

Hong Kong governs ? Beijing rules!

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Two years after the collapse of the ?Umbrella Movement? that arose in protest at the blatantly undemocratic procedure for electing Hong Kong's Chief Executive, two elected members of the Legislative Council, LegCo, have been barred from taking their seats by order of Beijing.

The case of Yau Wai-ching and Baggio Leung, who stood for election as candidates of the newly formed party, Youngspiration, has focused attention on the inherent contradiction of the ?One Country, Two Systems? formula that is supposed to govern relations between Hong Kong and Beijing since the ending of British rule in 1997.

The immediate pretext for their disqualification was their refusal to adhere to the required procedure and wording when taking their oaths as LegCo members. Instead, they unfurled banners that declared ?Hong Kong is NOT China?, and referred to the ?Fuckrepublic of Sheena? - Sheena being an ancient term for China which was used by the Japanese Occupation to refer to China merely as a geographical region, not a nation.

Not surprisingly, this provoked outrage in many quarters and provided Beijing with a perfect excuse for condemning the pair and everything they represented. At a superficial level, the incident could be dismissed as a politically inept youthful prank, designed to gain maximum publicity for a current that had no idea how to use membership of the LegCo to further its cause.

To leave it at that, however, would be to miss the point and to trivialise the fundamental issues involved. The first of these is that Yao and Leung stood for election as opponents of Beijing's claim to sovereignty over Hong Kong ? and they won their constituencies on that basis. That, and that alone, is what entitles them to take their seats in LegCo, their only allegiance should be to their electors and to this they said they were prepared to swear.

What would have been the outcome if they had sworn the oath of allegiance in the approved manner? Having stood on a platform that denied Beijing's sovereignty, they would have stood condemned of either betraying their principles and their electors or of lying on oath. The truth is that the oath-taking is either a legal fiction or an undemocratic barrier to popular representation.

In effect, Yau and Leung have been debarred from office because they took the wording of the oath seriously. They could, reasonably, ask whether all those other ?democrats? who did take the oath really meant every word of it. The same thought has obviously occurred to Beijing which is, reportedly, considering whether to disqualify as many as 11 other LegCo members on the basis of previously expressed opposition to Beijing's rule.

These issues apply to participation in all representative assemblies around the world. Behind them, lie the specific political issues in Hong Kong and China and these centre on the question of sovereignty, as will all

political conflicts in Hong Kong. Ultimately, the Occupy movement of 2014 was defeated because it had no strategic answer to that question and, therefore, no tactics for advancing its cause beyond protest at the status quo. Nonetheless, its ability to sustain an occupation of the Central district of Hong Kong and one of its main shopping streets for more than two months was eloquent proof of mass discontent with that status quo.

In a world composed of nation states, many of which had to fight arms in hand to throw off foreign rule, it was hardly surprising that, within the Occupy movement, there was a current that interpreted the conflict between Beijing and Hong Kong in national terms and took them to their logical conclusion. Hong Kong was seen as a nation whose established culture was being suppressed by a foreign power. For this current, the answer to the sovereignty question was clear, if not easily achievable; Hong Kong should be recognised as an independent nation-state and Beijing/China had no legitimate rights within its territory.

On this basis, the 'localists' as they became known, were able to project a far clearer and apparently more coherent assessment of the situation that faced Occupy. The de facto leadership of the Umbrella Movement stressed the popular support for their demands, which were rooted in the deliberately vague democratic formulations in the Basic Law that had been agreed with the British, but could not go beyond the tactic of the occupation for fear of alienating support. By contrast, the localists' prediction that the Beijing dictatorship would never make any serious concessions was confirmed at every turn.

Their conclusion was that much more radical measures should be taken, for example, extending the occupation from the streets to the government offices themselves, while seeking support internationally from 'democratic' countries, including the ex-colonial power. This could be understood, especially by the young generation that had grown up after 1997, as a parallel to the path taken by other small countries in their struggle for freedom from oppression by a foreign power.

It is certainly true that some features of Hong Kong society differ from those of the mainland but to conclude that this makes it a nation is to exaggerate those differences and also to ignore their origins. Apart from the local language, Cantonese, which is also spoken by anything up to 100 million 'mainlanders' but is not recognised as a language by Beijing, what are the differences? They certainly do not include any tradition of democratic self-government, something whose importance the British only discovered at the very end of their 150 year occupation.

In effect, the differences are those which flowed from the form of capitalism that flourished under British rule; a low taxation, free market economy, initially with access to preferential treatment within the British empire and later the main conduit for world trade with the mainland. Essentially, it was a trading enclave in which minimal public services were financed by government exploitation of its ownership of all land, parcels of which were leased at high rent to developers of all sorts.

Hong Kong's separate identity, therefore, while real, was the product of the balance of forces between the British and Chinese states, not of the separate development of a nationality. The call for Independence is both reactionary and utopian, it seeks to turn the clock back to a past that cannot be restored because that balance of forces has been irrevocably reversed. Worse still, absurd as it is, localist propaganda against mainlanders is increasingly couched in racist terms. Like the oath-taking stunt, this is calculated to drive a wedge between Hong Kongers and mainlanders - so much so that many are now wondering whether the whole 'localist' current is actually being encouraged by forces acting on behalf of Beijing.

Far from being the end of the story, however, recognition of this reality should be one of the starting points for a political strategy to go much further than securing democratic rights for the 7 million Hong Kongers.

The widespread dissatisfaction with existing conditions in Hong Kong is entirely justified; astronomical rents, inadequate social services and lack of prospects, particularly for young people, are all exacerbated by the absence of any accountability in the administration. Moreover, the sense of injustice at the failure to honour the democratic provisions of the Basic Law is compounded by the heavy handedness of Beijing's rule. After all, what is the problem with having a locally elected city administration? It is the answer to that question that supplies the other starting point.

Beijing, that is to say, the Chinese Communist Party, cannot tolerate even a local example of an administration accountable to an openly elected assembly because that would directly challenge its dictatorship over the whole of China. Beijing's intransigence is born of the fear that any concessions to accountable government in Hong Kong would generate calls for democratic rights on the mainland. The other side of that coin is that the people of Hong Kong will only ever enjoy full democratic rights if those rights are enjoyed by all of China's 1350 million citizens.

That, far more than inept political posturing, is what makes the policy of 'localism' in Hong Kong so utterly misguided. Counterposing the rights of Hong Kong to those of the mainland, appealing to the ex-colonial power or to the United States, plays straight into the hands of the CCP, allowing the politburo and its acolytes to condemn all democratic aspirations as naïve parroting of imperialist propaganda and all democratic movements as unpatriotic agents of the country's enemies.

Socialists in Hong Kong should make no concessions to the 'localist' current but, instead, stress the common interests of the overwhelming majority of Hong Kongers and the working class and poor farmers of the mainland. At the same time, they should defend the relatively freer conditions of Hong Kong, arguing for working class forms of struggle, collective action, delegated-based democratic mobilising organisations to fight for the fullest implementation of democracy and its extension to the mainland.

Hong Kong should be the basis for propaganda and organisation against Beijing's dictatorship, just as the International Settlement in Shanghai was used as a base by the first Communists in China, not to isolate the city from the rest of the population but to act as a beacon of mass struggle. At the present time, there is a wave of working class struggle within China and socialists in Hong Kong should prioritise building solidarity and support for all such struggles, that alone offers a way forward for all Chinese against the dictatorship that oppresses the whole country.

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