

IPRI Brief

The Hong Kong Protests

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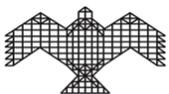
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In order to understand the current churning in Hong Kong, which has received global attention, it would be useful to take stock of developments in China and in Hong Kong from at least the mid-1970s.

Some essential details

Britain acquired Hong Kong island and the Kowloon peninsula after the mid-19th century Opium Wars, adding the vast New Territories taken on a [99-year](#) lease from Qing Empire in 1898. In the 20th century, during the period of



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Civil War pitting the Communist Party (CPC) forces and the Nationalist (Kuomintang or KMT) forces and in the aftermath of the Communists' victory and establishment of the People's Republic of China 1949, there was a steady influx of refugees that helped boost Hong Kong's economy. The influx continued during the periods when Mao imposed ultra-left policies such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In 1967, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, there were also riots in Hong Kong, fuelled by the gross inequalities in the territory. This spurred the British colonial government to adopt a series of [welfare measures](#) including public housing, the addition of more schools and hospitals, crackdown on corruption and police reforms.

First Tiananmen Incident and later rise of Deng

Some weeks after Premier Zhou Enlai, long the number 2 leader after Mao Zedong, died in January 1976, there began an outpouring of grief as he was seen as having tried to temper the worst excesses of the regime. This was the [first 'Tiananmen Incident'](#) initially deemed 'counter-revolutionary'. But after Mao's own death in September that year, the downfall of the "Gang of Four" ultra-radical leaders, including Mao's wife Jiang Qing, and the eventual rise of Deng Xiaoping as paramount leader by the late 1970s, the verdict on the Spring 1976 demonstrations was revised: it was deemed "patriotic".

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This revision of the labelling of the 1976 'Tiananmen Incident' has continuing implications for subsequent and ongoing events in China and especially in Hong Kong. Deng ushered in economic reforms and opening to the outside world calling for ["Four Modernisations"](#) – modernisation of agriculture, industry, science and technology

and national defence. But he paid no heed to the call for a [“Fifth Modernisation”](#) demanded during the brief “Democracy Wall Movement” of late 1978 that was supportive of his policies. Rather, [Wei Jingsheng](#), who articulated the democratisation demand, got jailed for his pains.

The Hong Kong question

Meanwhile time was ticking for Hong Kong’s New Territories lease. Banks and businesses had begun to [worry](#): mortgage periods were being reduced – to 20 years, 15 years and so forth. When the issue was broached with Beijing, the reply was that Britain should hand over all of Hong Kong. Then began protracted negotiations resulting in the [Sino-British Joint Declaration](#) of 1984, which envisaged a “high degree of autonomy” for Hong Kong for 50 years, with international human rights treaties Britain was party to and which were automatically extended to Hong Kong continuing to apply beyond 1997.

Deng had meanwhile come up with the [“One Country, Two Systems”](#) formula under which not only Hong Kong but the nearby Portuguese administered tiny enclave, Macau was to be handed over to China. More crucially, Taiwan, which Beijing deems a province of the PRC, was the formula’s most important target. Macau was handed over to Chinese sovereignty on 20 December 1999 and functions largely as a major [gambling den](#) for mainland Chinese tourists, with whatever little pro-democracy activism there is – among its current population of a mere 667,000 – easily muzzled, away from media glare. The issue of Taiwan will be discussed briefly infra.

In order to frame the rules or the constitutional framework under which the post-handover Hong Kong was to function, a Basic Law Drafting Committee was set up in 1985, consisting mostly of officials from mainland China, assorted pro-Beijing figures in

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Hong Kong and a couple of pro-democracy ones.

Stirrings in mainland China and the June 4 massacre

Developments in mainland China intervened meanwhile, partly delaying the work of the Drafting Committee. [Hu Yaobang](#), who had been made General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in September 1982, was eased out in January 1987 for being soft on “bourgeois liberalisation”, meaning the recurring demands for democratisation from among intellectuals and students that had already been expressed during the aforementioned “Democracy Wall” movement. But it seemed Deng had been less than careful in the choice of his successor: [Zhao Ziyang](#) proved to be equally soft.



The inner-Party power struggle seemed to have worked itself out a few days later as an April 26 editorial in the *People's Daily* (the official CPC mouthpiece) labelled the demonstrations a “conspiracy” and “turmoil”.

After the death on 15 April 1989 of Hu, widely seen as a non-corrupt and pro-people leader, massive demonstrations erupted. Official media, presumably taking orders from the CPC General Secretary, were initially supportive of the student demonstrators. But the inner-Party power struggle seemed to have worked itself out a few days later as an April 26 editorial in the *People's Daily* (the official CPC mouthpiece) labelled the demonstrations a “conspiracy” and “[turmoil](#)”. This description only provoked further anger and more students took to the streets and flocked to the sprawling Tiananmen Square which began to sport a sea of flimsy plastic tents housing thousands of young people camping day and night and supplied with food and drink with the help of funds pouring in from Hong Kong and elsewhere. Martial Law was declared in Beijing on May 20 and troops and tanks of the People's Liberation Army rumbled into the city centre only to be greeted by residents, some of whom even offered flowers to the soldiers saying, “you're the People's Liberation Army

and so you won't harm us..."

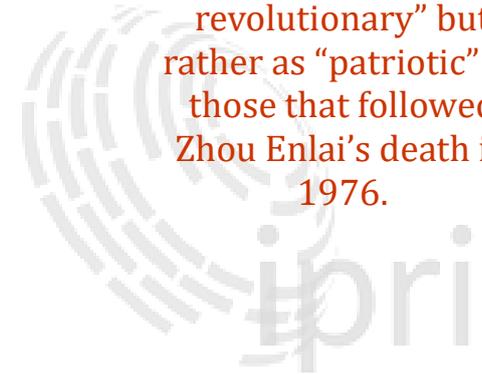
However, the standoff ended on the night and early morning of [June 3-4](#). Tiananmen Square was cleared and eventually a new CPC Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee was put in place with Jiang Zemin (until then Secretary of the CPC Committee in Shanghai) as General Secretary. As to who took the decision to send in the PLA, we might never know the official authentic truth but many [accounts](#) say that [Deng](#), backed by the then Premier [Li Peng](#) did.

I Hong Kong erupts

On June 4, 1989 about [a million](#) people in Hong Kong, out of its population then of 5.6 m, took to the streets to condole and to protest against the suppression of "Beijing Spring". Since then, every June 4, in the evening, large numbers of people – typically several tens of thousands – have been gathering in Hong Kong's sprawling Victoria Park to commemorate the event and to demand that the regime in Beijing acknowledge that the demonstrations of mid-April to early June 1989 were not a "turmoil", much less "counter-revolutionary" but rather as "patriotic" as those that followed Zhou Enlai's death in 1976.

"Ping Fan Lok Sei", a term in Cantonese (Guangdonghua) meaning "Reappraise June 4" (Ping Fan literally meaning 'overturn bottle' and Lok Sei meaning 6-4 or June 4) has been reverberating around Hong Kong for 30 years now, reminding the regime in Beijing to do as regards the demonstrations following Hu's death what it had done in respect of those after Zhou's. One of the current demands of demonstrators in Hong Kong who have been at it for nearly three months, is for the authorities to withdraw the ['riot'](#) classification of the ongoing protests.

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Effects on handover preparations



Chris Patten, facing pressures from the pro-democracy camp in Hong Kong and its supporters in Britain across the left-liberal-right spectrum as well as his own – perhaps, in hindsight, ill-informed inclinations – sought to raise the number of directly elected members.

The 1989 events had their repercussions on the work of the Basic Law Drafting Committee. Two of its members, senior barrister [Martin Lee Chu-ming](#) and activist [Szeto Wah](#) were expelled for having been vocal in their demand for greater democratisation. However, the [Basic Law](#) that was finally adopted in 1990 did incorporate some provisions for introduction of democracy, such as in the election of a part of the future Legislative Council and that of the Chief Executive, as the person to replace the governor in 1997 was going to be known. In 1992 came a new British governor who, unlike his predecessors was not a diplomat well-versed with China – and the Chinese language and all the accoutrements that go with it such as sensitivity or over-sensitivity to the hosts’ concerns – but a politician. [Chris Patten](#), facing pressures from the pro-democracy camp in Hong Kong and its supporters in Britain across the left-liberal-right spectrum as well as his own – perhaps, in hindsight, ill-informed inclinations – sought to raise the number of directly elected members. His predecessors David Wilson and Crawford Murray MacLehose openly [disagreed](#) with him as did another major British interlocutor with China, Percy Cradock. In some ways this disagreement also encapsulates the global West’s or North’s lack of genuine enthusiasm for democracy in the East or the South: Giving the lie to current accusations on the part of Beijing and its “[useful idiots](#)” abroad who speak of “foreign forces” fomenting “colour revolution”: But more on that anon.

Last British governor’s ‘overreach’ or ‘too little too late’

Chinese authorities were furious with Patten’s proposals, even though for the burgeoning pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, they

were too little too late. Some top Chinese officials in charge of the Hong Kong handover process used colourful [language](#) against him. A “[through train](#)” for a Legislative Council to have been elected – partly through universal suffrage – in 1995 and expected to sit past 1997, was derailed.

Post-handover Hong Kong

In effect, what Hong Kong got on July 1, 1997 was an unelected Chief Executive and an unelected legislature.

[Tung Chee-hwa](#), a tycoon whose family’s shipping business had been bailed out by Beijing in the 1980s and who had previously served in Patten’s executive council but had resigned in anticipation of being appointed first Chief Executive of HKSAR, became the China-appointed leader on 1 July 1997.

Initial calm in post-handover Hong Kong

Initially and for a few years onwards, there was hardly any change in life on the ground, apart from a change of flags: the currency remained the same as did the judiciary and other personnel the public had occasion to deal with. However, rather early on there were some straws in the wind: the then Chief Secretary for Administration, Anson Chan Fang On-sang – who had previously been in the identical post – was eased out for [failing to support Tung](#) (and despite having overseen a now nearly forgotten scandal of the sanction, without a tender process, of a major real estate development named [Cyberport](#) to Richard Li Tzar-kai, son of one of Li Ka-shing, one of Asia’s richest men presiding over holding companies controlling vast sectors of Hong Kong’s economy, including land and thus property, housing, retail sector, telecommunications and so forth).

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Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam

National Security Bill drama

And then came the bombshell in 2003 in the shape of a proposed legislation in pursuance of Article 23 (of the Basic Law) outlawing sedition, namely the [National Security](#) Bill. It met with widespread opposition given its wording: “...any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organisations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organisations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organisations or bodies.”

Coming as it did right when China, Hong Kong and other parts of East Asia were still recovering from the [SARS](#) (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak that claimed more than 750 lives, the Hong Kong government's insistence on pushing through with the bill appeared insensitive.

An estimated 500,000 to 650,000 people (out of a population then of 6.7 m) rallied on July 1, the anniversary of the handover. Remarkably, the Hong Kong Police's [figure](#) that day was rather uniquely outstanding for its honesty: 350,000, they said, adding that the figure did not reflect those who had done marching when the count was taken nor those yet to join. Despite this popular show of strength, Chief Executive Tung vowed to go ahead with getting the Legislative Council to pass the legislation. But [James Tien Pei-chun](#) of the pro-establishment Liberal Party developed cold feet after seeing the extent of popular opposition and resigned from Tung's Executive Council, effectively killing the bill as his party's support mattered in the Legislative Council. Despite the defeat, Tung stayed on until March 2005 when he resigned midway through his second term.

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Inept successors and the Occupy/Umbrella movement

Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, his successor, went on to then earn and complete a full term until 2012 but subsequently became embroiled in corruption allegations. His contribution to roiling the pro-democracy camp and other sections of society was in coming up with the Moral and National Education Curriculum Guideline in his 2010 policy address. It led to two years of resistance climaxing in major protests in August-September 2012 when Tsang's successor Leung Chun-ying announced temporary [withdrawal](#) of the move.

Almost the most spectacular – given the reach and spread of social media this decade – was the 2014 [Umbrella Movement or Occupy Movement](#) lasting 79 days from late September. The demand was for democratic elections [promised](#) in the Basic Law Articles 45 and 68. Article 45 of Basic Law states: “The ultimate aim is the selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage upon nomination by a broadly representative nominating committee in accordance with democratic procedures.”

And Article 68 says: “The Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall be constituted by election.

“The method for forming the Legislative Council shall be specified in the light of the actual situation in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress. The ultimate aim is the election of all the members of the Legislative Council by universal suffrage...”

It would be pertinent to note that Article 25 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (which continues to apply in Hong Kong post-1997) states: “Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity ... (a)

“The method for forming the Legislative Council shall be specified in the light of the actual situation in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and in accordance with the principle of gradual and orderly progress. The ultimate aim is the election of all the members of the Legislative Council by universal suffrage...”



To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; (b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors..."

Was the 2014 movement a failure?

The Occupy/Umbrella movement drew hundreds of thousands of young people, apart from the [500,000](#) witnessed on July 1. Among some of the incidents during those eventful weeks was the appearance of [Triad gangs](#) to attack demonstrators in parts of Hong Kong, as journalist and academic Louisa Lim has documented. Triad gangs have intervened earlier too and their use has the approval of some of China's top leaders as Lim has noted: "The idea that triads could be patriotic was first raised, in 1984, by Deng Xiaoping. The chief of China's Public Security Bureau, Tao Siju, caused uproar in Hong Kong, in 1993, when he echoed those sentiments, bluntly stating, "As for organizations like the triads in Hong Kong, as long as these people are patriotic, as long as they are concerned with Hong Kong's prosperity and stability, we should unite with them.""

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Although the Occupy/Umbrella movement has been generally written off as a failure in most narratives on that episode, it spawned new generations of activists. One of the major figures of the 2014, [Joshua Wong](#), 17 then – charged with contempt of court for failing to vacate an area as ordered – and at 22 now, having served a month out of his two-month sentence and let out discounted for good behaviour, has, since his release, largely been ignored on the streets and he has himself pointed out that there are [no leaders](#) in the current movement. Its plans and protests seem to evolve via online interactions using new

media platforms. It takes inspiration from Bruce Lee, star of early 1970s martial arts films who famously advised [“Be Water”](#).

Current anti-Extradition movement

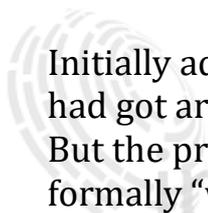
But to get to the origins of the current standoff: the ongoing anti-extradition law protests which are continuing despite Carrie Lam’s announcement on September 4 that the bill would be withdrawn and which have expanded into a larger pro-democracy movement, started with a [murder](#) in Taiwan: A couple from Hong Kong went on a holiday there and the man murdered the woman and returned home. The Hong Kong administration had thus to deal with the issue of extraditing a resident to Taiwan with which it lacked a formal arrangement for doing so.

The administration headed by Carrie Lam came up with a proposed “Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation [Ordinance](#)”.

However, the problem was that it also envisaged extraditions to mainland China. A series of massive protests followed: On 9 June more than [1.03 million](#) people of Hong Kong (out of a current population of 7.4 m) took to the streets according to organisers (270,000 said Hong Kong police, whose estimates of crowds at pro-democracy rallies have drastically come down since 2003). And on 16 June an estimated [two million](#) according to the organisers (338,000, being the police version) turned out. Further, on 16 August, an estimated [1.7 million](#) gathered for a peaceful protest (police figure 128,000).

Initially adamant, Chief Executive Carrie Lam had got around to saying the bill was [“dead”](#). But the protesters wanted the government to formally “withdraw” it. Long before she got around to it, they had added other demands.

Thus far five demands have crystallised: complete withdrawal of the proposed extradition bill (the only one that has been accepted now); government to withdraw the use of the word “riot” to characterise the protests; unconditional release of arrested protesters and charges against them dropped; an independent inquiry into police conduct; and elections through universal suffrage.



Protesters' five demands

Thus far [five demands](#) have crystallised: complete withdrawal of the proposed extradition bill (the only one that has been accepted now); government to withdraw the use of the word “riot” to characterise the protests; unconditional release of arrested protesters and charges against them dropped; an independent inquiry into police conduct; and elections through universal suffrage. Why is there this extent of opposition to the bill? It has to do with the nature and dynamics of Hong Kong-Beijing exchanges. Extradition treaties and agreements normally bind sovereign states, such as member countries of the United Nations. Thus, an extradition arrangement leading to a request from, say, [New Delhi to London](#) or [Lisbon](#) or [Washington to London](#) or [Beijing to Ottawa](#) would be that between sovereign nations. The operative word is ‘request’, between and among states. And such arrangements would be subject to legal challenges as have indeed been witnessed in each of the above-mentioned instances. Some such as [Soering](#) figure prominently in classrooms worldwide deliberating on International Public Law and International Human Rights Law. (The case was about a German national, Jens Soering, who was wanted for murder in the United States and who was residing in Britain at the time the case went to the European Court of Human Rights. He was eventually extradited to the United States after assurance was given that he would not face the death penalty, which is outlawed in the European Union member states.)

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Nature of Beijing-Hong Kong exchanges

A communication from Beijing to Hong Kong is and would be in the nature of an instruction, directive, advice or more likely, order, rather

than a request, given that Hong Kong is but a 'Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China'. Moreover, in sovereign states, extraditions are subject to judicial challenge, as noted above. In Hong Kong's case, the Court of Final Appeal (CFA) has been shown to be not quite that – its 'final' rulings subject to review and the review taking place in Beijing, by an entity named the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC). In reality this is shorthand for the Chinese leadership's diktat.

The best-known example of the CFA's non-finality was the [Right of Abode](#) case: After July 1997, there was a steady trickle of children born in mainland China to Hong Kong permanent residents affirming their right to live in the city as enshrined in Article 24(2) of the Basic Law which said a Chinese national born of a permanent resident had such a right. The CFA ruled in their favour. The Hong Kong government panicked believing a large number of applicants would flood in. It approached Beijing. The NPC Standing Committee ruled that applicants had to first get clearance from Chinese authorities. So much for the Basic Law and the finality of the CFA's verdicts.

Abductions and their chilling effect

Moreover, even without any extradition arrangement, mainland Chinese authorities have been able to "get their man" so to speak, such as in the instances of abductions of [booksellers](#) in 2015. These booksellers stocked tomes that contained salacious details about the lives of Chinese leaders. Rather than suing the publishers and authors, the mainland authorities seem to have taken the easiest path known to them, namely that of intimidation, harassment and worse and, in these instances, [abduction](#).

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In early August, a British consular officer of Chinese origin, [Simon Cheng Man-kit](#), was put in “administrative detention” just as he was about to pass through immigration into Hong Kong after a day’s visit to the mainland. He has since been released but not before mainland media darkly hinted that he had been detained for soliciting paid sex. Whether or not that is true, the fact that such perceived misdemeanours can be the cause of detentions in China only heightens concerns of the misuse of any extradition arrangement, given that tens of thousands of people engaged in myriad businesses in Hong Kong have over the past few decades made innumerable trips up north during which they might well have met, wined and dined and extended other favours to officials and/or Party leaders at the national, provincial and lower levels. In mainland China (as in some other countries), [economic](#) crimes have led to harsh punishments including the death penalty.

‘Riot’ label and memories of 1976 and 1989

It may be borne in mind as noted above that the demand for renouncing the word ‘riot’ to describe the ongoing protests harks back to events in Beijing and 1976 and 1989 and renewed every year on the evening of June 4 in Hong Kong.

The fifth demand, namely for elections through universal suffrage, indicate the protests have expanded into a renewed pro-democracy movement, picking up from where the 2014 Occupy/Umbrella movement left off.

As for the demand for unconditional release of those arrested and an independent inquiry into police conduct, [Andrew Li Kwok-nang](#), who was the first chief justice of the HKSAR 1997-2010, in a rare demarche, wrote in Hong Kong’s English language daily *South China Morning Post* calling for a commission of inquiry. “In the absence of scrutiny by a commission of inquiry, there is a serious danger that grievances against the police would continue to fester,” he wrote. However, Justice Li opposed any amnesty, saying that would undermine the rule of law.

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II What prospects now?

On 4 September, Carrie Lam [announced](#) she would withdraw the bill, add two members to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), conduct more community-level dialogue, and would seek advice from community leaders, professionals and academics. However, pro-democracy lawmakers and activists have said her concession was [“too little, too late”](#) and that they would insist on all five demands being met. It transpires that a number of [leading politicians](#) and “power brokers” had met Carrie Lam on 24 August and advised her to meet the protesters’ demands in part. Also, according to Reuters news agency, in the last week of August, she had told a group of [businesspeople](#), “If I have a choice, the first thing is to quite, having made a deep apology...”

Her concession fails to address the leading grievance of the protesters, namely a commission of inquiry to look into the ongoing [police violence](#). Rather there are signs of a hardening of stand, especially on the part of the city’s police, once hailed as “Asia’s Finest” but now apparently taking to massive [repression](#).

As of now, it would seem that protests and confrontations with the police will continue.

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Bogey of foreign forces’ role in protests Peace Research Initiative (IPRI)

Both the Beijing propaganda machine and some its spokesmen in Hong Kong have been repeatedly alleging that “foreign forces” were

fomenting “colour revolution” in Hong Kong, an [allegation](#) that had also been made five years ago and [repeated](#) over the past several weeks.

But what would be the motive for such interference on these foreign forces’ – presumably Western ones’ – part? [The United States’ own conservative thinktank, the Heritage Foundation, has been annually hailing Hong Kong as the ‘freest economy’.](#) Why would the United States or any other power want to disturb that?

Moreover, China’s ruling party, which continues to go by the name ‘Communist Party of China’ has been pursuing what may be described as [‘robber-baron](#) capitalism’ over the past few decades. Recall that Deng Xiaoping ushered in economic reforms in the late 1970s and, after the political hiccoughs of the late 1980s, gave a fresh boost to them in February 1992 with his famous [‘southern tour’](#) when he used the term ‘socialist market economy’, i.e. two and a half years after the crushing of Beijing Spring. The word ‘socialist’ in that term was perhaps pro forma, the operative words being market economy. In the more than two and a half decades since then, China has emerged as not only one of the largest economies but also a stout [defender](#) of globalisation which it has benefited immensely from.

A genuinely democratically elected government in Hong Kong would most likely address the inequalities that abound and this might hurt rather than help businesses from Western powers.

Assuming for the sake of argument that any foreign forces were indeed seeking to foment democratisation in Hong Kong and in the Chinese mainland, questions ought to arise as to the nature of the regimes that would ensue. In Hong Kong, quite clearly, the pro-democracy forces are most likely to be those that challenge the property [tycoons](#), monopolists, duopolists and other businesses enjoying the Beijing regime’s blessings. A genuinely democratically elected government in Hong

Kong would most likely address the inequalities that abound and this might hurt rather than help businesses from Western powers. Ditto mainland China, where too, the regime which adopted 'reform and opening' policies in 1978 and which since 2001 has been a [member](#) of the World Trade Organisation. It is more likely, should there be genuinely free elections, to be succeeded by one that is sympathetic to the interests of workers and farmers who have suffered immensely under the nominally communist regime. Such a democratic dispensation is likely to cut down on conspicuous consumption and thus needless imports and pay greater attention to the environment. Policies that are unlikely to please Western powers, especially the United States, whose current President Donald Trump has been dismissive of all talk of climate change.

Incidentally, numerous meetings and rallies over the past three months in Hong Kong have been entirely peaceful when the police kept clear of them. It is when confronted with what in most cases is unnecessary and excessive show of force that violence has resulted.

Triad gangs' and undercover police saboteurs' role

Rather than the red herring of 'colour revolution', what the media ought to be investigating now is the use of triad gangs and ['thugs'](#) to browbeat peaceful demonstrators. They were used in 2014, as noted above and there are clear signs of their use during the ongoing protests. [Undercover](#) policemen have masqueraded as protesters and made arrests (perhaps acting as agents provocateurs and saboteurs) and police have fired straight at protesters and in some instances into enclosed spaces such as a subway station full of unarmed peaceful civilians.

To be sure, there has certainly been violence on the part of the protesters when confronted with heavily armed police forces wielding massive armour. Incidentally, numerous meetings and rallies over the past three months in Hong Kong have been entirely peaceful when the police kept clear of them. It

is when confronted with what in most cases is unnecessary and excessive show of force that violence has resulted. Moreover, while outside observers might find this bewildering, many of the peaceful protesters say they '[understand](#)' the actions of the not so peaceful ones.

Professor Benny Tai Yiu-ting of the Faculty of Law, University of Hong Kong, who was one of the leaders of the 2014 Occupy Movement and recently released on bail after being sentenced to 16 months imprisonment in April on public disorder charges, has said in an interview that protesters were justified in using 'a certain degree of violence' against police because they were victims of what he described as '[systemic violence](#)'.

Moreover, questions remain over the July 1 storming of the Legislative Council building. How or why did the police withdraw from the otherwise heavily guarded premises, only for the protesters to force their way in and [vandalise](#) some of the symbols of the regime? (The protesters were careful not to damage any literature and put up a sign in the canteen saying, "We're not thieves, we won't steal".)

Protesters' innovative ways

Before the violent confrontations escalated, media attention had been on the demonstrators' adoption of peaceful ways of airing their views such as the [Lennon Wall](#), inspired by a wall in Prague decorated with art work following the singer John Lennon's assassination in 1980 and which served again as a venue of protest during the former Czecholovakia's "Velvet Revolution" of 1988. Since at least late August, protesters seem to have persuaded large numbers of residents to join in unison to shout slogans from their blocks of flats [every night at 10 pm](#). In the first week of September scores of uniformed students [demonstrated](#) around schools and [boycotted](#) classes in support of the ongoing

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protests.

Apart from the mostly [leaderless](#) and [anarchic](#) nature of the 2019 protests, what stands out is that gatherings and rallies have not been limited to the central business district and nearby areas as almost all previous ones had been. This time protests have erupted in districts far from a small stretch on the northern part of Hong Kong island around the Central Business District that traditionally witnessed them.

Protesters had briefly kept up a peaceful demonstration at the Hong Kong International Airport, welcoming visitors with banners about their demands but some of the more radical elements among them then blocked passengers from checking in, leading to mass [cancellations](#) of flights, a violent crackdown and additional security measures. Protesters' sporadic attempts to block access to the airport have continued into the second week of September and authorities have responded with mass cancellations of public transportation and show of force.

Beijing has given several high-profile indications that it has the option of using force, meaning sending in troops.

Threats of decisive moves to quell protests

Faced with mounting violence from the police, protesters have been donning protective gear such as gas masks since mid-June and there have been frequent clashes between the police and the protesters. Beijing has given several high-profile indications that it has the option of using force, meaning sending in troops. Hong Kong authorities too have dropped hints that they could [invoke](#) the emergency regulations ordinance, which could be used to order mass arrests, censorship and internet shutdowns but businesses have said such measures could [ruin](#) the economy. Chinese troop movements in Shenzhen, across the border from Hong Kong, have been prominently reported in the official media. In



late August, what was described as a routine troop [rotation](#) too received much coverage in the local and international media.

Whether authorities in Beijing and Hong Kong will go in for a major violent suppression of protests ahead of the October 1 celebration of 70 years of the PRC – which is set to be marked with a major [parade](#) – has been the subject of intense speculation.

All this is happening even as China has arguably the most authoritarian leader since Mao Zedong’s passing in 1976: the current Party General Secretary Xi Jinping who is also President of the PRC and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, scrapped [term limits](#) on the presidency and has not named a successor as was expected of him in 2017 when he began his second term.

Meanwhile, about one million Turkic peoples in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to the far west of China have been put in “re-education” facilities but which activists describe as “[concentration camps](#)”. The region had twice in early 20th century enjoyed independence and would have been known as East Turkestan had it remained so but the post-1949 PRC incorporated it as it did [Tibet](#).

Taiwan has emerged as a vibrant liberal democracy with an active legislature, independent judiciary and a free media.

III Implications for Taiwan

Deng Xiaoping’s “One country, two systems” formula was meant not only to take over Hong Kong and Macau. The much bigger catch in Beijing’s sights is Taiwan, now the 21st biggest [economy](#) in GDP terms and with a population of nearly 24 million. A little more than 12 years after Chiang Kai-shek’s death in 1975, his son and successor Chiang Ching-kuo lifted the harsh martial law under which the island had been ruled since the Kuomintang (KMT) or Nationalist forces had fled there following their defeat by the Communist Party forces in

China in 1949. After Chiang Ching-kuo's death in 1988, successor Lee Teng-hui, a native Taiwanese, began a process of democratisation culminating in his election as president in free elections in 1996. Taiwan has emerged as a vibrant liberal democracy with an active legislature, independent judiciary and a free media.

Although the KMT in initial decades dreamt of recapturing mainland China, it has since at least the early 1990s reconciled to status quo and even turned quite pro-Beijing as opposed to the rival Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), whose members are drawn more from among native Taiwanese and which is generally seen as being pro-independence. In reality both parties are for status quo because the DPP knows that Beijing would not allow Taiwan to proclaim independence and most members of the KMT too can see that given how the "One Country, Two Systems" formula is working or not in Hong Kong, they would be gaining nothing in return for unification with China. In fact, the last KMT president Ma Ying-jeou in 2014 voiced support for Hong Kong's 'Umbrella movement' and warned that it could have [implications](#) for relations across the Taiwan Straits. His successor the current President Tsai Ying-wen of the DPP has not only voiced her support for the Hong Kong protests but said in one of her [tweets](#), "As long as I'm President, 'one country, two systems' will never be an option."

The Hong Kong government appears to be bereft of ideas other than to voice support for the unleashing of force – perhaps under Beijing's orders – through its once professionalised police machinery which is getting increasingly brutalised by the day.

IV

Conclusion: A dangerous phase

It is a dangerous phase that Hong Kong continues to be in despite Carrie Lam's announcement that she was withdrawing the bill that sparked the protests. As of now, the protesters, having expanded their demands, are not in a mood to compromise. It is unclear whether the current Hong Kong leadership has

the power to do much about it. Carrie Lam avoided answering a question at a press conference on 13 August as to whether she had any autonomy. Another more pointed [question](#) was posed to her as she turned her back on the reporters: “Do you have a conscience?”

As for autonomy, a Reuters report on August 30 said she had submitted a [report](#) to Beijing earlier in the summer proposing accepting a couple of the protesters’ demands but that she had been rebuffed.

Hong Kong confronts an opaque regime in Beijing which in turn is looking back at an amorphous and loose collective of powerless, faceless and leaderless demonstrators. The Hong Kong government appears to be bereft of ideas other than to voice support for the unleashing of force – perhaps under Beijing’s orders – through its once professionalised police machinery which is getting increasingly brutalised by the day.

There have been calls from even pro-establishment figures for making some concessions and from [families](#) of police personnel for an inquiry into the protests and the police response. Acceding to these could help restore calm and enable Hong Kong and its people to get back to normality. But that would require the Beijing regime and – what is increasingly appearing to be – its puppet one in Hong Kong to eschew arrogance. Beijing is still indulging in [verbal](#) and [actual](#) sabre-rattling. If it does carry out its threat of use of force, it could demoralise the economic powerhouse and the economy could be left reeling for years. Whether wiser counsels prevail and some of the young people’s reasonable demands can be met, now that the PRC’s 70 years celebration are over, is the question.

Taiwan has emerged as a vibrant liberal democracy with an active legislature, independent judiciary and a free media.

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The Hong Kong government appears to be bereft of ideas other than to voice support for the unleashing of force – perhaps under Beijing's orders – through its once professionalised police machinery which is getting increasingly brutalised by the day.



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