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Hong Kong's Pro-Democracy Movement: Growing Youth-led Civil Disobedience?

By Dylan Loh Ming Hui

Synopsis

A recent groundswell of protests, sit-ins and boycotts agitating for greater democracy and freedom in Hong Kong have been led by youths and students. They highlight the difference in perceptions of 'democracy' between Beijing and pro-democracy groups in Hong Kong.

Commentary

HONG KONG'S college and school students began a week-long boycott of classes on 22 September 2014 in protest against Beijing's position on electoral reforms. This classroom boycott gained the support of over 400 academic and non-academic staff. College staff have promised leniency for students who skipped classes and Hong Kong's largest teachers' union circulated a petition calling for strong support for the classroom boycott.

More significant were the youths behind the mobilisation and organisation of the classroom boycott. This latest public protest is just one instance in a series of civil disobedience movements initiated by the youths of Hong Kong – many whom are not even old enough to drive or drink.

Seed of fire

In an interview with CNN, Chinese dissident, Hu Jian, (himself a student activist during the 1989 Tiananmen protests) noted that "Mainland China is a tinderbox that's been physically suppressed by the authorities, and Hong Kong is a seed of fire". That fire has been sparked by the comparatively more liberal press, academe and political field in Hong Kong, with the emergence of highly motivated and zealous youths.

One prominent example is student activist leader – Joshua Wong, who was just 15 in 2011 when he started a movement called 'Scholarism' in opposition to a bid to introduce pro-China and pro-communist education materials in Hong Kong's public schools. In 2012, 'Scholarism' successfully rallied an estimated 120,000 people into 'occupying' the Hong Kong government's headquarters and generated enough pressure for the proposal to be withdrawn.

Wong is at the forefront of the classroom boycott movement. Indeed, at a time when the 'Occupy

Central' movement group seems to have waned in support and been subjected to criticism for failing to act after Beijing refused to grant Hong Kong universal suffrage in August this year, the students have stepped up and taken over the mantle.

One of the co-founders of the Occupy Central campaign, Chan Kinman, lauded the student activists, saying he believed the student strike would be successful because young people were particularly annoyed by the blatant gesture of Beijing.

Youth-fuelled civil disobedience

There are several implications from the savvy student-led civil disobedience movements in Hong Kong. Firstly, Beijing is going to find it increasingly harder to use strong-armed tactics against protesters as the general pro-democracy movement evolves into a student-led and student-centred movement. Global Times, a nationalist Chinese newspaper, referred to the students as a radical pan-democratic group that "wants to take advantage of society's tolerance of students, making use of them to illegally confront the central government".

While the government in China will try to target individual leaders (Joshua Wong was identified in China's Blue Paper on National Security), it does not have the unfettered autonomy to manoeuvre as it does in the mainland.

Secondly, just as students in Hong Kong drew inspiration from the student protests in Tiananmen Square, there is a fear, from the Chinese Government's perspective, that youths in Macau and the mainland would similarly draw inspiration from the student's political movement in Hong Kong.

Thirdly, the continuing endurance and success of student-led civil disobedience will disenchant the people of Hong Kong towards Beijing and vice versa. In fact, the students have already achieved one target of what they set out to do – global media coverage sympathetic to their cause. These student protest leaders (and their campaign) have been given extensive coverage by international media such as CNN, Forbes, Bloomberg and The Guardian. This has, in turn, raised the image of the youths as the vanguard of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong.

Ball in Beijing's court

Finally, the political savviness and mobilisation ability of protest politics is going to prove extremely problematic for Beijing. They have already proven their mettle with the successful staging of several civil disobedience movements and have displayed their organisational capabilities. More worrying for Beijing is the proactive diffusion of protest politics to other locales.

For instance, Scholarism's founder Joshua Wong travelled to Taiwan to meet student leaders earlier this year in an effort to oppose a trade deal with China. The same group also hosted young activists from Macau in a proactive exchange of ideas and strategies.

Beijing has already stated its stand very clearly: that it has "comprehensive jurisdiction" over Hong Kong and it will not make concessions over universal suffrage. How Beijing deals with Hong Kong's student activism, and more crucially, how China successfully (or unsuccessfully) controls and manages political consciousness of youths in the mainland would be a major factor in determining its own domestic stability.

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