

The Hong Kong Umbrella Movement: A Students' or a People's Movement?

Written by Che-po Chan

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CHE-PO CHAN, NOV 11 2014

To Western media, the ongoing large-scale protest movement in Hong Kong (HK) is known as the “Umbrella Revolution”, led primarily by university and senior high school students. The umbrella, in this civil resistance movement, is construed as a symbol after having been astutely used for blocking the police’s pepper spray and tear gas. The movement leaders deny the movement as a “revolution” and simply call it a “movement”. They claim that they have no intention to overthrow the government or anything close to it; as, obviously, they do not want to irritate the Chinese authorities with the term “revolution”. However, Chinese leaders in various occasions have already linked the HK protests to a “colour revolution”. Students in this movement have asked for more democratic elements to be infused into future HK elections in order to make those genuine democratic elections.

The Umbrella Movement is not a movement with only student participants. It is true that the movement has more student or youth participants than adults (say, over 40 years old). Main leaders, in their early twenties, are from the joint-universities student organization, the HK Federation of Students, accompanied by teenage students from Scholarism, a joint-high-schools student organization established in 2012. According to a recent HK-wide survey, 60% of the 15- to 24-year-old respondents support the Umbrella Movement, in contrast to less than 30% of those above 40 years old. The other major group of participants is from the pro-democracy adult population who claim they have been fighting for HK democracy since the 1980s. Three founding leaders of this group, two university professors and one reverend by profession, have planned the Occupy Central movement a year ago before the outbreak of the current protests, with the hope of getting more middle-aged participants to join in. Road blockage and occupation in Central, the major business and financial area in HK, would simply cause great economic and transportation disruptions.

The Occupy Central movement also aims at fighting for a “genuine universal suffrage” for the 2017 HK Chief Executive election and strategically, through the movement, they want to raise political consciousness of the HK people. Three stages were planned beforehand and conducted since 2013. First, a campaign of deliberation among the entire population for universal suffrage was organized during the period when Hong Kong government was consulting HK citizens on proposed electoral reforms. Sessions of deliberation were held between June 2013 and May 2014 by the Occupy Central organizers. The second stage was a simulated public referendum held in June 2014 with close to 800,000 HK people voting on three different reform proposals. The result of the simulated referendum was clear that people want to participate directly as early as nomination of the Chief Executive, rather than until the final direct election after constraints are imposed on their choices, with candidates already been screened by the nominating committee. According to the plan, if the HK government would not accept the principle of “civil nomination” at the nominating phase, a civil disobedience (Occupy Central) movement would be held.

Occupy Central was widely expected to be held on 1 October. To support their adult counterparts and to start the movement, a week before 1 October, the HK Federation of Students and Scholarism organized a one-week class boycott and demonstration at the Government Headquarter near Admiralty, adjacent to Central. On 26 September, the peaceful sit-in turned into vehement climbing over the fences and breaking into the fortified area in a swift movement. Such developments propelled Occupy Central organizers to accelerate the date of commencement of their movement to capitalize on the presence of the mass. Since then, students replaced adults and became

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prominent characters in the movement.

HK changed its sovereignty from UK to China in 1997 and, since then, HK has become the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China. Any changes in HK political structure, including the current controversial 2017 Chief Executive proposed electoral reform, need to follow the route stated in the HK Basic Law and the decisions made by the sovereign state's Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC). The current controversy commenced from 31 August 2014, when the NPCSC handed down decisions to restrict the formation of the nominating committee and nominating procedures of the 2017 Chief Executive election. These restrictions in practice render the nominated candidates for the later general election to be screened first by the sovereign state. The HKSAR government quickly responded that the 2017 Chief Executive proposed electoral reform should go by the book by adhering to the Basic Law and the NPCSC decisions.

To ensure the proposed electoral reforms were discussed within safe limits and hoping that the proposed package could eventually be accepted and passed by two thirds of the HK Legislative Council members, as required by the Basic Law, both the HKSAR government and the Chinese government have all along, before the Umbrella Movement, paid much attention to pan-democratic political parties and adult supporters of the Occupy Central movement, but neglected opposition and discontent from the student population.

In the colonial years, students and youths in HK had been characterized as a generation of political indifference. They were actually not alone but accompanied by other age cohorts in their political indifferent orientation. The colonial HK was thus described as a politically apathetic society. That is, people only cared for their livelihoods, and their common dream was to achieve economic success. The driving spirit which has long made HK people proud of themselves is built on hardship endurance, self-reliance, and an attitude of being hard working. The HK tycoon Li Ka-shing, for instance, has long been youths' admired and emulated figure. It is said that the Umbrella Movement is a turnaround and testifies an awakening of HK youths' social and political consciousness.

But in fact, students' and youths' active participation in social and political movements could be traced back to earlier years since the new millennium. Many issues raised in these movements are related to young people's perceptions of China, their new sovereign state, HK's self-identity, and the new relationship between HK and China. One large-scale social movement was the 2012 anti-national education movement. Beijing viewed that movement as part of a refusal to identify China as the motherland. Scholarism, under the leadership of the then 16-year-old high school student Joshua Wong, emerged as a chief organizer of the 2012 movement and afterwards becoming prominent in subsequent social and political movements.

Examined against the background of defiance to respective authorities in the greater China region, some observers, particularly Western ones, like to associate the HK Umbrella Movement with the earlier 2014 Taiwan Sunflower Movement and the 1989 Tiananmen Democracy Movement. The major participants in these three movements are predominantly university students. The Sunflower Movement happened just months before the Umbrella Movement. Images of Taiwan students using shock tactics to break into the legislature main building and then occupying the legislative floor have been vivid in HK people's mind. HK students in the Umbrella Movement used the same strategies in their own operations.

In terms of spirit and value, the Umbrella Movement has definitely been inspired by the 1989 Chinese democracy movement. As an annual tradition in HK since 1989, large candlelight vigils and other activities have been held to commemorate the 1989 tragedy as a gesture to denounce the suppression imposed by the Chinese Communist Party. The candlelight vigils were attended by tens of thousands of citizens and, in recent years, youngsters and students attending the vigils have significantly grown in numbers. The HK Federation of Students and Scholarism have been deliberately included as organizers. Their role, obviously, is mainly to mobilize participation of the high school and university students and to advance the cause for Chinese democracy. It is said that HK youngsters will well pass the legacy to future generations until Chinese government responds positively to the "rehabilitation" demands.

In the eyes of the Chinese government, the Umbrella Movement, much as the 1989 movement, is a "revolution"

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supported by foreign powers. Hence, it deserves to be seen as a major reason for a heavy crackdown. The Chinese government officials and official media, on several occasions, openly said that an important source of instigation behind the HK Umbrella Movement is the Western influence. A number of prominent local supporters of the Movement were accused for accepting financial donations from Western sources. The US government and its steered NGO, National Endowment for Democracy, were blamed as foreign financial and operational supporters behind the scene. CY Leung, the HK Chief Executive had openly linked the Umbrella Movement to foreign intervention.

Until now, the Umbrella Movement has continued for more than a month and more physical conflicts have occurred between pro- and anti-movement participants in the occupied areas. Discontent has also risen among certain sectors of the general public, as retail businesses in the occupied areas drop in sales and vehicles cannot pass through the areas. The adult leaders of the Occupy Central Movement have announced that their leadership of administration of the occupied areas would be passed on to the student leaders and they would no longer engage full-time in the movement. One leader even said that "today is the Umbrella Movement and not the Occupy Central movement anymore". Many HK scholars, social leaders, and politicians who are sympathetic to the movement began to worry about the radical direction of the movement. They urged students to withdraw from the occupied areas for the sake of their own safety and to now end the occupation at a timely point. One convincing argument from these sympathizers is that withdrawal at this point could gain a greater acknowledgement from the HK general public and avoid a massive physical suppression from the authority in view of how the 1989 movement ended.

The HKSAR government made a major mistake when it ordered police to use tear gas on August 28th to disperse the students from Admiralty, the only occupied zone then. The government's violent action aroused public anger and motivated more hesitant supporters to join the movement which enlarged the movement's scale by taking on more occupied zones. Learning from the lesson, the HKSAR government at this moment is waiting for the turnaround of the public opinion. A recent HK-wide signature movement from the anti-Occupy Central camp has gathered over 1.8 million citizen signatures asking students and protesters to withdraw from the occupied zones. This, together with high court injunctions, has provided the HKSAR government legitimacy to use physical force again to clear the areas. Nevertheless, it would not be HKSAR government's sole decision in the next crackdown; Beijing is likely to be involved in helping to determine when and how to handle the next crackdown. At the moment, Beijing is busy with holding the forthcoming 2014 APEC Summit. Presidents, prime ministers and other major political leaders from 21 countries are going to Beijing in the first half of November. Beijing, for sure, would not order a crackdown in front of world leaders. So, the Umbrella Movement should be safe for now until the end of APEC summit. When the crackdown comes, Beijing and the HKSAR government would be determined to end the occupation once for all.

In sum, the Umbrella Movement could be seen as a people's movement in terms of its extent of participation. Yet, adult leaders of the Occupy Central Movement have surprisingly played a minor role; they mainly offered consultation to the student leaders and helped with management affairs. The students have played the major role and have veered the course of the movement all along. They negotiated with officials of the HKSAR government; they proposed terms of negotiation, and they asked for a direct dialogue with Beijing. It is from this perspective that we can define the Umbrella Movement essentially as a student movement.

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