

~ HONG KONG ~



Hong Kong's Long March to Democracy

by *Leo F. Goodstadt*



FOR 63 DAYS last autumn, officials in Beijing and Hong Kong tried every possible argument to convince Hong Kong's seven million citizens that democracy is best taken in tiny doses over a long period. The campaign failed. At least 100,000 people took to the streets on Dec. 4 to protest at mainland and Hong Kong authorities' refusal to commit to a timetable for the introduction of universal suffrage. Beijing showed no sign of budging, and progress toward democracy promises to be as protracted as Mao Zedong's Long March.

Despite strenuous efforts by officials and pro-government organizations to explain away the marching crowds, legislators got the message. Those elected on pro-democracy platforms in 2004 did not dare renege on their pledges. The result was the defeat in the Legislative Council of a carefully-crafted package of constitutional tinkering that would have increased the

number of people eligible to vote for the top post of chief executive to 1,600 from the current 800. It would also have added 10 new seats to Legco, while retaining the principle that half should be elected indirectly by chambers of commerce, professional bodies and similar interest groups.

Initially, the Government's campaign had seemed certain to prevail. A great deal of intellectual ingenuity had been invested in creating the constitutional package. Officials had calculated that the Democratic Party and the other advocates of universal suffrage would be tempted to put pragmatism before principle because, arguably, they would have good prospects of winning half or more of the 10 new seats in the 2008

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legislature. In addition, they would have some chance of contesting the 2007 elections for the post of chief executive because it would be harder for the authorities to fix the outcome in advance if the number of voters was doubled. Yet, the pro-democracy camp's principles prevailed, to the astonishment of most local commentators.

The government began its marketing campaign with a bold attempt to show how it shared the community's aspirations. Chief Executive Donald Tsang declared: "Personally, I support universal suffrage for Hong Kong as early as possible. Hong Kong people are educated and sophisticated enough to elect their own political leaders." So why was Hong Kong not proceeding forthwith to direct elections for Mr. Tsang's job and all the seats in the legislature? Very quickly, the debate narrowed down to the question of a timetable: when would the date with democracy materialize? This question seemed all the more pertinent once Mr. Tsang had rejected what he called a "big bang" approach to political reform on the grounds that American women waited a century for the vote.

Thus, a clear timetable for future reforms became a basic condition for the community's endorsement of the proposed modifications to the current electoral arrangements. But Mr. Tsang was in no position to satisfy this demand. As pro-government campaigners were to repeat interminably, Hong Kong would first have to convince China's leaders that its people could be trusted at the ballot box. The key step toward winning that trust, the community was warned, would be to accept the package as offered. Public opin-

ion, however, persisted in its insistence on a timetable for universal suffrage before approving the package.

The government had a carefully formulated concession in reserve, which it produced at the last minute. But the proposed compromise seemed complex, contrived and cosmetic. Most notably, the original package enabled the government to nominate its own appointees as voters, both in elections for chief executive and to the legislature. The new concession would have left the number of government-appointed voters unchanged in elections for chief executive, but reduced them to just under 13% from the original proposal of almost 20% of the voters for the five new, indirectly elected seats in the legislature. The community refused to be distracted from the timetable issue by esoteric details, and, in the end, the package itself and the campaign to sell it to the public proved too clever and too disingenuous to be convincing.

In a society as open and sophisticated as Hong Kong, cleverness is not usually a handicap. In this case, however, the community had good reason to be cynical. Mr. Tsang's senior aide, Rafael Hui—who has an outstanding reputation not just as a distinguished public servant but also as a successful business consultant—battled daily to win support for the package. A favorite refrain was that democracy would be followed by fiscal irresponsibility. "We need to seriously examine what objectives are to be achieved through the implementation of universal suffrage," Mr. Hui declared, "such as how to achieve a balanced budget and maintain a low tax regime."

But this bogeyman failed to frighten

Hong Kong's sophisticated public. It remains true that, even after the recent economic recession and considerable social hardship, no serious political group campaigns for the redistribution of wealth or anything like a welfare state. The Democratic Party itself and the other pro-democracy legislators are as committed to Hong Kong's traditions of free markets, small government and low taxes as the rest of this capitalist society. Where they differ most from Messrs. Tsang and Hui on economic policy is in their demands for reforms such as a competition law to curb cartels. The basic split in Hong Kong politics is about suffrage, not socialism.

The government, nevertheless, was determined to make class differences a major theme in its campaign. Business leaders were warned that if they did not become involved in the political struggle, their interests would be at risk. Not that they needed much persuasion to oppose universal suffrage. In private, Hong Kong's biggest businessmen attacked the government's package as far too liberal. The prospect of bowing to the public preference for prompter political reform was even more alarming, and Hopewell Holdings Chairman, Sir Gordon Wu, dismissed parades in support of universal suffrage as "mob politics."

The middle classes were also at risk, the government argued, and political reforms could make them an endangered species. "If we hastily implement universal suffrage without supporting measures," Mr. Hui warned, "the middle class will die for sure or they will all move elsewhere." He seemed not to have noticed that for 20 years, the destinations of choice for Hong Kong emi-

grants have been countries like the U.S., Canada, and Australia, which all boast of their commitment to democracy.

Officials endeavored to show the middle and professional classes how much better off they would be if the government's package were implemented. They would have a prominent part in a Commission on Strategic Development that would hammer out the blueprints for Hong Kong's political and economic future. Its 152 members, declared Professor Lau Siu-kai, head of the government's think tank, would assemble "elites from the political, economic and social sectors to sit together to explore the long-term problems of Hong Kong."

The credibility of this unelected group soon came under attack. The press revealed that the government particularly wanted its advice on such issues as "How can democratic development be taken forward without undermining economic prosperity, causing social instability, impairing the efficiency of government, and undermining trust between Hong Kong and the central government?" Officials, it seemed, viewed democracy as a virus that could prove as destructive as an outbreak of avian flu.

By themselves, these attempts to persuade the community that democracy was harmful to its well-being might not have provoked the impressive turnout on Dec. 4 in protest against the government's proposals. The former British rulers had insulted the intelligence of Hong Kong people along similar lines with apparent impunity over a much longer period.

Earlier in 2005, however, the political landscape had altered dramatically. In March, the first chief executive, Tung Chee

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Hwa, abandoned the post despite attempts by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao to shore up his authority. Mr. Tung's downfall was all but inevitable, however, after he lost the community's confidence. This was due not only to his mishandling of the prolonged economic malaise, and to mismanagement of the 2003 SARS epidemic. It was principally in Mr. Tung's dealings with Beijing that he forfeited the public's respect. In an effort to please the central government, he and his cabinet distanced themselves from pro-democracy leaders and alienated a large constituency of democratically minded citizens.

The precedent set by Mr. Tung's departure was not lost on his successor, and Mr. Tsang strove to project himself as being in touch with the pulse of the community. Before announcing the constitutional package, he made the effort to gain the personal goodwill of many pro-democracy legislators by inducing Chinese authorities to relax the ban on their entry to the mainland so that they could meet with leaders from neighboring Guangdong province. Beijing was sufficiently encouraged by this experience to make another attempt to lobby leading pro-democracy figures. Thus, five of them were invited to a high-level seminar with mainland officials just ahead of the December protest march. This encounter did little to remove the impression that Hong Kong was expected to dance to Beijing's tune, regardless of overwhelming support for universal suffrage.

The community's response was for tens

of thousands to line up patiently for hours on the following Sunday to join a parade to the city center. As usual in Hong Kong, the demonstration was well-mannered, good-humored and entirely law-abiding. It provided a forum for political protest that even the most prominent members of society could join without fear for their personal safety or their reputations.

Most conspicuous among those who took to the streets was former chief secretary, Anson Chan. She had been the No. 2 in the government of Tung Chee Hwa before resigning abruptly in 2001. Mrs. Chan, nevertheless, had remained on good terms with her former colleagues and mainland officials. After the march, however, the Chinese authorities suspected a conspiracy was at work, and a prominent mainland expert on Hong Kong affairs, Xu Chongde, attacked her for harboring personal political ambitions. Yet her presence made it difficult to brand supporters of universal suffrage as "dissidents," although the government's supporters tried hard enough to demonize them.

Mr. Tsang was not deterred by the public display of widespread opposition to his proposals. He took his cabinet and his officials of ministerial rank to the streets to sign a petition in support of his package organized by the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB) and the Federation of Trade Unions. These two organizations had grumbled openly about Mr. Tsang's appointment to replace Tung Chee Hwa be-

cause they had been unswervingly loyal to the former chief executive. The time had come, however, for loyalty to Beijing's policies to take command. The DAB now discreetly dropped its previous undertaking for universal suffrage to be introduced in 2007. At the same time, Mr. Tsang kept personally lobbying pro-democracy legislators until the final minutes when it became obvious that his package could not win the necessary two-thirds majority in Legco.

Officials warn that Hong Kong will have to pay a price for this defeat. The mainland authorities' trust in the community will be shaken, they claim, and political reform has been set back for years to come. The Hong Kong public shows little anxiety on either count, perhaps because it is ready to accept responsibility for the choices it made during the constitutional drama in December.

It must be said that the impressive turnout for the December march owed very little to the political skills of the pro-democracy political groups. They lacked coherent leadership and were frequently divided by personal rivalries. Some even seemed cowed by the status of mainland officials. Until very late in the day, observers still expected enough defections among the pro-democracy legislators to enable the government to win the votes it needed to implement the constitutional package. In the end, of course, the group felt compelled to discharge its popular mandate.

It would be a mistake to attribute this display of political virtue just to a fear of being punished by voters in the 2008 elections. It was the march on Dec. 4 that made the difference. It seemed to confirm pro-

democracy groups' mandate to reject ingenious electoral arrangements whose true purpose was to conceal how distant a prospect universal suffrage would remain.

The very orderliness and moderation of mass demonstrations in Hong Kong serve to brush aside the sound bites and spin of everyday politics, as well as the blackmail and blandishments of lobbyists. They reflect what has been termed Hong Kong's preference for "polite politics," and are persuasive evidence of this society's capacity to administer its own affairs with wisdom. A march like this reconfirms the political maturity and social discipline of an extraordinary community. Even bystanders are left with a feeling of the intrinsic decency of Hong Kong people, which makes it hard to betray them.

Mr. Tsang seemed to share this sentiment. He had put his personal prestige on the line before the march when he made a direct appeal on television for the community to trust the authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing. Although he was rebuffed, he spoke of the marchers almost as if he envied their convictions: "I have heard their voice, I have felt their feelings and I share their pursuit....Each one of them represents a passion, an ideal which underline a shared affection for Hong Kong."

Mr. Tsang has the comfort of knowing that he would have swept into office if the post of chief executive had been decided through a general election, and there are no qualified candidates who could easily replace him. Nevertheless, the failure to achieve his constitutional goals has made his life more difficult. At the end of December, he made a duty visit to the Chi-

nese capital. The media interpreted his reception by President Hu and Premier Wen as “cool.”

If the two leaders were less than cordial, they were being unfair to Mr. Tsang. Key elements in his team’s strategy for selling the constitutional package faithfully followed the tactics proposed by President Hu and Premier Wen themselves to solve Tung Chee Hwa’s problems. For example, the plea for big business to show political leadership and the appeals to the middle class were straight out of their 2003 playbook.

On Mr. Tsang’s behalf, Mr. Hui also borrowed Beijing’s tactics from 2003 to explain why the Hong Kong authorities had faced a recalcitrant legislature and a mass march. The blame, then, was attached to hostile foreign influences: Mr. Hui specifically named former Democratic Party Chairman Martin Lee Chu-ming and Catholic Bishop Joseph Zen. These allegations made little impact in Hong Kong, although Beijing appeared to take them very seriously.

In terms of Hong Kong’s governability, the failure to reform the electoral arrangements means that the business elite will continue to dominate. As a result, crucial public issues will remain mired in allegations of cronyism, highlighted by long-running controversies about how best to develop prime real-estate sites around the harbor. Polarization of political parties over constitutional reform will continue to prevent them from confronting the government over its unimpressive proposals to upgrade the educational system and to overhaul hospital services. The public,

though, seems happy enough to pay the price for its political principles.

The government’s defeat discredited two long-standing myths. The first was the belief that, unlike other postindustrial societies, political activity in Hong Kong distracts attention from urgent economic issues. On the contrary, 2005 saw Hong Kong business flourish for the first time since 1997, despite the constitutional controversies. The other myth was that the community has no interest in political affairs so long as the economy grows.

On this theory, Mr. Tsang should have been able to get his proposals accepted by acclaim because the economic landscape was exceptionally bullish. GDP growth was predicted at a respectable 4.5% or better for 2005 overall. As the constitutional stand-off gained momentum, officials were rightly hailing “spectacular performance” in the third quarter, with investment boosted by “sanguine economic prospects” and “vibrant business activity.” Mr. Tsang himself was proclaiming the dawn of “a golden era” for the economy.

However ungrateful it seemed, the public was not to be bought off by the promise of prosperity and still insisted on the right to choose its rulers or, at the very least, on a date by which that goal might be achieved. Officials have preferred not to heed this message. The authorities in both Hong Kong and Beijing are proclaiming that, for the foreseeable future, economics must be the primary concern of government—which sounds like a certain recipe for renewed constitutional confrontations. ■

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