

COMMENTARY

An alternative view of HK protests

By [George Koo](#)

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In reporting the Hong Kong protest movement, the Western media have represented hoodlums as heroes and hooliganism as a movement for democracy. The rioters beat up on innocent bystanders, attacked police with gasoline bombs and sharpened metal rods, destroyed government buildings and metro stations, and interrupted the operations of the international airport.

The Hong Kong economy has ground to a halt, yet the media praised the rioters as freedom fighters. In fact, the ringleaders of the riots demanded that the disturbances not be called riots but protests.

When the Hong Kong police pushed back on the protesters, the cameras always found them, much less so when the violence was perpetrated by the rioters. In fact, accusations of “police brutality” were frequently bandied about as the provocation for the ensuing violence.

In the months from early June to early August, the Hong Kong police had to face protesters numbering in the millions, or at least that was what the media reported. Yet the police with great restraint made just 420 arrests.

By contrast, New York’s finest arrested 700 during the one-day Occupy Wall Street protest on October 1, 2011, and the size of that crowd was in the thousands, not millions. If the mayhem that has happened in Hong Kong took place in New York, rivers of blood would have covered the pavement and city jails and hospitals would have overflowed with victims.

So, what was the original cause for mass unrest in Hong Kong?

It was precipitated by the Hong Kong government proposing an amendment to the existing Fugitive Offenders Ordinance.

The necessity of the amendment became obvious when a young man took his pregnant

girlfriend from Hong Kong to Taiwan, murdered her, and buried her dismembered remains there, and then came back knowing that he couldn’t be extradited to Taiwan to face justice.

Safe haven for fugitives

I asked a friend, a longtime resident of Hong Kong and a senior adviser to the governments in the territory before and after its handover from British to Chinese sovereignty, for an explanation of the proposed amendment. He said, “There are currently hundreds of known fugitives using Hong Kong as a safe haven because Hong Kong only has agreements with certain countries but [they] have so far not included Macau, Taiwan and mainland China.

“The proposed amendments to the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance are designed to promote criminal justice and to redress a situation whereby certain criminals can use our city as a safe haven.”

Agitators seized the opportunity to convert a government intention to close a loophole into a cause célèbre by claiming that the added statute would give Beijing arbitrary power to arrest and extradite anyone, even those merely passing through Hong Kong, into mainland China for incarceration or worse.

Hong Kong’s chief executive, Carrie Lam, assumed that correcting the omission was straightforward and failed to anticipate the storm that followed. Even as Lam officially suspended and then subsequently withdrew the bill to amend the extradition provisions, the fury of the protests continued.

After successfully forcing Lam to backpedal, the protesters pressed forward with more demands, including exoneration of those arrested, Lam’s resignation, and universal suffrage for the selection of members of the

Legislative Council and the chief executive.

Around the end of August, my friend shared this observation with me: “Whatever organization is behind supporting and promoting this unrest is apparently well funded and highly organized, with weekly schedules on what and where the disturbances will take place.”

Bankrolled by National Endowment for Democracy

As reported by various sources, a main source of funding support is the [National Endowment for Democracy](#). The NED is in turn funded by the US Congress to finance organizations around the world that advocate democracy and human rights. Some 18 organizations identified as active in China have received funds from the NED. Six of the 18 are known to operate in Hong Kong.

Lest anyone think that this is the first instance of NED involvement with Hong Kong, it's not. The NED also bankrolled the Occupy Central movement that took place in Hong Kong in 2014. Fomenting unrest in the name of struggling for democracy and freedom is consistent with the NED's mission.

This time, however, the ringleaders took the protests to a new level, not only in terms of duration and level of violence, but also in taking their case to Washington. These supposed representatives of Hong Kong asked the US Congress to ensure their freedom and democracy.

That the US had nothing to do with the handover between Britain and China seemed immaterial to these young aspiring freedom fighters. It was also equally a no-brainer for bipartisan members of Congress to propose the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019, which is likely to be enacted by the full body.

“No brainer” because it doesn't take any brains for Congress to take this action and it also entails no cost, because any reaction to such legislative action won't be consequential to their constituents. But the cost to all the people of Hong Kong, not just the handful of activists, could be major.

With the Hong Kong act in hand, the US government can then feel empowered to tell the Hong Kong government how it should govern, which the Hong Kong government would reject, and Beijing would vigorously object on the grounds that the US has no right to interfere..

Then the US would feel that it has grounds to remove the recognition of Hong Kong as a special administrative region of China and with it, the removal of China's Most Favored Nation status.

That's a move the administration of President Donald Trump would implement as part of its goal to decouple China and the US.

If that were to come to pass, the people of Hong Kong would be the losers. Without its special status, the city would be just one of many, and not even as valuable to Beijing as neighboring Shenzhen. Any economic advantages Hong Kong enjoys now would disappear.

About five years ago, I had the occasion to conduct a video interview of Joshua Wong, one of the young dissident leaders who [testified before Congress](#). My impression of Wong at the time, when he was still a high-school student, was that he was articulate and energetic and had seized the mantle of being a democracy advocate as a career.

I don't know if he went on to college; I suspect that he found being a dissident an easier living and facing the media limelight more rewarding than pursuing higher education. He showed appalling ignorance of Chinese history and culture.

A generation disconnected from China

Wong represents the generation born after the handover. This generation of young people have no sense of what British colonial rule was like but have somehow acquired a romantic idea that being a British subject was golden.

In reality, Chinese subjects under colonial rule had no say in the selection of their rulers and no right to cast ballots for any official posts. In contrast, the Basic Law negotiated between China and Britain provides for selection

of the chief executive by universal suffrage in gradual steps leading to a full vote by the populace before the end of the 50-year transition.

[Mark Pinkstone](#), an Australian journalist with 50 years of experience in Hong Kong, said, “The Basic Law, the constitutional document that supports ‘one country, two systems,’ provides freedoms of expression, speech and religion. Not one of them has been eroded since the handover in 1997. The current demonstrations are living proof of that.”

Pinkstone’s point of view, of course, contradicts the protesters’ claim that the loss of freedom is the reason for the demonstrations. Perhaps a legitimate adjudicator of the two conflicting points of view is the Human Freedom Index monitored by the Cato Institute, based in Washington.

According to the latest index, Hong Kong is ranked No 3, trailing only New Zealand and Switzerland. The index ranks 162 countries and autonomous regions based on 79 measures of personal and economic freedom. The US is ranked 17 as measured by the same indicators. It would appear that young Hongkongers don’t appreciate how well off they are.

Failings of the Hong Kong government

Of course, the Hong Kong government must bear responsibility for the buildup to this summer of discontent. After the handover, the city government did not introduce a curriculum that would teach children what it meant to be Chinese and their affiliation with the Chinese culture. Instead of identifying with and being proud of their Chinese heritage, they grew up estranged and feeling that it would have been better to be faux British.

The succession of post-handover governments also saw the need to generate affordable housing but did nothing about it – or could not because the real-estate tycoons that control the Hong Kong property market opposed it. The frustration of wages not keeping up with the rising cost of cramped housing led to a boiling point in 2014, and again five years later.

The World Economic Forum published a [survey](#) of people from 25 nations who were asked

if they thought their own government was heading in the right direction or not. The survey was conducted between October and November of 2016.

China emerged leading the pack, with 90% of its citizens responding that their government was on the right track while only 10% thought not. The US was squarely in the middle, ranked at 13, with 35% of its citizens thinking their government was going in the right direction and 65% disagreeing.

Unfortunately, Hong Kong was not separately polled, but if I had to guess, I would suspect that the sentiment of Hongkongers toward their government would be closer to the US than to China.

Sadly, if the young people of Hong Kong decide to cast their lot with the US, they will become disillusioned by a dysfunctional democracy that they’ll get to see up close. And they will miss the opportunity of hitching their future to a China going in the right direction.

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Dr George Koo recently retired from a global advisory services firm where he advised clients on their China strategies and business operations. Educated at MIT, Stevens Institute and Santa Clara University, he is the founder and former managing director of International Strategic Alliances. He is currently a board member of Freschfield's, a novel green building platform.