



South China Morning Post

If protesters want to protect Hong Kong's way of life, they must win the war of ideas

James A. Dorn

August 2, 2019

The massive demonstrations in Hong Kong against the proposed extradition bill have revealed the moral rectitude of citizens to protect their way of life and freedom from communist China. On June 9, hundreds of thousands exercised their right to peacefully contest the legislation supported by Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor. By putting moral and political pressure on government, the people succeeded in reversing the course of the bill, which was suspended on June 15 and declared “dead” on July 9. Yet, the bill has not been fully withdrawn – and the protests continue.

Protesters are concerned that, if a bill allowing extradition to the mainland were enacted, Hong Kong would risk losing its unique status as a guardian of the rule of law, limited government, economic freedom and human rights. The possibility of being subjected to China's draconian penal system would increase uncertainty and result in self-censorship – undermining the free market in ideas that is Hong Kong's trademark. The resulting outflow of human and financial capital would have dire consequences for both Hong Kong and China.

It was to protect their way of life that the protesters marched and stopped the pulse of everyday life in the world's freest economy. But on June 12, the protests turned violent, as a small minority clashed with police, and called for immediate withdrawal of the bill and the ouster of the chief executive. More recently, protesters have broken into the Legislative Council building, defaced the Chinese national emblem and thugs have beaten pro-democracy demonstrators.

One young demonstrator expressed their sentiment by saying: “Protesting is the only way we can make our voices heard in the absence of democracy.”

It would have been more correct to say “one of the few ways” because, unlike the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong has a genuine rule of law that respects basic human rights. Article 27 of the Basic Law states: “Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication; freedom of association, of assembly, of procession and of demonstration.”

The grounding of rights in individuals, not the state, contrasts sharply with the top-down approach to rights in China, where basic rights stated in the constitution are merely “paper rights” and the rule of law is a rule designed to “build socialism” – not a meta-legal principle to

defend life, liberty, and property. That is why ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong mostly see themselves as “Hongkongers,” not as national citizens of the People’s Republic.

The “one country, two systems” doctrine embedded in the Basic Law will end in 2047; what happens in the next 28 years will define the future of Hong Kong.

If Hong Kong can export its system of limited government and individual freedom to the mainland – by showing that a free market in ideas is far superior to “socialism with Chinese characteristics” – then there is hope that China may eventually move from a model based on “building socialism” to one that recognises the principle of spontaneous order under what Friedrich Hayek called a “constitution of liberty”.

Unlike in the mainland, everyone in Hong Kong has a voice in a free market for ideas and an opportunity to criticise the state, including Beijing. The evils of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown have not been forgotten.

Why China’s youth don’t talk about Tiananmen

The moral force of the voices of freedom and limited government should not be underestimated. Just as free trade in goods and services increases the wealth of a nation, so does free trade in ideas.

Social media has been widely used to “spontaneously” organise the protests. But when young demonstrators think taking to the streets is the “only way” to make their voices heard, they risk taking a tactical approach to reform that could backfire as protests become violent or disruptive.

What is needed is a long-term strategy that relies on the strength of Hong Kong’s ethos of liberty and adherence to limited government. China has certainly benefited from allowing Hong Kong to maintain its free-market trading system since 1997, but that system could not have survived without a corresponding free market in ideas.

The protests against the extradition bill have succeeded in killing the legislation for now, and Hong Kong leaders who favoured the bill have lost face – but not their official status. Without competitive, free elections, Hongkongers are handicapped but not totally ineffective in shaping the political landscape and confronting Beijing with the stark reality of two systems: one in which there is still a free market in ideas and the other in which a “president for life” is intent on suppressing all criticism.

To win the war of ideas, Hong Kong needs to remain an open society and fight the mainland – and those who sympathise with Beijing – with ideas. Key to that battle is the idea that limited government and a free market in ideas are better means to enable individuals to pursue happiness than state control.

James A. Dorn is a senior fellow and China specialist at the Cato Institute in Washington, DC. A longer version of this article was first published on the Cato Institute’s blog, Cato@Liberty