

Hong Kong's shrinking autonomy

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China recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of regaining control of Hong Kong. President Xi Jinping visited the former British colony to commemorate the takeover. But many residents of the territory lament rather than praise Beijing's control.

The territory never governed itself. Grabbed by Great Britain from Imperial China, most of Hong Kong (the "New Territories") was on a 99-year lease. When the agreement's expiration approached a less dominant Britain negotiated with a rising People's Republic of China.

The Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong was born. The SAR was to retain "a high degree of autonomy," including its residents' Western-style liberties, through 2047, after which the territory would fully revert to China.

Nervous residents doubted Beijing's word. But one Hong Konger who feared the transition told me he couldn't think of anything that he once could do that the new regime prevented him from doing.

However, this era may be coming to an end as President Xi's campaign against liberal freedoms and Western thinking intensifies. Three years ago Beijing announced its new election plan: all residents could vote, but only for nominees chosen by a committee controlled by PRC partisans.

This ruling triggered the Umbrella Movement, in which demonstrators, mostly young, demanded free elections. The government finally dispersed the protestors and arrested the leaders after 79 days. However, the Legislative Council, or LegCo, ended up in deadlock.

In 2015 the PRC apparently kidnapped or detained five Hong Kong publishers who produced books banned in China. Four eventually returned to Hong Kong—Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen, is still being held—but only one discussed his imprisonment and forced "confession." Earlier this year Xiao Jianhua, a Chinese born billionaire with Canadian citizenship, apparently was taken from his Hong Kong apartment by Chinese security agents.

Before last fall's LegCo elections, the government disqualified six "localist" candidates who election officials deemed to harbor pro-independence sentiments. Nevertheless, several pro-democracy candidates, including Yau Wai-ching and (Sixtus "Baggio") Leung Chung-hang, won.

The latter two added "Hong Kong nation" to their oaths and Leung used an obscenity against China. Their oaths were rejected, setting in motion a government suit to prevent them from taking their seats and the intervention of the National People's Congress in Beijing. Then the Hong Kong government challenged the seating of another four legislators, who had protested Beijing's control in other ways.

These attacks on Hong Kong's autonomy triggered renewed public protests. However, after the LegCo fiasco activists found greater resistance to their message.

Still, while Beijing has establishment backers, the PRC holds little allure for many of the young. Only three percent of 18-to-29-year-olds view themselves as Chinese, down from 32 percent during the changeover (94 percent now say they are Hong Kongers).

Since the changeover, nearly a million mainlanders have moved to Hong Kong. Many of them are Chinese students studying in Hong Kong who stay after they graduate. Contrary to the fears of some, migrants have not brought Communist orthodoxy to the territory. Rather, most immigrants enjoy their new liberties.

Despite its political struggles, Hong Kong still gets much right—it tops annual international ratings of economic openness, such as the Fraser Institute's Economic Freedom of the World and Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom. However, political discontent could grow.

Thus, for China the SAR has become a source of dissent, even treason, and potential disorder. At the same time, Hong Kong matters far less commercially to a country which has fully engaged the world.

So Beijing is setting red lines. President Xi announced: "Any attempt to endanger China's sovereignty and security, challenge the power of the central government and the authority of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, or use Hong Kong for infiltration or sabotage activities against the mainland, is an act that crosses the red line and is absolutely impermissible." And President Xi left no doubt as to the basis of his government's authority when he visited the local People's Liberation Army garrison.

A few hours after Xi flew home tens of thousands of Hong Kong residents marched for democracy. Hong Kongers must remain vigilant.

However, they also must exercise wisdom. Unfortunately, pursuing radical but unattainable ends risks the survival of today's freedoms. Especially since Hong Kong fights alone.

The struggle for Hong Kong's future will continue. Much depends on China's forbearance. But even more the future depends on the people of Hong Kong. They must actively defend their basic freedoms while tempering their passion with prudence.

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