This can be gauged by their marginalization in recent events.(28) Although some of them have intended to initiate new acts to enliven their protest, none of them has successfully drawn media attention.(29) In sum, different actors in the movement do share the same goal, but the split over strategy regarding how to pursue their political agenda is becoming more and more significant. Only students insist on taking to the street, but others seem to prefer changing tactics.

The Possible Resolution

So far Beijing stands firm on the legal ground but plays softly on the domestic front. On the one hand, Beijing reiterates that the principle of "One Country, Two Systems" should be interpreted under China's legal system, which means that no foreign countries have the right to intervene in Chinese domestic affairs and that NPCSC's decision is indisputable given its legal status.(30,31) On the other hand, Beijing is indeed very

patient towards the HKSAR government and the Umbrella Movement and refrains from directly engaging in the event.(32) This is a clever 'attrition strategy' because Beijing's calculations are to cool down the controversy through time and let internal differences build up among Hong Kong people, which eventually would kill the protest's momentum and legitimacy, given the huge cost to the economy. Under this strategy, there is no need to make any political concession, at least not a substantial one. Plus, there is no political harm to Beijing from this strategy when of faking political tolerance through rhetoric. The current HKSAR administration, however, might be the political scapegoat once the situation aggravates, whilst potentially serving as a convenient buffer for Beijing, which stays out of the political fray of handling the situation directly.

Given this situation, what the HKSAR administration can do is exactly to execute the containment strategy, keep expressing positive and open attitudes for political negotiation while containing the protest without offering real policy change. So this will be a tougher game to the students as time goes by. It is unclear what is the short-term goal that serves the denominator for all members of the movement leadership, when is the best timing to end the street occupation, and how the momentum can be transformed into other types of political activism. Lacking consensus on the above issues will place the Umbrella Movement in a disadvantageous situation because the social support will most likely run out in the near future. Also, there will be all kinds of measures for Beijing and the HKSAR government to mobilize counter-movements.

Strategically, the most-likely scenario for the resolution is that the students take the middle ground and propose certain policy changes that loosen up the electoral system incrementally. That is, lower the approval percentage of candidate eligibility, amplifying the social base of the composition of the nomination committee, and fine-tuning other technical issues in the electoral system that can reduce the level of political manipulation. While Beijing might not necessarily agree any of these proposals, such a move will reveal Beijing's true intentions vis-a-vis the honoring of the principle of "Hong Kong people running Hong Kong" in a democratic way. Unless the motto simply exists as a deceiving device by which only a communist political surrogate is allowed to rule Hong Kong. (33)

Implication for Hong Kong and China

There is growing negative sentiment in Hong Kong toward Chinese immigrants and the subsequent changes brought by the tightening relationship with China in the recent decade.(34) Such social discontent is the root of the problem that haunts Hong Kong people in relation to future cohabitation with China referred to as 'domestication': a

process that assimilates Hong Kong into China in political, economic, social, and even cultural arenas.(35) This explains why the momentum behind the Umbrella Movement is so huge that the 'cognitive mobilization' about the identity crisis permeates the whole society. If Beijing wants to resolve the deep apprehension fuelling protests in Hong Kong over the past decade, there should be a clear policy direction and declaration that addresses those concerns to ease anti-Chinese feeling.

China is evidently an important stakeholder in Hong Kong and its future, politically more so than economically. While Hong Kong seeks full application of the policy of "One Country, Two Systems", China has a clear objective to fully integrate Hong Kong as an integral part of China, itself geared towards the unfinished job of erasing the century-long national humiliation over the loss of the territory. Moreover, granting Hong Kong a true democratic election for the communist party is just like opening up a Pandora's Box: not only Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet would pursue their own independence, but also other local regions and territories risk being unleashed. They have demands of their own regarding freedom, autonomy and decentralization. This is likely to evolve into a political crisis not just for the ruling communists in Beijing, but also for China as a united national-state and a unifying nation.

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* Raymond Lee is a specialist in Chinese affairs.

Endnotes

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