

Hong Kong Launches Massive Resistance Against China

By attempting to impose its will, Beijing has now shown Taiwan, too, what's in store. Has it finally gone too far?

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After a week of massive protests in the streets of Hong Kong, chief executive Carrie Lam has suspended action on a controversial bill that would extradite Hongkongers to mainland China. But this is clearly not enough for those rallying in the streets—after a long fall, Hong Kong-Chinese relations are broken, and it's unclear whether they can ever be put back together again.

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) regained sovereignty over Hong Kong from Britain in 1997, Chinese officials assured nervous residents that they would enjoy extensive self-rule. Hong Kong was legally designated as a "Special Administrative Region" of the PRC to emphasize its unique autonomy. Beijing would be fully in charge of decisions pertaining to foreign policy and national security, but on most other matters, the people of Hong Kong would run their own affairs.

Unfortunately, the Chinese government has slowly but inexorably eroded Hong Kong's promised autonomy. Early on, Beijing rebuffed efforts to implement democratic reforms to replace the unelected imperial structure inherited from the British. Only 50 percent of Hong Kong's legislature is directly elected; the remainder, along with the powerful post of chief executive, are chosen by the Election Committee—a body that Beijing appointees dominate.

China's jurisdiction has also gradually expanded over an array of political, economic, and judicial matters. A growing number of candidates for elective seats in the legislature have been disqualified on charges of "disloyalty" for declining to take an oath affirming the PRC's sovereignty over Hong Kong. Angry dissidents have protested such encroachments, sometimes in noisy demonstrations, but with little success.

Beijing's power play escalated again in recent weeks, and this time the pushback from the people of Hong Kong was more emphatic and intense. Exceptionally large demonstrations (including two in mid-June) took place, despite protesters being met with tear gas and rubber bullets. The catalyst was the proposed extradition law that chief executive Lam initially tried to push through on Beijing's orders. That measure would give the Chinese regime significant leverage over Hong Kong's ostensibly independent judicial system. It would enable Beijing to "request" that Hong Kong authorities transfer certain types of criminal suspects to the PRC for trial.

The menace behind such a change is evident. Hong Kong-based critics of China's government would be especially vulnerable. Given the crackdown on human rights advocates and even respected economic reformers at home that President Xi Jinping has orchestrated, Hong Kong would no longer be a reliable haven for dissenters. At best, the mere threat of extradition for a criminal trial in a Chinese court devoid of even basic due process protections would have a pronounced chilling effect on freedom of expression. At worst, there would soon be little difference between liberty in Hong Kong and its fate throughout the rest of the PRC.

Chinese security and police personnel have already engaged in alarming behavior toward dissidents residing in Hong Kong. In 2015, mainland security agents even kidnapped five Hong Kong booksellers and compelled them to confess that they had been selling books banned in the PRC. With the extradition law, they would no longer have to rely on such crude methods.

Chinese leaders may have assumed that the extradition measure was a clever way to intimidate democracy advocates and other regime critics living in Hong Kong. But it was an extremely myopic strategy. The resulting street protests were so huge and determined that Beijing and its Hong Kong political minions backed down, postponing consideration of the measure.

Still, the attempt was a brazen bid to further dilute Hong Kong's precarious autonomy. An especially counterproductive effect was the maneuver's impact in Taiwan—the de facto independent entity that Beijing hopes to entice into accepting political reunification with the mainland. The Taiwanese people are watching carefully how Beijing treats Hong Kong and abides by the promises of autonomy made in 1997. They do not like what they see.

Ironically, the current turmoil in Hong Kong over extradition began with a Taiwanese initiative in response to a real crime. A Hong Kong resident was accused of killing his girlfriend and then returning to the Special Administrative Region. The Taiwanese government sought to get Hong Kong authorities to transfer the suspect to Taiwan for trial. Although Beijing was not about to tolerate such a request from a Taiwanese government it regards as illegitimate, Chinese leaders seized on the incident to “clarify” Hong Kong's extradition obligations with respect to foreign countries and the PRC itself. The proposed extradition law was the result.

Taipei authorities responded by indicating that they would rather have no access to the murder suspect than see the new extradition law take effect, given the probable negative consequences for liberty in Hong Kong. The PRC's steady erosion of Hong Kong's political and legal autonomy over the years had already produced widespread hostile reactions in Taiwan. Beijing's longstanding offer to Taiwan is the formula of “one country, two systems.” PRC leaders have promised that Taiwan would have a degree of autonomy following reunification with the mainland even greater than that given to Hong Kong.

A growing number of influential Taiwanese, though, do not trust Beijing and want no part of such an offer. Both major political parties have flatly rejected the Hong Kong model. Former prime minister William Lai, who is challenging incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen for the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party's nomination, stated bluntly that Taiwan “doesn't want to be another Hong Kong or Tibet.” Citing the latter was especially telling, since Tibet has been under stifling, direct Chinese rule for decades.

Persuading Taiwan to abandon its de facto independence and accept reunification with the mainland was always a long shot, even with a secure commitment to autonomy. But Chinese

leaders have now blown even that possibility. Their reneging on the promises of self-government made to the people of Hong Kong has revealed the extent of the PRC's repressive agenda. With the attempted imposition of the extradition law, the conciliatory mask is off entirely. Despite the risks entailed in continued defiance of Beijing's reunification demands, the Taiwanese are not likely to put their necks in a Hong Kong-style noose. By trying to squash autonomy and freedom in Hong Kong, Xi's government has irretrievably alienated the people of Taiwan and undermined its own goal.

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