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Guest comment: Brian Leung Kai-Ping

Hong Kong can be a gateway to liberal values for China

China should accept the territory’s openness in the political sphere, not just the financial sector, says Brian Leung Kai-Ping, a protester





Sep 10th 2019



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The moment felt profound, when I and thousands of other protesters smashed our way into Hong Kong’s Legislative Council on July 1st. As I entered the legislative chamber, what struck me was the chasm between the ideals of the supposed democratic institution and the bitter realities that Hong Kong has endured over two decades. I was staring at the root cause of the problem in that very hall.

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The reason is because almost 60% of the public favour the pro-democracy camp but this fails to produce proportional representation in the legislature, since nearly half of the seats are not popularly elected. A dozen politicians, especially aspiring ones from a young generation, have either been disqualified after the election or barred from standing for office. This poisons politics: it denies the public their political choice and deprives society a mechanism for change.

This is why the current protest movement has little sign of ending: it is a symptom of deeper structural problems. What the world is witnessing is not an abrupt deterioration of our politics and institutions, but a gradual, though no less agonising, accumulation of frustration and anger towards the political system

itself.

If the gulf between democratic ideals and authoritarian political institutions is not overcome, the chasm between Hong Kong and China will only grow larger. The promise of “one country, two systems” feels like a fraud to many Hong Kongers.

The future of Hong Kong depends on whether China can master the art of governing a free society. Put another way, the question is whether China’s Communist rulers can allow part of their territory to govern itself democratically. They should have more trust in the people of Hong Kong. Over the past several months the Hong Kong public has demonstrated that civil societies have an extraordinary ability to self-organise and innovate. In particular, ordinary people have taken full advantage of digital technologies to coordinate their actions and deliberate what to do next.

Digitally-mobilised and organised citizens have voted to occupy parts of the city, then decided when to leave. They have held democratic assemblies that brought together distinct professional groups (including the hitherto non-political civil service), managed general strikes and airport protests, and crafted crowd-funded international advertising campaigns. There has been a flourishing of cultural output in the form of art, music and videos. More importantly, protesters are able to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular strategy and to self-correct when they agree that their actions have been counterproductive—and yes, to exercise restraint.

These are exactly the characteristics that democracy requires as an open-ended process of self-governance. No individual or political party is so omnipotent and all-knowing that they negate the need for human agency, ingenuity and constant trial-and-error. Through the shared experience of a struggle for freedom and democracy, Hong Kongers have formed a robust political community that transcends generations.

There is no denying that income inequality and unaffordable housing are major concerns for many young people, as the pro-establishment camp likes to argue. But the people of Hong Kong are not simply protesting because of economic hardship; in fact, some of them protest despite it, taking risks to demonstrate despite precarious employment situations or limited means. Many people at the demonstrations are well-educated and materially well-off. What unites them is the common ideal of a democratic and free Hong Kong.

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For decades, China has enjoyed the benefits of a liberal international order in Hong Kong and beyond, particularly through several of the liberal institutions that the city provides, from a convertible currency and open trading system to the rule of law. But China's central government remains fundamentally hostile to the liberal values when those touch on the territory's political system.

The governments of Hong Kong and China misjudged how the world would react to their suppression of Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms. Their mistake was to assume that global views of the city are driven only by economic interests, rather than political ideals. At a time when many democracies feel caught between the rising influence of autocrats and demagogues on one side, and the public's loss of faith in democratic ideals on the other, Hong Kong's struggle is reigniting faith and interest in citizen politics. A robust, active, civil society is an indispensable safeguard for a healthy democracy.

What can happen to ease the tensions and stop the unrest in the streets? Protesters harbour no illusions that any single system, democratic or otherwise, is a panacea. All they demand is an institutional environment that respects their dignity as individuals and their freedoms of thought, action and association. China resists this. But it has much to gain by accepting a degree of political liberalism for Hong Kong, as it embraced the economic variety.

It was that sense of idealism for an open society that compelled me to take off my gasmask and expose my face when I was in the legislative chamber on July 1st. Yes, I am now identified. (I am also now outside the territory and uncertain if I can safely return.) But all Hong Kongers showed courage in protesting. It is time for China's leaders to match that bravery with courage of their own to accept the people's demands.

Institutions are hollow shells if citizens are unwilling to defend the values and norms that keep them standing in a crisis. The people of Hong Kong are fighting to defend individual dignity. Hong Kong can remain China's gateway to the world and its liberal international order. Let that order involve not only rules and norms of trade and finance, but deeper liberal values, traditions and institutions, so that they may take root in the Chinese cultural soil and blossom into a society that works for everyone.

Brian Leung Kai-Ping is a prominent protester in Hong Kong's pro-democracy demonstrations. He is a doctoral student in political science at the University of

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