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Analyze the Prospects for Greater Democratization in Hong Kong

by

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Topic: Analyze the prospects for greater democratization in Hong Kong

1. Introduction

Originally a British colony, Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997. On 1 July 1997, Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, ending its 156 years of colonial rule (Gargan 1997). Tung Chee-hwa, a patriotic Hong Kong businessman, became the first Chief Executive of HKSAR, a realization of the doctrine of ‘Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong’ (The Basic Law 2008). It seemed that the future of Hong Kong was bright, given that the autonomy of the SAR government was guaranteed by the Basic Law, which eliminated the fear of many that the Chinese communist system would be imposed on Hong Kong after the handover of the sovereignty. Nonetheless, on 1 July 2003, six years after the return of sovereignty, half a million Hong Kong people participated in a mass rally to protest against the government. While the majority of the protesters voiced their concern about bread-and-butter issues, a considerable number of them demanded democracy in Hong Kong. This paper investigates the prospect of democracy in Hong Kong by analyzing the factors affecting the democratic development of Hong Kong, namely the China factor, the political parties in Hong Kong, and the civil society in the local context. It is concluded that the prospect for greater democratization in Hong Kong is dim, given that the democratic progress of Hong Kong is highly dependent to that of China’s.
2. The need for democracy in Hong Kong

Before discussing the factors which affect the democratization of Hong Kong, it is essential to first understand at the first place why democracy is needed in Hong Kong. Viewed from a broader context, Tiruneh (2004) highlighted the merits of democracy in modern states that citizens enjoy political rights including ‘the right to vote, the right to run for office, and the presence of fair and free elections’ (Tiruneh 2004:470). Having a fair and free election system is of utmost importance as it implies that citizens can remove incompetent leaders through the election process. This point is also reiterated by Sing (2009) that one of the advantages of Western democracy is that:

‘because of the far greater opportunities for the public at large to use peaceful elections to replace unpopular leaders and parties under democracies than under dictatorships, most protests and demonstrations under democracies were not targeted at toppling the political system, as compared with the more violent anti-system demonstrations under dictatorships’ (Sing 2009:120).

The above quote illustrates that a democratic system can promote political stability of a state in which the election system gives a voice to citizens to express their concerns in a peaceful way so that it is not necessary for them to resort to ‘violent anti-system demonstrations’, safeguarding the stability of a society (Sing 2009:120). In addition to promoting a politically stable state, Sing (2009) also noted the positive correlation between the development of democracy and economic growth by the provision of a politically stable business environment and the replacement of incompetent leaders who obstruct the implementation of effective economic policies. In Feng’s study...
(2003; in Sing 2009:121), it is found that ‘an increase in one unit of democracy has the potential to raise the [economic] growth rate by about 5.6 percent per year’ (2003; in Sing 2009:121).

The aforementioned merits of democracy can also be translated to the local context of Hong Kong. Under the circumstance that the Chief Executive of Hong Kong is elected by an Election Committee composed of only 1,200 members, in which most of them are pro-Beijing members, having a democratic system which allows the public to vote for their ideal candidates who can best represent their interests can help ‘ease the delegitimating effect of the SAR government’ (Sing 2009:121). In economic terms, as Hong Kong, as with other major cities in the world, is venturing into a process of economic restructuring, the grievances of the public is expected to be at a high level due to the uneven distribution of wealth and the loss of jobs. If these problems are not dealt with carefully, these grievances may ‘escalate into mass mobilization’ and may turn into political crises for the SAR government (Sing 2009:124). By installing a democratic system, the legitimacy of the government and the stability of the society can be ensured, thus reducing the risk of the occurrence of political crises.

3. Reasons for the dim prospects for greater democratization in Hong Kong – inability to fulfill the three conditions for democratization

Tiruneh (2004) summarized three conditions for democratization in his article, namely economic development, political process, and external influence. Before analyzing the prospects for greater democratization in Hong Kong, it is crucial to discuss whether Hong Kong has satisfied the conditions for democratization or not.
3.1. Economic development

In terms of economic development, Hong Kong is a prosperous society, with GDP ranked at 38th out of 193 countries included in the study (World Bank data 2010). It also has a high GDP growth rate at 6.8% in 2010, which ranked 40th out of 215 countries being studied (CIA – The World Factbook). Hong Kong is considered a ‘high income’ region by the World Bank (World Bank data – Hong Kong SAR 2011). From the above information, it can be concluded that Hong Kong enjoys a high level of economic development. As regards Hong Kong’s slow democratization progress, Huntington commented that:

Since 1987, Hong Kong has developed into a “higher income economy”. The probability of a “higher income economy” being a full democracy is so high that Hong Kong has been long overdue in its transition to a full democracy in comparison with most societies around the world (Huntington 1984, 1991; in Sing 2009:126).

The above shows that Hong Kong has satisfied the first condition of democratization, which is a high level of economic development.

3.2 Political process

Political process, which is specifically referred to as ‘political leadership’ in the words of Tiruneh, is about whether the political leaders are ‘predisposed to democracy’ (Tiruneh 2004:477). In the context of Hong Kong, despite the fact that in a survey conducted by Sing in 2003, more than 70% of the respondents wanted full democracy in Hong Kong by 2008 (Sing 2005:244), and another survey conducted by him in
2005 shows that 66% of the public wanted ‘a clear timetable for implementing universal suffrage in Hong Kong’ (Sing 2009:127), the implementation of full democracy and universal suffrage is not at the top priority of the political leaders. On the contrary, it is observed that Hong Kong is undergoing a process of ‘reverse democratization’ in which ‘the central government, its agents and supporters in the HKSAR, and the HKSAR government are determined to restrict the scope of political autonomy enjoyed by citizens and groups’ (Lo 2001:13). The reason accounting for the unresponsiveness of the political leaders to democracy in Hong Kong is closely related to the degree of democratization in China, as well as its attitude towards the democratization in Hong Kong.

3.2.1 The degree of democratization in China

As a Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong is an inseparable part of China. Lam (2001) points out that ‘Beijing is the dominant influence in Hong Kong’s politics in general and in its democratic development in particular” (Lam 2001:33). Lo (2001) adds that HKSAR is a ‘dependent polity’ as its political development depends on that of China’s (Lo 2001:270). Therefore, in order to analyze the prospects for greater democratization in Hong Kong, the prospects for democratization in China has to be understood first as they are closely linked.

Scholars specializing in the political system of China generally hold a pessimistic view towards the democratization in China. Although the number of middle class in China has expanded exponentially after the implementation of the open-door policy, which is conducive to the development of democracy, Meisner argues that “China’s new capitalists are psychologically as well as economically dependent on the Communist state” and that they ‘rely on the state’s apparatus of repression for their
political and economic well-being’, so Meisner concludes that the probability that this group of middle class could bring China closer to democracy is small, as their interests are intertwined with the political interest of the Chinese Communist Party that they prefer the status quo more than seeing democratic change in China (Meisner 1996; in Lo 2001:267).

Nonetheless, Diamond (1999) holds a more optimistic view towards the democratic future of China. He believes that Hong Kong can provide a demonstration effect on China as ‘the potential diffusion effects emanating from democratization or rising democratic pressure in Hong Kong [on China] should not be underestimated’ (Diamond 1999; in Lo 2001:269), meaning that the ideas and demands for democracy in Hong Kong can influence China to go towards democracy. However, this argument is not without its flaws, in which it exaggerates the political impact of Hong Kong on China. As Hong Kong is only a small Special Administrative Region in China, its influence on the political system of the whole China would be limited (Lo 2001:270). Furthermore, given the cautious and negative attitude of China towards democracy in Hong Kong, it is unlikely that China would go towards democratic development solely because of the demonstration effect of Hong Kong. Even if China did allow Hong Kong to have any drastic democratic development, it would very likely be a centre to periphery approach, that is, a top-down decision made from China rather than a bottom-up one.

3.2.2 The attitude of China towards democratization in Hong Kong

The cautious and negative attitude of China towards democracy in Hong Kong is not without its reasons, especially regarding the implementation of Universal Suffrage in Hong Kong. An advisor to the Research Institute for Hong Kong and Macao Affairs,
the State Council’s think-tank established after the 1 July 2003 mass rally, mentioned in an interview that ‘concerning the issues of the legislation of the Basic Law Article 23 and constitutional development, [pro-democracy groups] collaborated with American and British hostile forces and the Roman Catholic Church…[attempting] to overthrow the Basic Law, while destabilizing Hong Kong and subverting China’ (Poon 2008:103). This quote illustrates the mentality of China that the democracy movement after the handover was an attempt of the Western conspiracy to destabilize Hong Kong and to subvert China, and given this mentality, it is understandable why China is reluctant to introduce Universal Suffrage in Hong Kong. If Universal Suffrage is introduced, members of the “pro-democracy” groups which are perceived to be backed up by Western forces would be able be elected as the Chief Executive, which would create the risk for Hong Kong to become an ‘independent or semi-independent polity’ (Poon 2008:103).

In the eyes of China, if democratization is allowed in Hong Kong, it will very likely lose control of Hong Kong. In an attempt to avoid Hong Kong becoming a ‘subversive base’, Hong Kong is seen undergoing the process of ‘reverse democratization’, which is observed by the attempt of the SAR government to enact Article 23, the Public Order Ordinance, and the Societies Ordinance shortly after the handover. The attempt of enacting these laws and regulations shows that the SAR government is going towards the road of ‘soft-authoritarianism’, in which the freedom of speech and demonstration is seen to be curtailed after the handover (So 2002:415).

The Basic Law stipulates that besides showing allegiance to the Hong Kong citizens, the Chief Executive has to be accountable to the Central People’s Government as well; therefore if China did not give the ‘green light’ for democratization in Hong Kong,
political leaders in Hong Kong could not afford to introduce any drastic democratic change in the Hong Kong political system, fearing that it might anger Beijing. Therefore, as regards the political process factor mentioned by Tiruneh (2004), it can be said that the political leaders in Hong Kong are not ‘predisposed to democracy’ (Tiruneh 2004:477) due to the pressure from China.

3.3 External influence

External influence to a nation, including its colonial legacy, is another factor affecting the democracy progress of a state. Hong Kong has been a British colony before its handover to China in 1997. Although the colonial government seemed to be more responsive to the demand for democracy by introducing the idea of ‘administrative absorption of politics’ resulting in a consultative government (Lau 1990:5), still, it is just for the sake of its ‘honourable retreat’ (Lung 2003). The colonial government did not make any whole-hearted attempt to educate the next generation of leaders to have the democratic vision to rule Hong Kong SAR after the handover. Thus, in the words of Tiruneh (2004), ‘the British colonial legacy per se is not sufficient to sustain democracy, and that it requires the interaction of this legacy with democratically predisposed leaders” (Tiruneh 2004:478), which is absent in the case of Hong Kong.

To sum up, out of the three conditions for democracy as mentioned by Tiruneh (2004), Hong Kong only satisfied the first one, which is a high level of economic development. At present, in the administration, Hong Kong does not have any political leaders who are ‘predisposed to democracy’ (Tiruneh 2004:477) due to the China factor, and the pragmatic nature of the 156 years of British rule could not help Hong Kong transform to a democratic state either. Therefore, it can be concluded that the prospect for greater democratization in Hong Kong is dim.
4. Reason for the dim prospects for greater democratization in Hong Kong – weak political parties

Sing (2005) identifies six variables that can account for citizens’ support for democracy in Hong Kong, in which the ‘confidence in political parties’ ranked third, showing its significance in explaining the democratic movement in Hong Kong, especially after the handover (Sing 2005:251). Given the importance of this factor, it is essential to analyze how the public view the political parties in Hong Kong.

Although Lam (2001) highlights that 62.3% of the respondents agreed that ‘all members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council should be directly elected’, and 64.6% of them believe that ‘the Chief Executive of Hong Kong should be directly elected’, which is seemingly an optimistic sign showing the determination for democracy of the Hong Kong population, the reality is not as bright. In another survey, Lam (2000; in Lam 2001:23) reveals that the majority of Hong Kong citizens are not active participants in democratic movements, in which 91.4% of them said they have ‘never attended any activities organized by pressure groups’ (Lam 2000; in Lam 2001:23). The result of this survey reveals that even though Hong Kong people have the aspiration for democracy, they are not willing to turn this aspiration into actions due to the pragmatic political culture of Hong Kong. This indifferent attitude towards politics can be seen by the party membership of the two most well-known political parties in Hong Kong:

Table 1: The party membership of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB) and the Democratic Party (DP)
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<th>Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong</th>
<th>Democratic Party</th>
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<td>20,685</td>
<td>767</td>
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Source: Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (2011) and Democratic Party (2011)

The above table shows the membership number of the two most well-known political parties in Hong Kong, the DP and the DAB. It can be seen from the low membership number that political parties lack popular support in Hong Kong. Even after the handover when the demand for democracy is high, a survey done by Lau (2001) shows that the Democratic Party, which is viewed as the major force to advocate democracy in Hong Kong, enjoy a low rate of support, with 46% of the respondents indicating that it could not represent their respective views (Lau 2001; in Cheng 2005:17). It shows that political parties lack popular support from the general public in Hong Kong due to the pragmatic political culture of Hong Kong.

The pro-democratic parties in Hong Kong have always been seen as the major force to bring Hong Kong closer towards democracy by acting as an opposition force in the government. However, internal problems exist within the pro-democracy camp which adversely affect citizen’s confidence in political parties. For instance, some legislators from the pro-democracy camp did outrageous things in the Legislative Council to attract the media’s attention, such as throwing fruits at the Chief Executive. These actions for sure can attract media’s attention, but they also made the party lose support from the public, especially the intellectuals, who believe that disagreements should be voiced in a peaceful way.
The most important reason accounting for the weak political parties in Hong Kong is the conservative outlook of the SAR government on democratization in Hong Kong. Perhaps it would be more accurate to rephrase it as the conservative outlook of the Chinese government on democratization in Hong Kong. As mentioned before, China holds a pessimistic view towards the democratization in Hong Kong, fearing that Hong Kong would be turned into a subversive base. At the same time, the Chinese official’s belief that ‘[pro-democracy groups in Hong Kong] collaborated with American and British hostile forces’ (Poon 2008:103) further reinforce China’s cautious outlook on democratization and the support of pro-democratic parties in Hong Kong. Without the support from the Mainland and the SAR government, pro-democratic parties in Hong Kong is being marginalized, leading to the shortage of political leaders who are enthusiastic to promote the democratic development of Hong Kong (Lam 2001:27).

5. **Reason for the dim prospects for greater democratization in Hong Kong – the lack of a powerful civil society**

In the words of Lam (2001), a robust civil society should have the capacity ‘to generate political alternatives and to monitor government’, meaning that civil society can help to ‘consolidate and deepen democracy’ (Lam 2001:21). However, in Hong Kong, the power of the civil society is undermined by the lack of trust between the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the political parties, as well as the ad hoc nature of their collaboration to fight for democracy (Ma 2007:218).

An appropriate example to illustrate the fragile nature between CSOs and political parties in bringing about democratization is the Civil Human Rights Front (CHRF). It
is a united front formed to oppose the enactment of Article 23 formed by 44 social activist groups, including human rights groups, political parties, professional unions, etc (Ma 2007:212). They all joined the group together because of their common interest to stop the government from legislating Article 23. The CHRF worked well until the point where some mainstream democrats in the group tried to ‘convert the anti-Article 23 movement into a full-fledged democracy movement…[using] CHRF as its vehicle’ (Ma 2007:216). This upset some of the groups in the CHRF as they believe it is inappropriate for them to be a member fighting for democracy, since their goal of stopping the enactment of Article 23 had achieved. They were unwilling to be ‘manipulated’ by the mainstream democrats to advance their own goals. The inability to transform CHRF into a new coalition fighting for democratization in Hong Kong demonstrates the lack of trust between CSOs and political parties. Moreover, the ad hoc nature of their collaboration illustrates the preference for CSOs to engage in flexible political movement which saves them from having long-term commitment. This fear of long-term commitment is a sign of suspicion and insecurity of CSOs in participating in political movements. Without the concerted effort of CSOs and political parties, it is difficult to build up a robust civil society in Hong Kong that serves to ‘generate political alternatives and to monitor government’ and to ‘consolidate and deepen democracy’ (Lam 2001:21).

6. Recommendations

In order to have a brighter prospect for greater democratization in Hong Kong, it is important that the Chief Executive of Hong Kong take a balance between his allegiance to the Chinese government and to Hong Kong citizens. The Chief Executive should act as a bridge between China and Hong Kong and give assurance that what Beijing fear will happen to Hong Kong after democratization is unrealistic.
Peaceful dialogues between the SAR government and the pro-democrats are essential so that the government knows what the masses are demanding for. Most importantly, it is crucial to empower political parties so that they can really make a difference in the society. A robust civil society should be developed so that they can cooperate with political parties to consolidate and deepen democratization in Hong Kong.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, since Hong Kong’s handover to China, there is a rising demand for democracy from the public, but what happens in the reality is that the SAR government is undergoing the trend of ‘reverse democratization’ which runs counter to what the masses are demanding for. Although Hong Kong has a high level of economic development which is conducive to the development of democracy, still, it lacks political leaders who are ‘predisposed to democracy’ (Tiruneh 2004:477). The colonial legacy of being a British colony did not help much in consolidating democratization after the handover. Moreover, the weak political parties as well as the fragile civil society in Hong Kong are challenges faced by Hong Kong to achieve greater democratization. However, the above problems cannot be solved without the approval from Beijing for introducing a higher level of democracy to Hong Kong.

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