

An Undemocratic Hong Kong?

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CHARLOTTE BRANDON, MAY 25 2011

What constitutes a representative democracy? According to Freedom House, 117 of the world's 191 countries are considered democratic and at large, the majority of countries not recognized as democratic, regard themselves a democracy. Therefore, from this alone, democracy is a difficult and complex to define. However, a simple yet broad term is often perceived by this definition: "Democratic governments are those in which fundamental human rights of individual citizens are protected by the collective and in which the views of the population-at-large, not just a ruling elite, are reflected in the actions of government" (ICPD.org). Interestingly, Hong Kong already has institutions that underlie democracy but it is still yet to be legitimate. Axworthy writes that Hong Kong became a "substate consisting of the rights and institutions that underlie democracy – freedom of speech, of association, of religion, of assembly; a vibrant free press, a tolerance of political criticism and debate about government and other issues....was gradually laid down and over time grew deeply ingrained. Hong Kong thus developed what we might call a strong "culture of liberty" (2006, 5). This poses the key question; if Hong Kong has institutions that do to some extent, simulate a democracy, what has prevented full transition for Hong Kong to become a legitimate democracy? However, as will be demonstrated, a representative democracy reflects the electorate process and from the 2008 elections in Hong Kong, this was far from democratic, linking in with the reasons outlining why the transition has indeed been hindered. This essay will explain how the role of China and Britain has influenced Hong Kong and in fact, delayed the process of constitutional reform greatly.

Using examples from scholars, it has come to my attention that Hong Kong's development to become a more representative democracy is divided into the early stages of pre and post handover which highlight the different stages of the appeal of a democracy for the Hong Kong people. Axworthy again, argues that in any legitimate democratic state, there consists of authority, accountability, and answerability. These three identities of a democracy will provide an understanding for Hong Kong's undemocratic government. It is perceived that political authority exists only because we consent to obey it. According to Pierre Trudeau "human societies, then, differ from bee hives in that men are always free to decide what forms of authority they will adopt and who will experience it. And it is really men who have the responsibility of taking these decisions...". (Axworthy, 2006, 12) Therefore, the slow process to democracy is due to a lack of will from the people. Surely, if they wanted to be represented and play a part in politics as opposed to just the elites, then, they as a people, have the power to do so. However, events of demonstrating and rioting show disagreement to this statement, most notable in the protests after the implementation of Article 23. But to begin with, other factors have prevented Hong Kong's transition to a more representative democracy.

Firstly, Hong Kong has become a huge socio- economic success. Statistically observing, Hong Kong is the 8th largest trading economy in the world, leading financial centre in the world in terms of external banking transactions and stock market capitalism, and Per Capita GDP of some \$22,000 in 1995 exceeding that of Britain and Australia (Hook, 1997, 18)). What these facts provide is evidence for Hong Kong's economic success both when it was still occupied by the British and then the Chinese. It needs to be addressed that Hong Kong has obtained this success without being a representative democratic state, therefore highlighting that there is not a link between democracy and wealth. Thus, as I will explain, Hong Kong's economic success alone has provided prime reasons why Hong Kong has partly voluntarily decided not to adopt full democracy in the political system – therefore, suggesting that as it is already economically secure, there is no need for democracy! Economic stability links in with the people of Hong Kong. Hong Kong is full of a diverse amount of people from the elite bankers etc to the working classes, but throughout time, Hong Kong has been recognised for the flourishing amount of immigrants entering the country.

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“Most immigrants to Hong Kong subscribed to colonial rule voluntarily, primarily for economic and political reasons” (Bray, 1993, 545). Here it can be suggested that from the start, before handover, the people immigrating to Hong Kong found stability in the state, rather than oppression in a colonized state. Often it is perceived that non-democratic countries are oppressive and unsuccessful, however, as it has already been outlined, Hong Kong has been a chief exception. Interestingly, after many people did leave Hong Kong before the British returned her to China, in fear how Hong Kong would react economically, while 10% left, about one fifth of those have returned since (Ching:1997, 56). Moreover, a survey suggested that 80% of Hong Kong people were confident in the future. (Ching: 1997, 56). Likewise, at the time just before handover, people were willing to give up their British passports in order to become more involved in Hong Kong politics with China. Interestingly, these survey statistics were released in 1997 which do suggest that the peoples optimism was not heading towards democracy (after all, under Chinese control, this would be doubtful), but purely based on Hong Kong’s economic stability. So long as the state maintained its credibility and success under China as it did under Britain, the people would react well. So, basically, in this category, at the time of the handover, there was not an overwhelming need for a representative democracy, therefore, why would it be necessary at all to adopt it?

A further factor is the fact that Britain did not implement democracy in Hong Kong. The British foreign office and the local economic elite were content to portray Hong Kong as an “economic oasis, uninterested in politics, so that when Mrs Thatcher’s government negotiated the return of Hong Kong back to China, one sovereign power simply replaced another”. “Britain bequeathed liberty but it did not bequeath democracy”. (Axworthy: 2006, 5). Again, this links back to the economic success of Hong Kong and the fact that even under colonial rule, Hong Kong was a major success and so implementing democracy was not a vital tool to maintain stability. The degree of social and economic success implies that British policies for Hong Kong were, at the very least, not significantly incorrect but very balanced. Furthermore, the debate on why Britain did not implement democracy occur which summarise the hindering process Hong Kong faced towards what could have been an easy transition. For Britain, pre 1997, to have introduced constitutional change at a time of hype could have been seen as a signal that Britain was preparing to exit. There was a preoccupation with the need to avoid provoking China for Britain’s and Hong Kong’s sake. As Hook observed, “Britain could hardly afford lightly to have risked benefits that would accrue from a share of the China market”. Therefore again, despite the brewing pressures from the people, there was a delicacy about constitutional reform and therefore, Britain could not under any circumstances, risk a potential dispute, supporting the reasons why Hong Kong’s process was delayed or indeed prevented at this time.

The influence of China has had the most significant influence over Hong Kong and the reasons behind its slow transition to becoming a more representative democracy. In my opinion, the role of China and its influence on the elections, the people, and the economy was certainly the most important factor. In my opinion, China’s perceptions of Hong Kong before the handover ultimately led to the strategies it used to prevent Hong Kong from developing into a representative democracy. If we look at the basic reasons, Hong Kong – a thriving, rich state under British rule was handed back to China which was judged as “an underdeveloped Communist country incorporate a world class city”. (Salaff, 2000). And this was, indeed the actual case. China was much less developed at the time of the handover and thus for Hong Kong to undergo transitions towards becoming more democratic would be unrealistic. Despite China’s less economically developed status in comparison to Britain or Hong Kong at the time of handover, China still obtained a substantial influence over Hong Kong – business links were intertwined, and food and water supplies were dependent on China mostly. Bray predicted, amongst many others in the early 1990s that “...China will do as it pleases with Hong Kong after 1997, if not before, and that any attempts to influence the Chinese government, or to erect barriers against it by building democratic structures, are futile”.(1993, 548). Therefore, even mere observations before 1997 predicted that it was in China’s interest for Hong Kong not to overpower her by becoming a democratic structure.

This links in with the other factor that after the handover Hong Kong’s electorate and legitimate power was limited thus preventing the transition to become a more representative democracy. As it was noted before about how China’s perceptions of Hong Kong before the handover reflected their actions, in 1995, China sought the denial of democratic based parties and so the UDHK and the Democratic Party became the enemy. This was the prime time when we see Hong Kong eager to transform to a “one person, one vote” system due to the rise and popularity of democratic parties but this was prevented to an extent because this was also a time of great fear for China, a time

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where Chinese authorities were most sensitive about political reform. Part of this fear was due to the anticipation that if there was political reformation, it would have a “neighbouring” effect on China. Why China would be fearful lies on the assumption that some leading “democrats” are disloyal to China and want to topple Communist rule on the mainland and secondly, “popular politicians might resort to popularity measures for example, bringing in the minimum wage”. (Economist, 2007). “The world’s biggest Communist party is afraid of democracy in Hong Kong lest it introduce an element of socialism there; and, perhaps, lest it inspire China politically, as it has economically”. This is certainly still true in present day Hong Kong and thus solutions to the problems are urgent. Sing exclaims that “Hong Kong’s political development has lagged in the face of well-documented P.R.C efforts to impede progress toward direct elections, universal suffrage, and other democratising reforms that Beijing fears might loosen its control” (2009, 98).

As it has already been demonstrated, the main reason for the delaying process towards a representative democracy in Hong Kong is due to China’s unwilling attitude to accept it, in fear of neighbouring effect in China and the Mainland. Will Hong Kong ever become a full representative democracy? I believe and am positive that indeed it will be very soon. The pressures from the people have resulted in phenomenon results in a very short amount of time. I believe however, that for democracy to be achieved there needs to be a strong communication between China and Hong Kong as opposed to a separation of powers. What we are seeing at the moment in modern day Hong Kong is a slight tension between the two countries. The example of protests shows that the people appear to vision China as the enemy which will make China even more resistant rather than supportive. I strongly believe that China needs to be comforted and at the same time, the people of Hong Kong need to be reassured that democracy is still attainable.

A further factor is due to the fact that there are a variety of different people in Hong Kong voicing different opinions. Most evident during the time of handover, different groups of people were pro democracy, others pro China, linking in with the economic stability argument. This poses the key question: in terms of democracy, how far did the people of Hong Kong strive for democracy or did they have more emphasis on maintaining economic balance and security? Some have argued that Hong Kong’s economic stability is grounded in authoritarian political systems and that an “Asian value system that subordinates individuals to the group interest provides the political stability needed for development” (Deyo 1990). Others dispute this, arguing that a modern economy demands democratic institutions and need popular social movements (Scott, 1989). Therefore, in order to understand the process of democratisation in Hong Kong, whether the people of Hong Kong preferred economic stability under “Asian” values rather than western style democracy will give a thorough insight in comprehending Hong Kong’s transition to a more representative democracy – economy versus polity. During 1995 – 1997 research by Salaff identified four broad types of identification within Hong Kong: “Loyalists”, “Hong Kong Locals”, the “Weavers” and China’s “class enemies” (2000, 251). Weavers and class enemies fear discontinuity and had been politically disenfranchised in China, whereas, Loyalists and locals stress their Chinese roots. This highlights there is mass difference of opinion in terms of Hong Kong’s future, the idea of a representative democracy would have to wait.

This leads on to my next point. The Chinese idea of “one country, two systems” was clearly designed to reassure the people of Hong Kong that after handover, things would stay the same and not deteriorate. Furthermore, in 2007 China’s President, Hu Jintao stressed that in the “one country, two systems” doctrine, “one country” comes first (Sing, 2009, 99). Despite it being years after the handover, China evidently still wants to encourage patriotism and oppose an independent Hong Kong. However, as it has been demonstrated, this has failed. Firstly, “one country” is an illusion. There will always be a strong sense for the need and desire to protect ones national identity. People of Hong Kong cannot be expected to see themselves at one with China. History has proved that in all countries and human beings, we strive for national identity. To have a different system from another country, automatically detaches one from identifying with the opposing system. The point trying to be made here is that this idea has been contradicted in so many ways but it was the belief in this idea that has contributed the prevention of Hong Kong’s ability to become a representative democracy. Moreover, the system of “one country, two systems” has resulted in Hong Kong’s elections and political parties to be carefully monitored by the Chinese authorities and government. The PRC argue that only “Patriots” can be allowed to govern Hong Kong and how economically important the undemocratic functional constituencies are (Sing, 2009, 98). Therefore, this demonstrates that it is down to this system that has prevented a representative democracy because it does not juxtapose well with the Chinese political beliefs and system.

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It is evident that all of the above factors have certainly slowed the process of Hong Kong becoming a more representative democracy. There were the issues before handover of how China wanted to prevent this and how the people of Hong Kong just felt the need to be stable for that time. But, for the past decade, it is apparent that Hong Kong is more active than ever before, making the transition to a representative democracy more of a reality and swiftly approaching. I believe that it is now the perfect timing for Hong Kong to make that full transition, arguing then, that it is making fast progress, disagreeing with some scholars such as Sing who have argued that democracy is doubtful, especially by 2020. My reasons for this come from the demonstrations that the people of Hong Kong have been actively involved in. The 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstration is a key incident that brought the process of democratization into reality. Deng Xiaoping famously announced "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong". Of course, this is yet to become reality but the force of "people power" is greater than ever. Interestingly, In 2004, President Hu voiced publicly that democracy is a "blind alley" (Axworthy:2006, 12). But, how could this be so? We have seen continuous riots and demonstrations for the past decade in Hong Kong which have correlated with the strengths and power of the democratic political parties such as the League of Social Democrats – winning 10 per cent of the vote in 2008, and the rise of the Civic Party. Surveys consistently show majority support for direct elections and in 2004 LegCo election democratic reformers received 61% of the vote. After all, Demonstrations of thousands of Hong Kong citizens resulted in the resignation of C.H. Tung. This supports the notion of people power. Previously, the power of the people was weak, partly because a representative democracy was not desired, but it is clear that it is now more desired than ever before in Hong Kong, resulting in a swift move towards constitutional reform. Axworthy sums this up by voicing that "Hong Kong is in fact, in a democratic boil" (2006, 12).

In conclusion, it is clear that it was China's feat that resulted in strategies to prevent Hong Kong from transforming into a representative democracy. This has been the most important factor in my opinion. "...China, then, is the brooding presence overseeing Hong Kong's political development" (Axworthy, 2006, 13). All of China's present day policies ultimately affect Hong Kong to a fair extent. Furthermore, the influence of Britain pre 1997 and Hong Kong's economic influence had significant influences, explaining the slow, delayed transition that otherwise. All of these factors played a vital role, ultimately preventing and delaying the transition. However, instead of looking at why Hong Kong is still yet to make the transition to a more representative democracy, we should focus on how a representative democracy can be achieved. As, I have already outlined, democracy is in visual focus, but who is responsible for allowing this transition? As demonstrated, the voice of the people correlates with the strengthening of political parties therefore a closer to step to constitutional reform, however, it is also down to China to allow this process to happen. The recent controversies in China as protests were being held against the regime, reported 28th February 2011 (Economist, The Independent, CNN) show that the power of the people is growing even in China and the one cannot oppose to the desires of the people for long, emphasising the ever growing process towards a representative democracy in Hong Kong and maybe eventually China.

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Date written: March 2011