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Liberal and Free Hong Kong Is Dead

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The Umbrella Revolution has been rained out.

China only wants “patriots” to hold positions of political authority in Hong Kong. That means those who are willing to shill for the Chinese Communist Party. The relative autonomy enjoyed by the Special Administrative Region since the 1997 turnover to Beijing ended last year. Now even the pretense of political choice is disappearing.

Hong Kong always was an anomaly. It was a British colony because of London’s untrammelled aggression against the largely prostrate Chinese Empire. Indeed, the territory initially was acquired as spoils of the Opium Wars, which were waged to defend the right of the British to sell their controversial wares to the Chinese people against the wishes of the latter’s government. As a justification for war, that’s a stretch even for a purist libertarian like myself.

But after the triumph of Mao Zedong and the CCP in 1949, the People’s Republic of China maintained a symbiotic relationship with Hong Kong, since the latter operated as an entry point to the mainland during Mad Mao’s rule. Even more important, Hong Kong developed into a refuge for Chinese fleeing the PRC’s institutionalized madness.

During the CCP’s brutal consolidation of power, bloody intervention in the Korean War, multiple campaigns against ideological enemies, disastrous agricultural collectivization and industrialization during the Great Leap Forward, and national mash-up incorporating party purge, civil war, and collectivist cataclysm known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, tens of millions of people died. Mao won the competition for bloodiest dictator ever. Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler were amateurs in comparison to the Red Emperor, as Mao was known.

Mao verged on all-powerful while alive, but he almost instantly became a political nonentity after his death. His image survived — in Tiananmen Square, on the PRC’s currency, and most everywhere else — but his lunatic policy prescriptions, which had left his people in poverty and misery, were quickly abandoned. The twice-purged Deng Xiaoping quickly took control. The latter was more interested in results than ideology and turned his nation toward the market.

Deng also negotiated Hong Kong’s return with the United Kingdom. The island had been ceded — the spoils of war — but most of the colony’s land was on a 99-year lease set to expire in 1997. London could have played a dangerous game of international chicken, maintaining the status quo or calling a referendum, but even the Iron Lady, Prime Minister Maggie Thatcher, wasn’t willing to risk the likely ensuing rupture in relations. So in 1984 she agreed to return the territory, which Beijing guaranteed would enjoy at least a half century of special treatment, famously described as “one country, two systems.”

The modus vivendi prevailed until 2014, when “Umbrella Revolution” protests on behalf of full democracy disrupted city and government operations for weeks. Determined student activists asked for what the CCP would never grant, especially under Xi Jinping, who was a couple years into his general secretaryship and presidency. The demonstrations ended inconclusively, and the PRC responded by steadily increasing its control.

In 2018, Hong Kong’s government proposed an extradition bill that could have sent Hong Kongers to Beijing for trial. Months of demonstrations ensued, with tens and hundreds of thousands of people routinely on the streets. Demands also expanded, to Chief Executive Carrie Lam’s resignation and, again, completely free elections.

Some observers wondered if another Tiananmen Square massacre was in the offing, but Beijing was colder, more calculating, and better prepared. The Xi government raced the National Security Law through the National People’s Congress without giving even Hong Kong authorities a look, put the measure into effect last June 30, and started arresting people immediately.

The authorities made clear that almost any opposition to the local or national governments, advocacy of democracy and criticism of communism, cooperation with foreign individuals or organizations, and any other exhibition of free political thought would be treated as separatism, subversion, or terrorism. Chinese apparatchiks would be stationed in Hong Kong to enforce the law; defendants could be held without bail, tried before special judges, and even be sent to Beijing for prosecution. Offenders faced life imprisonment. Foreigners living overseas could be prosecuted, convicted, and imprisoned for actions overseas. Jimmy Lai, former publisher of the *Apple Daily* who was subsequently charged under the law and held without bail, presciently warned, “Whatever we write, or whatever we say, they can label secession or subversion or whatever they decide according to their expedience.”

Opposition collapsed as Lam and every institution of the Hong Kong government dutifully and even gleefully did Beijing’s dirty work. The authorities immediately began arresting protesters, charging activists, purging teachers, threatening journalists, interfering online, and otherwise supplanting Hong Kong freedoms with Chinese-style repression. The impact was immediate and increased daily. Demonstrations halted. Organizations disbanded. Businessmen abandoned politics. Activists scrubbed social media accounts. Democracy leaders fled abroad. Libraries tossed books. Universities fired professors and threatened students. Schools censored students, intimidated teachers, and cleansed curricula. And Beijing’s factotums, the local elite made rich through Chinese connections, celebrated.

Lam’s government — which is subordinate to the PRC’s Hong Kong Liaison Office, whose head operates rather like a Gauleiter in Nazi Germany — soon began arresting people on ever more dubious charges based on ever more strained interpretations of the law. The Legislative Council had been set up to guarantee a pro-Beijing majority, with only a minority of seats filled through popular vote. The rest were chosen indirectly. But so unpopular was Beijing that it feared losing the poll scheduled for last September. So Lam postponed the vote, purged pro-democratic legislators, and charged 53 lawmakers and activists with subversion for organizing a private primary since their objective was to win a legislative majority to block government policy. *Seeking to win an election now violates the National Security Law.* The only good news is that Lam did not seek to arrest the 604,440 people who violated the law by voting in the primary.

Now Beijing is applying the coup de grâce. Last week, the National People's Congress, by a vote of 2,895 to 0 (with one abstention), approved legislation "improving the electoral system" in Hong Kong. Only "patriots" will be allowed to serve in the Legislative Council (LegCo). And patriotism is defined as welcoming subordination to Beijing. Explained Song Ru'an, a Chinese Foreign Ministry official in Hong Kong: "When we talk about patriotism, we are not talking about the abstraction of loving a cultural or historical China, but rather loving the currently existing People's Republic of China under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party." After all, who wouldn't love the apparatchiks whose predecessors killed tens of millions of people?

The new plan expands LegCo membership from 70 to 90. Most lawmakers will be appointed by an election committee filled with reliable CCP lackeys, vassals, retainers, hirelings, and gophers. The same group will vet the few candidates for elective seats. Then there will be no risk of a LegCo member holding inconvenient views, let alone a legislative majority obstructing Beijing's wishes.

In fact, this approach was signaled back in 2016, when the Hong Kong government, at Beijing's instruction, began disqualifying anyone who advocated Hong Kong independence. That standard was broadly interpreted to include several leading democracy advocates. In the future the standard for disqualification is likely to cover anyone who is not a certified CCP fanboy or fangirl. Hong Kongers judged to be "unpatriotic" need not apply.

Lam, who whined about being paid in cash after U.S. sanctions caused banks to reject her, appears to be enjoying the opportunity to wreak revenge upon the mass of Hong Kongers who did so much to undermine her rule. She proclaimed herself to be pleased with the latest PRC measure. She issued a statement declaring, "It is natural and essential to require people vested with governing powers to be patriotic, which is also part and parcel of basic political ethics and a principle that applies everywhere in the world." If you are going to be a commie toady, you might as well go all in as a commie toady.

Hong Kong is dead. Politically, it differs from Beijing and Shanghai only in the pretense that it has a local elected leadership. In practice, however, the CCP now runs the city. The pro-democracy activists who voiced people's aspirations over the last half dozen years are in jail or exile. Criticism of the regime is restricted, with the limits steadily tightening. The media is nominally free but could be prosecuted for most anything under the elastic National Security Law. Self-censorship is the norm online and off. The internet remains open, but the authorities are unlikely to continue to allow open access to critical information.

The city is still freer economically than the mainland and might remain so for years. But even that advantage will be at the arbitrary sufferance of Beijing, not local authorities. And Hong Kong no longer matters so much to China. The city accounts for less than 3 percent of China's GDP, down from nearly a fifth in 1997. Moreover, the loss of other liberties inevitably undermines economic freedom. For instance, economic research and reporting have been criminalized on the mainland. Anyone active in politics, even overseas, will have to be wary doing business in Hong Kong.

And there is little that Washington can do. Xi Jinping and the CCP are determined to rule. They will not be deterred by U.S. threats, economic or political. Hong Kong is but one of many difficult issues dividing the two nations. Nevertheless, Americans can save at least some Hong

Kongers by becoming a refuge for bright, creative, well-educated people determined to live in freedom. And by aiding efforts to break through Beijing's information blockade, helping Chinese as well as Hong Kongers remain aware of what lies beyond the dictatorial nightmare concocted by Xi and his cronies.

For a century, Hong Kong has been a hopeful outpost of hope and opportunity. No longer, alas. Residents of the onetime British colony will remain prosperous. But with the CCP's updated version of the Nazi *Machtergreifung*, Hong Kongers have lost most of the liberties that long set them apart from the mainland.

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