

Hong Kong: learning the right lessons

Peter Main, Red Flag 29, July 2019 Tue, 16/07/2019 - 16:01

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The trashing of the Legislative Council, Legco, building in Hong Kong on July 1 certainly drew the world's attention to the ongoing opposition to the proposed Extradition Law that would allow people detained in Hong Kong to be tried in mainland Chinese courts.

It also drew attention away from the half million strong demonstration demanding much more than just the postponement of the hated law. Taking place on the anniversary of the handover of the territory to Chinese rule from the British, that march forcefully expressed the widespread opposition to the erosion of civil rights and the creeping imposition of Beijing's rule.

Nobody who watched the TV footage of demonstrators using steel railings as battering rams to eventually break through the security glass of the Legco's doors can have failed to notice that there were hundreds of riot-equipped police standing by, watching them. Nor will they have missed the pictures of the old colonial flag being draped over the speaker's lectern, at one point the British Union Jack itself was unfurled in the chamber. Those same pictures were then widely cited by Beijing and its tame, Hong Kong-based, acolytes as evidence that the whole incident was orchestrated by "foreign powers".

Did the mostly young activists walk into a trap? Probably. Riot police are a disciplined force, they follow orders and their orders at the time clearly were not to stop the protesters from breaking in. That, however, is not the point, what really matters is why hundreds, many hundreds, of young Hong Kongers thought that it made sense to break into the Legco and spray slogans over the walls and the portraits of those they regard as Beijing's stooges.

The slogans themselves go a long way to answering the question. "There are no rioters, only police brutality!" summed up the widespread outrage that the mass demonstrations were characterised as riots to justify the way the police broke them up. Most telling of all, however, "You drove us to this!" expresses not only frustrated desperation but also, more worryingly, a serious political miscalculation.

As several protesters explained, to anyone who would listen, they had concluded that Carrie Lam, Hong Kong's Chief Executive and, for that matter, Beijing, only responded to violent confrontations. This was because, even after the 2 million strong demonstration on June 17, the Hong Kong government had done nothing to respond to the very obvious feelings of the population. However, several days later, after there had been a violent clash between the police and protesters, Lam had announced that the Extradition Law would be withdrawn from the present session of Legco. For the activists, the lesson seemed clear.

The reality is much more likely to be that, even in the face of such massive opposition, it took Beijing and Hong Kong several days to agree the need for a climbdown; nonetheless, it was the millions on the streets, not the hundreds fighting the cops, that forced that decision.

Raising the colonial flag points to a much more serious political error. There is a current within the

Democracy Movement that has reacted to Beijing's rule by calling for independence. Realising that such a small territory could not possibly stand up to any imposition of rule from Beijing, its supporters hope for support from the former colonial power and "the West" more generally.

Perhaps they will take heart from the British Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt's, apparently robust defence of Hong Kong's "autonomy" within China. If so, they are deeply mistaken. His words were aimed at the members of the Conservative party, whose votes he wants in the party's current leadership election - not a few of whom probably know Hong Kong from having served there in a military or administrative capacity.

The truth is that Britain neither wants, nor is able, to put any serious pressure on the Chinese government. On the contrary, it is London that seeks help and favours from Beijing in the twenty first century, and all the more so if any form of Brexit is achieved.

The pro-independence, or "nativist", activists in the Hong Kong Democracy Movement are, however, a minority; the flags were quickly removed by others and they stayed down, implying the majority of the activists, even those in the Legco chamber, understood immediately how such symbols would be used on the mainland. They know that the leadership of the one-party dictatorship fears nothing more than the spread of the Democracy Movement to the hundreds of millions of workers just across the border.

The strategic implications of that need to be thought through. The best, in fact the only, way that Hong Kong can preserve any of its current relative freedoms is precisely by winning support on the mainland. The uncomfortable truth is that building a movement against the dictatorship where it really matters can only be done clandestinely, by a disciplined and politically united organisation, in other words, a party.

Revolutionaries in Hong Kong have to find ways to link up with the "underground" networks of activists who solidarise with the growing militancy in the heartlands of the Chinese working class, literally, only a few miles away. At the same time, in Hong Kong itself, the Democracy Movement needs the same working class orientation because the strategy of the existing leadership, basically liberals and academics, has already shown its bankruptcy. That is the activism that can ultimately topple Xi Jinping and company, not futile appeals to a declining former colonial master.

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