

A requiem for the city of Hong Kong

Richard C. Bush Monday, November 18, 2019

We are likely witnessing the end of Hong Kong as we know it. What began as a refugee society after the end of World War II and the civil war victory of the Chinese Communist Party, transformed itself into an international financial center and a prosperous, middle-class metropolis by the 1990s. Hong Kong was also a test of the proposition that a capitalist society with basic political freedoms and the rule of law could coexist with the Leninist regime that became the city's sovereign in 1997. The term for this arrangement was "one country, two systems." Proving that proposition correct would require good sense and restraint on all sides. In the end, the possibility of coexistence vanished in clouds of tear gas and flames from petrol bombs.

There is the belief that the cause of the current crisis is social and economic inequality, and that if only that problem could be solved the crowds on the street would abandon their protests and life would return to normal. There is truth in that belief. Hong Kong has one of the highest concentrations of wealth in the world. Young people cannot get good jobs or afford an apartment. As a result, they are blocked from getting married and having families.

But economic and social inequality has existed for decades, and little or nothing was done about it. Hong Kong has many bright people who understand how to correct the various elements of the inequality problem. What was missing was the political will to do so. One reason is that most members of the business elite were not willing to share their wealth. Another is that the central government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) — Hong Kong's sovereign — believed that it would be possible to preserve the city's admirable prosperity and stability by ruling through that business elite and the leaders of the civil service. In return, the central government let the tycoons keep their wealth and limited the ability of the population as a whole to choose the city's leaders.

This strategy had an Achilles heel, however. In China's 1984 agreement with Great Britain concerning transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong to the PRC, Beijing agreed to an independent judiciary, the rule of law, and the protection of civil and political rights. So, by the time the transfer had taken place in 1997, what had been a purely economic city had become a very political city, with citizens eager to exercise what political power they had. They came to see that the exercise of political power was the only way they could reduce the concentration of political and economic power.

Before the current crisis, Hong Kong experienced two significant political movements. The first, in 2003, was to resist passage of a national security act, which people feared would take away what political freedoms they had. The second, in 2014, was the Umbrella Movement that called for full democracy in the selection of the city's leaders. In 2003, organizers followed the rules for public demonstrations, and Beijing and the Hong Kong government soon backed down. In 2014, protesters did not follow those rules and occupied three major urban thoroughfares. There was some violence, but all in all the

campaign was peaceful. In this case, [in my view](#), Beijing offered a last-minute concession that would have permitted a competitive election for the Hong Kong government's chief executive and paved the way for fully democratic elections of the Legislative Council. But, again in my view, the radical wing of the protest movement opposed the compromise and moderate democrats went along with them. (The concession was probably offered too late to be taken seriously.)

This time, it has been different, in several significant ways.

First of all, the Hong Kong government apparently failed to understand that the popular resentment over economic *and* political issues still festered very close to the surface. It apparently failed to recognize that its proposal to change the rules governing the transfer of criminals hiding out in Hong Kong to their home jurisdiction was just the spark needed to fuel a new protest movement. The protesters were right: If enacted, the extradition bill would have undermined civil and political rights. (The specific case that led to the drafting of the bill could have been solved quietly through administrative action.) With Beijing's permission, the government eventually backed down, but it did so too late and too grudgingly for protesters to recognize the value of the concession.

Second, the more radical members of this protest movement employed different tactics than they had in 2014. Instead of occupying thoroughfares, which authorities learned how to contain, they engaged in guerrilla-style actions, moving around the city and never settling in one place. Moreover, the level of violence on the part of protesters was much greater than before. My view, from 30,000 feet and eleven-time time zones away, is that protesters provoked the police in enough cases to create a vicious circle of attack and counter-attack.

The protesters made a couple of strategic mistakes. In the words of the great philosopher Kenny Rogers, they did not understand that "You've got to know when to hold 'em, [and] know when to fold 'em." They either did not see the value of declaring victory once the government made its concessions or they didn't want to. In this reading, they wanted to prolong the struggle to make compromise impossible and to do as much damage to the Hong Kong system as possible. They made a set of maximal demands and have stuck to them to this day, including electoral reform (which they bear some responsibility for scuttling last time) and demanding both the punishment of police excesses and the release and exoneration of arrested protesters.

Reinforcing this uncompromising stance is the protesters' approach to organization. Their movement is comprised of a network of activist cells and lacks a formal leadership. The movement flowed "like water." Many people were active but no one was accountable. There was no mechanism to judge when continued action had produced diminishing returns in terms of concessions from the authorities. There was no way to decide when to fold the hand.

Hard-liners in Hong Kong are strengthening hard-liners in Beijing.

Finally, the protesters misjudged the intentions of outside actors. Even in 2014, they had insufficient understanding of Xi Jinping's concern — even paranoia — regarding national security, and the ways in which Hong Kong protests reinforce that concern. In this sense, hard-liners in Hong Kong are strengthening hard-liners in Beijing. In addition, while some American political leaders have been strongly supportive of the protest movement, even if they don't fully understand its violent character, the protesters do not seem to understand that President Trump — who is the ultimate decider when it comes to U.S. action — really doesn't care about democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and that he has adopted an approach of selective appeasement in his transactions with Xi Jinping.

Perhaps coexistence between a free city and a Leninist state was ultimately impossible. We will probably never know. But the possibility of failure increased as Hong Kong's business elite used "one country, two systems" to enrich themselves, and radical political activists took advantage of the freedoms that Beijing had granted to create what Chinese leaders certainly viewed as a challenge to sovereignty over Hong Kong. The Leninist regime is now likely to radically abridge the freedoms it once protected and impose tight controls to ensure that this sort of crisis will never happen again. Whether Hong Kong can survive as an international financial center under such a regime remains to be seen.



Richard C. Bush

Chen-Fu and Cecilia Yen Koo Chair in Taiwan Studies

Senior Fellow - [Foreign Policy](#), [Center for East Asia Policy Studies](#), [John L. Thornton China Center](#)

[richardbushiii](#)