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Hong Kong's Chief Executive Election and Political Future

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MATHEW WONG, MAY 16 2017

On 26 March 2017, Hong Kong elected its first female Chief Executive. Carrie Lam, the former Chief Secretary, gained the majority of the votes in the Election Committee – 777 out of 1,194, beating the other two contenders including former Financial Secretary John Tsang and retired judge Woo Kwok-Hing. Throughout the election campaign, Lam was viewed as Beijing's preferred candidate by media, business leaders, and the public alike. She had shown her loyalty to Beijing given her assertive stance on several key issues, including the electoral reform in 2013 and the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Her extensive bureaucratic experience and her tenacious image, on top of her blessing from Beijing, won her the support of many pro-establishment electors. Although Tsang was a strong contender leading by some margins in most opinion polls, he only received 365 votes. Tsang's campaign team successfully boosted his popularity through the use of social media, and gained him the support of many young people. Just two days prior the election, thousands of supporters showed up in Tsang's campaign rally in Central (Cheung and Chung, 2017). However, the election of Hong Kong's chief executive is not a popularity contest. Quite the opposite. There were reports that Beijing had strong reservations towards Tsang, as he did not demonstrate a tough stance in curbing Hong Kong's separatism sentiments (Chung and Ng, 2017). Also, he was accused of being too close with the democratic camps. The support of the democrats might also be the "kiss of death" for Tsang. All these factors hampered Beijing's trust and confidence in Tsang.

Hong Kong's Chief Executive Election is deemed as a "small circle" game. Under Basic Law Article 45, the Chief Executive has to be nominated by a "broadly representative committee in accordance with democratic procedures" (PRC, 2014). The electoral college is currently composed of 1,200 people from specifically designed "sectors", which in reality is dominated by pro-Beijing politicians and business tycoons. Opposition democrats are only able to win enough seats to nominate a candidate (which they did not do this time), but never affect the outcome of a plurality election within the college.

Despite the "One Country Two Systems" arrangement guaranteeing a high degree of autonomy for Hong Kong, Beijing's influence in the region is obvious (PRC, 2014). In an interview, Wang Guangya, head of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council, stressed four criteria for Chief Executive: love China and Hong Kong; be trusted by China; capable of governing; and the level of support from the Hong Kong people. There were rumors that Liaison Office in Hong Kong (Beijing's government organ) had been rallying support for Lam during the election period. Some electors claimed that they received phone calls persuading them to vote for Lam. Even though some pro-establishment electors might have wished to vote for Tsang (who is clearly from the establishment himself), they fear there might be repercussions for not voting according to Beijing's directives.

Paradoxically, the more Beijing is trying to influence Hong Kong, the stronger the quest for universal suffrage is witnessed in recent years. Under the government of outgoing Chief Executive Leung Chun-Ying, Hong Kong is characterised by immense social discontent and political tensions. Leung's administration began with a series of controversies including potential conflict of interests and anti-Moral and National Education protests. Apart from personal and family scandals, there was a rift between Leung's administration and the pro-democratic camps. His divisive rule also did not gain him many allies even from the pro-Beijing camp. His decision to not seek for re-election might be forced by Beijing's concern that he was too unpopular; although this possible intervention was met with

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enthusiasm among many Hong Kong people.

The current election system exclusive to political elites is also the consequence of a failed political reform and the Umbrella Movement. In August 2014, the National People's Congress, China's highest decision-making body, ruled that universal suffrage could be implemented in Hong Kong, but the Election Committee would only nominate 2-3 candidates for ordinary voters to choose from (Xinhua, 2014). Based on this proposal, it is expected that the oppositions would not even be able to nominate a candidate, unlike in previous elections, so the contest would only be among different pro-Beijing figures. The Umbrella Movement was the popular mobilization against this proposal. The reform was eventually vetoed by pro-democracy legislators as the proposal does not meet the standards of a "true" democracy.

The Umbrella Movement was a turning point in Hong Kong politics. It was an act of civil disobedience with protesters occupying the streets for 79 days between September and December in 2014. As many as 100,000 protesters, mainly students and young adults, occupied major roads and paralyzed some of the key areas in Hong Kong. Ultimately, people protested for a "true universal suffrage" – not only the right to vote for the Chief Executive, but also the right to nominate candidates (Chan, 2014). In the early stages of the movement, the police in riot gear used tear gas and pepper spray to disperse the protesters. This was widely unexpected as these tools were seldom deployed in Hong Kong. Remarkably, citizens turned up in numbers after the tear gas was used in support of the protesters, further bolstering the movement. The umbrella became the symbol of how the protesters defended against the police, and thus the name of the movement.

However, the widespread sympathy was not shared by every Hong Konger. Many people of the older generation criticised the protests. Instead of political freedom, they were more concerned about economic stability and that the protests would disrupt economic interests, damaging the reputation of this world-class city. The movement was also symbolic in the sense that it polarized the society between the supporters and oppositions to the movement (the so-called yellow ribbons and blue ribbons, respectively). The failure of the movement to bring about any concrete political changes also created disillusionment among many Hong Kong people, who started to think about the future of Hong Kong. Viewed this way, the rise of localism, or even separatism, might be a more profound legacy left by the Umbrella Movement.

The 2016 Legislative Council Election marked the rise of localist and self-determinist politicians. Many newly-established parties, such as Demosistō, Democracy Groundwork, Youngspiration, successfully won seats at the expense of traditional politicians, reflecting a shift in the public mood in the post-Umbrella era. Although supporters of localism and separatism are definitely in a minority, they are backed by a significant number of voters, winning about 15% of the directly elected seats.

Unlike traditional democrats who ultimately recognizes Beijing's sovereignty, the localists present a very real threat to Beijing. As a result, Beijing has been looking for opportunities to marginalize them. Before the 2016 legislative elections, all candidates were asked to sign a declaration form pledging support for the constitutional document and China's sovereignty. This turned out to be a tool for arbitrary disqualification: some oppositions were allowed to run without signing the form, whereas some high-profile localists were barred from running despite having signed the declaration (*The Economist*, 2016). Things are no easier for the localists who managed to win the election, as they were disqualified for failing to take the oath properly. Follow-up legal actions are still on-going for the localists and leaders of the Umbrella Movement.

As the next leader, Lam herself recognises that the top priority is to reunify a divided and polarized city. There is a long list of issues to be solved, ranging from Hong Kong-China relations to political development, freedom, and welfare. But what matters most is the understanding of the people's source of dissatisfaction. Policymakers should not dismiss those who oppose their rule as enemies, but people to be won over. Admittedly, two of the major issues facing Hong Kong, namely housing problems and full democracy, cannot be resolved overnight. But with the lack of a democratic government, a leader sympathising with the people and representing their interest might be the best Hong Kong can currently hope for.

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