

Right-wing protests

Pat Byrne and Khalid Bhatti

October 5, 2020

Despite repeated forecasts of communist domination and oppression by the mainland since the handover in 1997, Hong Kong has remained a capitalist enclave with low taxation, freedom of speech, assembly and press. Indeed, the Cato Institute, a Washington-based, neoliberal think tank set up by the far-right Koch brothers, recently declared it to be third freest place in the world with the United States being in 17th place!

A common myth fostered by the right-wing media in Hong Kong is that HK was better off economically under the British. In relative terms, this was true. It was due to its role as an exclusive gateway between the world and booming China. Once China allowed direct investment and trade from the rest of the world into mainland China, especially after it joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, it was no longer necessary for outside companies to go through Hong Kong and vice versa.

As a result, HK lost a major part of its attraction to international business and its importance to China's economy – since the Handover HK has rapidly declined from a position accounting for 20 percent of China's GDP to only three percent today. As a result, Hong Kong has fallen behind many mainland Chinese cities including its neighbouring technological powerhouse in Shenzhen.

But this was only a relative decline – not an absolute one. Hong Kong still offers many advantages for companies wanting to do business in China. More importantly, in real terms the incredible rise of China's economy has also raised HK's standards.

Thus, Hong Kong's GDP has nearly trebled from \$165 billion dollars since China took possession in 1997 to \$455 billion dollars today, with a corresponding trebling of per capita wealth (\$25,000 to \$61,000). On the other hand, with the private ownership and massive inequality in capitalist Hong Kong this big increase in wealth has not gone to the ordinary people of HK but overwhelmingly to the capitalist elite in the territory.

Comparisons have been regularly made between Hong Kong's situation and the Berlin Wall. The obvious difference being that HK citizens are free to go back and forth. And unlike East Germany which was considerably poorer than West Germany, mainland China is increasingly on a par with Hong Kong and in some cases is surpassing HK in terms of jobs, living standards, and other opportunities. Equally important, the mainland is not suffering from the same level of housing needs facing HK.

Thus there is no need for a Berlin Wall to prevent people from going from the mainland to Hong Kong. Indeed, the flow of people for work is often from HK to China rather than the other way round. To further emphasise the difference between the situation in HK and Berlin, far from trying to impede travel between HK and the mainland, Beijing has spent massive amounts of

money to build the world's longest series of bridges and tunnels to connect Hong Kong and Macau with the mainland. This has dramatically cut down the time it takes to travel between HK and the mainland.

Far from making it extremely difficult for its citizens to travel abroad, for fear of them defecting as the Soviet Bloc did in the 20th century, Chinese students, business people and tourists travel freely. In fact, last year 150 million Chinese tourists travelled on foreign holidays and rather than defecting returned to their homes in China. So much for the prison house image portrayed in the Western media!

Last year's protests in Hong Kong were not the first. There had been earlier demonstrations in 2014 with the Umbrella Revolution and the Occupy Central Movement.

The latest upsurge came last year in response to the introduction of a local regulation proposing extradition to China. This arose because of the murder of a Hong Kong woman in Taiwan and the fleeing of her alleged HK murderer back to the territory. There being no extradition treaty between Taiwan and Hong Kong because of Taiwan's undetermined national status, Beijing's solution was to introduce a rule that allowed people to be extradited from Hong Kong to the Chinese mainland. This frightened many HK residents who feared it would open the way for the extradition of dissidents etc. for punishment on the mainland.

To voice these fears in HK a huge movement was launched against the proposed extradition rule helped by the support of the right-wing media. This movement initially represented the majority of people in Hong Kong and included voices from both left and right.

In response to the massive protests of millions of HK people the Chief Executive of the local Legislative Council suspended the proposed extradition rule. The protests continued. Then the rule was withdrawn. But still the protests continued with its demands widening into the Five Demands: the withdrawal of the extradition bill; retraction of the "riot" characterisation; release of students and the injured; and Lam's resignation as Chief Executive. A fifth demand went much further in demanding universal suffrage for the whole Legislative Council and the Chief Executive.

From a broad and peaceful protest, the pro-democracy movement rapidly changed into something else. Increasingly, it was taken over by right-wing, pro-American forces and its aims shifted from protecting the democratic rights of Hong Kong people towards denunciation of the Chinese political system and for complete secession from China.

A key part of this transformation was the role of the right-wing media led by Apple Daily and the Next Magazine both owned by Jimmy Lai, a well named publisher who copied Rupert Murdoch's combination of gutter journalism and sex to build up his media brand. Lai who is a fanatical neoliberal has played a leading role in directing and funding right-wing elements in the protest movement.